

Legolas and Gimli: A Fictional Friendship.

Introduction

This essay explores the friendship between Legolas and Gimli in Tolkien's book *The Lord of the Rings* which take place in Third Age 3018-19.¹ I suggest that their friendship is a remarkable paradigm for a friendship which crosses seemingly insurmountable barriers. I set the scene by examining the historical background of relations between Elves and Dwarves. I show that the turning point in this enmity does not come until the meeting with Galadriel, but that it is decisive. I examine the key events that follow and explore how the friendship develops. Despite a definite element of competitiveness between the two, they come to appreciate the alien beauty of each others realms – the one of wood and forest, the other of caves and stone. Each is able to articulate what it is that moves them, although perhaps Gimli is the more verbally gifted, and so inspire a deeper friendship. In my conclusion I look at some of the significance for male friendships generally.

Firstly a few words about my approach to the *Lord of the Rings* (LOTR). I have no intention of critiquing Tolkien or his work. What I'm going to do is take a very straight forward, perhaps even naive approach to the text. I make no apologies for this. I will try to meet the characters on their own terms, in their own context. I will in fact treat the characters as autonomous beings, which for me at least will be far more satisfying than trying to impose any sort of ideology upon them. Tolkien was quite clear that the story was not intended as an allegory. In the forward to my edition he says that he had no thought of an inner message or meaning: "It is neither allegorical nor topical".² Later he says: "... I cordially dislike allegory in all its manifestations, and always have done so since I was grown old enough and wary enough to detect its presence."³

As far as I'm concerned the characters belong in the world of middle earth and that's where I intend to leave them. This is not to say that we cannot learn from them. For although they are literary inventions, and in most cases are not even human, they are full of the virtues and vices which we like to think makes us human. As I hope to show, the characters in Tolkien's books put on display many of the qualities of friendship, and can act as guides to us in this area.

If you haven't read LOTR then you'll probably find this quite confusing, and it would be better to go off and read it first. In fact I highly recommend that you do! Those who have only seen Peter Jackson's film based on the book will not, I think, truly understand the depth of the characters Tolkien has created, nor the subtlety of their interactions. As good a film as Jackson has created, it pales beside the book, and Gimli's character in particular has been stripped of his depth and most of his solemn dignity.

One way to understand the development of the friendship between Legolas and Gimli is to use Aristotle's species of friendship as set out in the *Nicomachean*

¹ References to the *Lord of the Rings* (LOTR) are to my single vol. Edition. Since the 3 vol. edition is also common I have included the book no, and chapter number in parentheses as well to help locate the quotes.

² LOTR Forward p.10

³ LOTR Forward p.11

Ethics: friendship based on utility, on pleasure, and finally friendship based on virtue.⁴ I'll mark the stages of this transition as they appear.

Elves and Dwarves

Tolkien's creation myth forms the first part of the *Silmarillion*, published posthumously. In this story Ilúvatar first made the Ainur, and then formed them into a choir and taught them a great theme. It was the theme of creation and they fashioned it into a great vocal symphony. But amidst the harmony Melkor added a dissonant note. Twice he raised his voice against the harmony, and twice Ilúvatar re-wove the theme so that the dissonance was incorporated. But Melkor once again added a harsh clamour, whereupon Ilúvatar "raised up both his hands, and in one chord, deeper than the Abyss, higher than the firmament, piercing as the light of the eye of Ilúvatar, the Music ceased".⁵

Afterwards Ilúvatar takes the Ainur into the void and shows them the Music made real in the form of a beautiful world, and he tells them that it contains everything that they sang, and in it will be everything which they thought that they had added themselves, and he says to Melkor "And thou, Melkor, wilt discover all the secrets thoughts of thy mind, and wilt perceive that they are but a part of the whole and tributary to its glory."⁶ Some of the Ainur go down into the world and they are known as the Valar. They help to prepare the world for the coming of the children of Ilúvatar - the elves and men. Melkor is among them and the Valar find themselves not infrequently having to undo his work, and eventually wage war on him, and imprison him. But since they do not really understand evil they let Melkor go eventually, whereupon he causes more wickedness.

Long before the time of the Lord of the Rings in the First Age of Middle Earth, the Elves were the first of the sentient peoples to awaken. Their story is told more fully in *The Silmarillion*, and it is a story of great nobility, but also of great folly. Despite their immortality, intelligence and the help of the Valar, the elves seemed often to lack wisdom, and they were not always able to deal with the evil influence of Melkor. The history of the elves is laced with sorrow and misfortune.

"In the beginning the Elder Children of Ilúvatar were stronger and greater than they have since become; but not more fair, for though the beauty of the Quendi in the days of their youth was beyond all other beauty that Ilúvatar has caused to be, it has not perished, but lives in the West, and sorrow and wisdom have enriched it."⁷

The Dwarves were not part of the original plan for creation. They were created by Aulë, one of the Valar, in his eagerness to see sentient life come into being. But though he was a craftsman, the Dwarves were not really alive, and only moved according to his will. Ilúvatar confronts Aulë with his folly, and Aulë feeling ashamed makes to strike the Dwarves with his hammer and destroy them. But even as he does they cower and beg for mercy and he cannot kill them. He begs Ilúvatar to amend his work and give the Dwarves true life. Ilúvatar had already read his thoughts and

⁴ see Aristotle esp. chapter 8.

⁵ *Silmarillion* p.17

⁶ *Silmarillion* p.17

⁷ *Silmarillion* p.48

consented, else the Dwarves would not have shrunk from his hammer, but he says he will not suffer them to come before his first-born. They are to be laid under the mountains to sleep for a long time: "But when the time comes I will awaken them, and they shall be to thee as children; and often strife shall arise between thine and mine, the children of my adoption and the children of my choice".⁸

Tolkien describes the Dwarves as being made strong to endure. "Therefore they are stone-hard, stubborn, fast in friendship and in enmity, and they suffer toil and hunger and hurt of body more hardily than all other speaking peoples; they live long, far beyond the span of men, yet not forever".⁹

As Illúvatar predicts there is a long history of enmity between the elves and dwarves, which goes back almost to their first meeting. It was many long years before the Dwarves and Elves met. Eventually the Dwarves made their way west over the Blue Mountains, but this is at least *seven thousand years* before the events in LOTR take place.

Long before the Dwarves emerged many of the Elves had followed the Valar to Valinor, the sanctuary created especially for them during the first age due to the trouble caused by Melkor. The Two Trees were the apotheosis of the creative abilities of the Valar and gave light to the entire world which had been lit only by stars to that point. After their destruction the lamps of the sun and moon were created. Those who saw the light of the Two Trees and dwelt in Valinor were known as the High Elves, and those who did not were the Dark Elves. Later many Elves returned to Middle Earth. In Valinor the High Elves "grew fairer and wiser and more learned, and invented their magic and their cunning craft in the making of beautiful and marvellous things, before some of them came back into the wide world".¹⁰

The Elves were surprised indeed to see the Dwarves because they had believed themselves to be the only sentient beings - the only ones that spoke with words, and made things with their hands. They looked unlovely to the Elves. The Dwarves called themselves the Khazâd, but the Elvish names for them translate as the Naugrim (Stunted People), or the Masters of Stone.¹¹ The Elves called themselves the Eldar – People of the Stars. The Silmarillion tells that few of the Elves ever learned the Dwarvish tongue, but the Dwarves were quick to learn Elvish, and perhaps even a little reluctant that any foreigner race should learn their tongue. You'll notice that although there is quite a bit of Elvish in the LOTR, there is little Dwarvish. There is something secretive about them, something hidden and perhaps even occult. Although it appears that both Galadriel and Gandalf speak at least some Dwarvish.

In the Silmarillion Tolkien says:

"Ever cool was the friendship between the Naugrim and the Eldar, though much profit they had one of the other; but at that time those griefs that lay between them had not yet come to pass"¹²

"Those griefs" were aroused by lust for the Silmaril which had been made by Fëanor of the Noldor clan while the Elves were living in Valinor. The Silmarils captured in their matrix refractions of the light of the Two. Melkor used the dissension he had stirred up as a diversion so that he could steal the Silmarils, killing the Noldor King

⁸ Silmarillion p.44

⁹ Silmarillion p.44

¹⁰ The Hobbit p.178.

¹¹ Silmarillion p.91

¹² Silmarillion. p.92.

Finwë in the process. Melkor then fled back to Middle Earth. Fëanor and his sons swear terrible oaths to pursue vengeance against Melkor, cursing him and giving him the name that he is hence forth known by: Morgoth, the Black Enemy. Fëanor and the bulk of the Noldor set out for Middle Earth, but find that the ships they need to cross the Sundering Ocean are denied to them. They slay the shipwright kin, and take their ships. Once at sea the Valar finally intervene. They send a messenger that any who do not immediately repent and return will be forever banished from Valinor, they will be slain by their enemies else they will find the length of their years an intolerable burden. Most carried on. Galadriel, though not a supporter of Fëanor decided to follow him in any case because she longed to see Middle Earth again, and to set up her own realm within it. The Noldor were indeed mostly slain, and mostly because of their almost insane attachment to the Silmarils. Through her actions during the War of the Ring Galadriel became the only one of the Noldor to be redeemed and return to Valinor. It was on one of these Silmarils which the later enmity between elves and dwarves centred.

As the Fellowship of the Ring approach Lothlórien, Haldir's response to discovering a dwarf amongst the company is:

“A dwarf! ... that is not well. We have not had dealings with the Dwarves since the Dark Days. They are not permitted in our land. I cannot allow him to pass.”¹³

The “Dark Days” probably refer to the war between Sauron and the Elves at the end of the Second Age (approximately 3000 years before the LOTR). Morgoth had been defeated and cast out of the world, but his lieutenant Sauron remained – and like Morgoth before him fooled the wise into thinking that he had reformed. The middle of the second millennium of the Second Age saw the forging of the magical rings by the Elves, with the help of Sauron, who in secret made the One Ring to rule the others. When they realised this the Elves went to war and drove him out of their lands, but he retired to Mordor and built his castle Barad-dûr. The Dwarves at this time simply shut the gates of Khazad-dûm and waited the war out. Later Sauron was captured, but again managed to fool his captors. The mortal Men assaulted Valinor thinking to claim immortality, which resulted in Catastrophe, the destruction of Numenór and the erection of the magical barrier around Valinor. The remnants of Men founded the Kingdoms of Arnor in the north, and Gondor in the south. At the end of the age they formed the Last Alliance with the Elves, and in the battle on the slopes of Mount Doom Isildur cut the One Ring from Sauron's finger.

Things are not helped when delving for Mithril deep under the mountains in Khazad-dûm, the Dwarves awaken the Balrog in Third Age 1980. Lothlórien is deeply affected by this evil. Galadriel can withstand anything other than a direct attack by Sauron himself partly because she wears one of the three Elven rings, but the Balrogs had been second only to him under the service of Morgoth, and were immensely powerful and evil. The Elven rings were not forged by Sauron, but they were still linked to the one ring because he gave the Elves the knowledge of how to forge them. Galadriel could not be dominated by Sauron, and knew his mind.

Amid this background of simmering hostility there is also some more recent history between the families of Gimli and Legolas. Gimli's father is Glóin who was on of the

¹³ LOTR (2.6) p.363

Company of Thorin in whose company Bilbo Baggins went on his adventure to the Lonely Mountain and met Smaug the dragon. Thorin's father Thrain II had been the last Dwarf to wear one of the seven rings Sauron gave to the Dwarfs, until Sauron took it back after capturing him in 2845. The Dwarves could not be dominated like Men, but the rings did inflame their gold lust. Glóin was a distant cousin to Thorin and of the same royal blood. During that trip the dwarves were incarcerated by the King of the Wood Elves, who happens to be Legolas's father. Legolas's people are Wood Elves, and were amongst those who refused the invitation to Valinor and stayed behind in Middle Earth. Tolkien says they were more dangerous and less wise than the High Elves, and that though distrustful of strangers they were basically "Good People".

During the Council of Elrond Glóin is reminded of his incarceration by the king of the Wood Elves and begins to grumble about it.¹⁴ Gandalf replies:

"Pray do not interrupt, My good Glóin. That was a regrettable misunderstanding, long set right. If all the grievances between Elves and Dwarves are to be brought up here, we may as well abandon this Council."¹⁵

So this is the background to the meeting of Legolas and Gimli – grievances old and new, and neither side much inclined to forgive and forget. Perhaps this is a particular failing of very long lived races, since the Elves are essentially immortal and the Dwarves live about 250 years. Both races seem to be quite stubborn at times. Be that as it may both Gimli and Legolas are appointed to the Fellowship of the Ring and set out together.

Having both been chosen to be members of the Fellowship of the Ring, Legolas and Gimli are able to mostly put aside their differences. There are a couple of occasions when some rancour shows through - by the door of Moria for instance,¹⁶ and on the margins of Lothlórien.

Lothlórien

The visit to Lothlórien is the turning point of their relationship, although it is initially an occasion for more bickering between them when it turns out that Gimli will only be allowed to pass if he is blindfolded. When he resists, Legolas says "A plague on the Dwarves and their stiff necks!"¹⁷ However the tables are turned when Aragorn suggests that they all be blindfolded, including Legolas who is the one person that the elves of Lothlórien trust completely. Gimli seems to find this prospect very amusing:

Gimli laughed suddenly. 'A merry troop of fools we shall look! Will Haldir lead us on a string, like many blind beggars with one dog? But I will be content, if only Legolas here shares my blindness.'¹⁸

Note the subtle dig at Haldir as the dog leading the blind beggars. There really is no love lost here.

¹⁴ see the Hobbit chps. 8 and 9.

¹⁵ LOTR (2.2) p.273

¹⁶ LOTR (2.4) p.320.

¹⁷ LOTR (2.6) p.366.

¹⁸ LOTR (2.6) p.366.

It is not possible to see the exact point when Legolas and Gimli become friends, but Gimli's meeting with Galadriel makes a big impression on him. In the book she speaks first, and then he answers:

"Dark is the water of Kheled-zâram, and cold are the springs of Kibil-nâla, and fair were the many-pillared halls of Khazad-Dûm in Elder Days before the fall of the mighty kings beneath the stone. She looked upon Gimli, who sat glowering and sad, and she smiled. And the Dwarf, hearing the names given in his own ancient tongue, looked up and met her eyes; and it seemed to him that he looked suddenly into the heart of an enemy and saw there love and understanding. Wonder came into his face, and then he smiled in answer.

He rose clumsily and bowed in dwarf-fashion, saying: 'Yet more fair is the living land of Lórien, and the Lady Galadriel is above all the jewels that lie in the earth!'¹⁹

This is one of the most fantastic moments of the story, and without the background of the Silmarillion and the Hobbit one might miss the subtlety of it. Certainly the film completely fails to capture it. Galadriel's realm is close to Moria and has suffered first from the awakening of the Balrog and subsequently as the orcs grew in power. Clearly the elves have not forgotten that it was the Dwarves awoke the Balrog, nor the other grievances between them, and yet Galadriel is able not only to be a gracious host but to express love for Gimli, who has been bad tempered to date. Later Galadriel once again shows her mettle by refusing the ring when Frodo freely offers it to her.

After this Legolas and Gimli, to the wonder of their companions, were frequently seen together exploring the realm of Lothlórien. And by the time they take to boats to continue their journey, the two share one boat, and Tolkien describes them as "fast friends".²⁰ Gimli has a very intimate farewell with Galadriel. When asked what gift he would like, he replies that merely seeing and hearing her has been enough, but when pressed he requests a single strand of her hair, which he is granted. Later he will defend her name with vigour! So Galadriel's impression on Gimli seems to have melted his stone heart, and with that change it became possible to be friends with an elf. We know less about the change that comes over Legolas. Perhaps it was Gimli's unexpected eloquence when addressing Galadriel that impressed him, or at least made him reassess his attitude to the dwarf? Gimli is wonderfully eloquent at times, and has, I think, the best lines in the whole book.

Although we have already seen the glimmerings of the love that blossoms between this pair, we should not overlook the utility which they bring to the Fellowship. There are many occasions when Gimli's strength, and Legolas's agility or clear sight, have served the others well. It is easy to imagine that the complimentary skills and qualities that each brought to the Fellowship would have been appreciated, even when they did not like each other. This corresponds to the lowest level on Aristotle's hierarchy of friendship. With the visit to Lórien we see that the two begin to overcome their antipathy and find pleasure in each other's company – which corresponds to the second level of Aristotle's hierarchy.

¹⁹ LOTR (2.7) p.375

²⁰ LOTR (2.8) p.392

The pursuit of Merry and Pippin and Fangorn

With the death of Boromir, and the departure of Frodo and Sam, Aragorn, Gimli and Legolas are left wondering what to do now. They quickly decide to rescue Merry and Pippin and set off to chase the Orcs who have kidnapped the two Hobbits. Orcs should not even be able to walk around in full day light, and yet these are running at full pelt - clearly some devilry is at work and it is some time before they find out more.

They run for three days without food or sleep. This is an heroic feat, the more so because Gimli is rather shorter than the long legged Elf and Ranger. The bond which already exists is tempered and made stronger by enduring this ordeal together. At length after a meeting with the Riders of Rohan they come to the edge of Fangorn Forest.

The Dwarf has no love of forests, seeing only fire wood for his forge, but Legolas is a Wood Elf and forest is his natural habitat. Fangorn Forest is rather forbidding though. The trees are quite wild and partly sentient and not well disposed to races with axes, and cast a pall on the atmosphere. When it becomes clear that the young Hobbits have gone into the dark aggressive forest Gimli is reluctant. When Legolas says: "I could have been happy here, if I had come in days of peace", Gimli replies: "I dare say you could... You are a wood-elf, anyway, though elves of any kind are strange folk. Yet you comfort me. Where you go I will go."²¹

This willingness to follow each other becomes a theme of the friendship. In the forest they find the unexpected - Gandalf the Grey resurrected as Gandalf the White – and the story moves to one of the climatic episodes the storming of the Hornburg by 10,000 of Saruman's Uruk-Hai, a new hybrid Orc much larger and stronger and able to endure full sunlight.

The battle of the Hornburg

During the battle of the Hornburg, the friendship, now cemented between the Dwarf and Elf takes a macabre twist as they compete to see how many orcs they can kill. They check each other's score several times during the battle, and the one with the lesser total, redoubles his effort in order to catch up.

Finally at the end of the battle the two, who have become separated, are reunited and compare notes. Gimli, slightly wounded but otherwise fit, calls out:

'Forty-two, Master Legolas!...Alas! My axe is notched : the forty-second had an iron collar on his neck. How is it with you?'

To which Legolas replies:

"You have passed my score by one... But I do not grudge you the game, so glad am I to see you on your legs!"²²

Here we see the competitive aspect of the friendship which is played up in the movie while other aspects are played down.

²¹ LOTR (3.5) p.512

²² LOTR (3.8) p.566

With the battle won, the victors march on Isengard. On the road Gimli and Legolas have a conversation which is particularly note worthy. Having endured Fangorn and the Huron trees which surrounded the Hornburg Gimli is very relieved to be in open spaces. And almost as if to cheer himself up he begins to speak of the caverns behind the fort at the Hornburg. He begins to describe them to his Elven friend: immeasurable halls, filled with an everlasting music of water that tinkles into pools, as fair as Kheled-zâram in the star light.²³ His description is one of the most beautiful passage in the book. And Legolas, to whom caves are an anathema replies:

You move me Gimli...I have never heard you speak like this before. Almost you make me regret that I have not seen these caves. Come! Let us make this bargain – if we both return safe out of the perils that await us, we will journey for a while together. You shall visit Fangorn with me, and then I will come with you to see Helm’s Deep.

‘That would not be the way of return that I should choose’, said Gimli. ‘But I will endure Fangorn, if I have your promise to come back to the caves and share their wonder with me.’²⁴

The friends are beginning to communicate on the level of beauty, which is similar to Aristotle’s friendship based on virtue. In the end they fulfil their bargain and visit the caves together after the One Ring is destroyed, and when they come out Legolas is silent except to say that only Gimli could find words fit for them, “and never before has a Dwarf claimed a victory over an Elf in a contest of words.”²⁵ Unfortunately we never hear Gimli’s response to his visit to the deep places in Fangorn where Legolas takes him.

The paths of the Dead

There is still a competitive element in the friendship, and it is this element that helps Gimli to overcome his fear and step through the door to the Paths of the Dead. As we read the ghosts of men have no terror for Legolas, and as Gimli stands on the threshold frozen with fear he says: “Here is a thing unheard of... An Elf will go underground and a Dwarf dare not!”²⁶ With this he plunges in, though still feeling the terror of the place. The realm of tunnels and stone caverns is of course most strongly associated with the Dwarves, but Legolas’s father’s house is also underground. Even so this is another striking moment when Gimli overcomes his fear to follow his friend. His love and respect for Aragorn must also be a factor, but when he speaks his thoughts aloud – as if coaching himself – he put’s it in terms of his relationship to Legolas.

The story continues with Gimli and Legolas as brothers in arms and companions for much of the time. They fight in more great battles including the Pelannor fields, and the last stand before the black gate, but there is less detail in these parts of the book – perhaps because of the wide perspective necessary to encompass

²³ LOTR (3.8) p.570

²⁴ LOTR (3.8) p.571

²⁵ LOTR (6.6) p.1014

²⁶ LOTR (5.2) p.818

them. The two attend the crowning of their friend Aragorn as King Elessar, and accompany the Hobbit's as far as Helm's Deep on the return journey.

Gimli eventually settled in Helm's Deep with a group of Dwarves who worked on making the beautiful caves accessible, and did great works for Gondor and Rohan. Legolas settled with his people in Ithilien between Gondor and what was Mordor.

The Grey Havens

The final event in this historic friendship between Elf and Dwarf is one of the most moving, and it is difficult to describe the significance of it to someone who has not steeped themselves in Tolkien's mythology. At the end of the story Elrond, Galadriel, Gandalf, Bilbo, and Frodo and many Elves set sail for Valinor. This is the culmination of the story of the rings, although the story of Middle Earth continues. Elrond, Galadriel, Gandalf carry with them the three Elven rings which they have worn for centuries and which, with the destruction of the One Ring, are now greatly reduced in power. Galadriel by her actions has redeemed herself and becomes the first of Noldor to return to Valinor after many thousands of years. Bilbo and Frodo had earned their places by being bearers of the One Ring. But few other mortals have ever seen the light of Valinor; and those who did, such as Eärendil, became the stuff of legends. Valinor was never intended for the mortals such as Men, Hobbits and Dwarves.

And then after Aragorn, King Elessar, had died Legolas too departed for Valinor. Tolkien tells us that one of the last notes in the Red Book (from whence much of the Hobbit and the LOTR stories come) is this final tribute to the friendship:

“We have heard tell that Legolas took Gimli Glóin's son with him because of their great friendship, greater than any that has been between Elf and Dwarf. If it is true then it is strange indeed : that a dwarf should leave Middle-earth for any love, or that the Eldar should receive him, or that the Lords of the West should permit it. But it is said that Gimli went also out of desire to see again the beauty of Galadriel; and it may be that she, being mighty among the Eldar, obtained this grace for him.”

It is more or less certain that this means that Gimli has been granted immortality, because Valinor is also known by the epithet "The Undying Lands". Gimli is granted this great honor, but through his actions in the War of the Ring, through his friendship with Legolas, he had surely earned it.

Conclusion

There are many great literary friendships, but this one is one of the most moving ever written. It is subtle, and relies on Tolkien's extensive back-story to bring out that subtlety, but it is quite profound. The characters move from barely disguised enmity, into neutral acceptance, to a relationship based on utility. This is transformed by Gimli's meeting with Galadriel in which she opens her heart to Gimli, and he has an epiphany in which he sees his old enemy in an entirely new light. Afterwards Gimli and Legolas begin to have a much greater appreciation for each other, and move towards a more intimate friendship. This is helped by a common purpose, but is still

difficult because of the vast cultural gulf between the races. Eventually though it is the mutual appreciation of beauty which binds them together.

Their friendship and perhaps friendship more generally, reaches an apotheosis when Gimli is granted passage to Valinor, a place made by the Valar to protect the Elves from evil influences, and in which no Dwarf has ever seen or set foot on. The import of this is hard to get across in words to anyone unfamiliar with the mythology of Middle Earth, it is hard to imagine anything more fabulous than a Dwarf being granted permission to dwell in Valinor with an Elf.

It is perhaps inevitable that some will see story this in homo-erotic terms. By this I mean that some will consider that this and other friendships in the book have a sexual basis. I think this is a mistake. There is no doubt that love and intimacy develops between the two characters, but the automatic linking of love and intimacy with sex is unfortunate. Tolkien says the story is not allegorical. This need not stop us from looking for ulterior motives of course, and some have portrayed LOTR as a book about Christianity, or about World War II which he denied. These analyses are highly speculative though, and the analogies, say between Gandalf and Christ, are not very robust. I think Freud was wrong to interpret all psychopathologies as having a sexual basis. How much more wrong are those who interpret all human behaviour whatsoever in sexual terms? Love between men is a difficult subject in our time. It has a very restricted field – either it is sexual, or it is devoid of emotion. The result is alienation and mistrust. It's not that I am agin men having sex with men, there is nothing wrong with that per se. But I would like to open up to a possibility of love that was not sexual, the love, as Aristotle put it, that is based on a mutual response to virtue. Tolkien was influenced, we know, by the Anglo-Saxon epics such as Beowulf. Hero's almost always have a male companion and friend, to give a helping hand, to guard their back, to talk with.

Robert Bly has been a champion in our times for men befriending and loving men, and has encouraged men to find ways to bring emotion into their mutual relationships. Legolas and Gimli manage to do this by going into the realm of their friend. In mythic terms the friends allow the other to see and experience their inner most world – the cave for Gimli and the deep woods for Legolas. Each is a symbol both of the depths of the character, but also of where they find value and virtue. What they find is that despite the differences, despite being at odds for thousands of years, they could actually communicate their sense of value and virtue. This is true intimacy.

This image could pertain to men making friends across the barrier of racial or cultural difference. Or the difference could be one of religion. Tolkien, then, seems to be offering us a supremely optimistic vision in this story. Of course the forces of evil – Sauron, the Balrog and the Orcs – they are not interested in love, not interested in empathy and intimacy. They want to control and destroy. There are a lot of these kind of men and women around now. But if there is willingness and openness there need not be enmity. An Elf can be wonder-struck by a cave, and a Dwarf can see beauty of a deep old forest. A man can see into the heart of another man.

One of the important things about this love being between two male characters is that it is not buying into the neo-romantic myth that fulfilment is only obtained via the sexual/romantic relationship. Aragorn and Samwise find love, marry and both found dynasties, albeit on different scales. Legolas and Gimli do not go that route. They lead their peoples, as is their destiny, but they do not become involved in romantic love.

In the Buddhist tradition there is an old saying. "Hatred is never overcome by hatred; hatred is only overcome by love".²⁷ It seems most straight forward to take this as the theme of the story of Legolas and Gimli: that long held enmity can be overcome and friends made between individuals and peoples who are alien to each other. We are able to rise above our conditioning, our prejudices and habits of thought. We can attain nobility of mind and be a friend to anyone.

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²⁷ Dhammapada v.5.