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“Hel-heime!': The Daring Love Between Men in Dome Karukoski's *Tolkien*”

Dome Karukoski's biopic *Tolkien* (Fox Searchlight 2019) is for the most part a sensitive representation of J.R.R. Tolkien's early life. It does not fail to portray the passionately intellectual and emotional connections between the young members of the T.C.B.S. (Tea Club, Barrovian Society), the literary and artistic club formed by a small number of students of the King Edward's School, Birmingham to which Tolkien belonged and which included Robert Gilson, Geoffrey Bache Smith, and Christopher Wiseman.¹ Their time was spent discussing, among other things, favorite texts, ancient and early medieval languages and mythologies. A great detail provided in the film is their communal cry, “Hel-heime.” Chorused among the members, it promoted solidarity and courage within their circle. The young men of the T.C.B.S. truly believed they were a spark of truth and imagination that potentially could light the world on fire.

Nicholas Hoult's performance as a young Tolkien is extremely satisfying. While very able to hold his own within Hollywood blockbuster cinema, Hoult is not afraid to take risks in his choices of roles and in his acting. His range of emotional expression in the film is impressive, especially in his relationship with the young Geoffrey Smith, played by the very competent Anthony Boyle. Despite the distance separating them throughout much of the film, the two young men maintain an undercurrent of passionate affection inextricably wound to the backdrop of the Great War.

While they never actually share a battle scene, the two appear to be simultaneously present on the battlefield as each calls out the other's name, struggling in the sea of dead male bodies.

¹ In addition to these top four, there were Thomas Barnsley, Sidney Barrowclough, Ralph and Wilfred Payton, and Vincent Trought.

Geoffrey is badly wounded during battle. John Ronald searches for Geoffrey through a rain of artillery fire, having mentioned to his batman, Sam, that Geoffrey would do the same for him.

On December 3rd 1916, Smith died in France of his wounds received from artillery shells.

Tolkien subtly reflects Geoffrey Bache Smith's intense homo-amorous feelings for his close friend. In one particular instance, the two are watching other fellow Oxford students fence and John Ronald confides in Geoffrey, expressing his sorrows over Edith Bratt's engagement to someone else. Geoffrey attempts to support "Tollers" Tolkien and in so doing appears to speak somewhat cryptically of his own experience of unrequited love; their hands touch in a lingering shot, which cements the scene's amorous intensity. No other love interest appears to be a possibility for Geoffrey, who is usually alone, though John Ronald's romantic feelings for Edith are centrally placed within the narrative. The overall impression of all this is that the love between these two men possibly exists on two separate wavelengths, and that while Tolkien reciprocates Smith's love, he may not quite match the intensity of that love. Calling this love "homo-amorous" provides a sense of the contours of feeling between these two men, but does not suppose anything beyond that. It may be that Geoffrey's love was brotherly and spiritual; it may be that a physical attraction and eroticism accompanied that love. If it was physical for Geoffrey, there appears no evidence from the published correspondences, biographical scholarship, nor from "A Spring Harvest," his collection of poetry published by Tolkien in 1918 of any internal moral struggle; this, of course, only tells us so much. If the love was intense in a more Platonic way [emphasizing the Greek philosophical tradition here], the physical intimacy between academic men in the early twentieth century is both challenging and enticing to read in our more sexually liberated era. Certainly, the film calls attention to a homo-amorous longing.

Scholars must, of course, be careful not to project our own present-day attitudes upon earlier times; though we mustn't be afraid to investigate the potential for libidinous connections either.

In Hoult's sonorous voice, Tolkien declares that his work is about “what it means to love, and be loved.” That seems to be just as true of Karukoski's *Tolkien*. Maybe Geoffrey's love is not boldly announced, but it appears to be something that develops off-screen, a quieter and more personal “hel-heime” to which John Ronald is privy, but cannot reciprocate to the same degree.