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## "Wondered at this Change": Queer Potential and Telling Silence in the Relationship of Legolas and Gimli

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“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 this is true, then it is strange indeed: that a Dwarf should be willing to 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. More cannot be said of this matter.”

This is “one of the last notes in the Red Book” (1081), a quote most fans of Legolas and Gimli know by heart – and a quote that, all in itself, encapsulates the representation of their relationship, potential and problematic both. Legolas and Gimli are one of the iconic friendships written in *The Lord of the Rings*, a friendship that reaches across the boundaries of people historically at odds, in which the two involved reach outside of their own comfort zones to find comfort in each other, and in which they follow each other, eventually, beyond the ends of the earth. Their friendship is both strange and comforting, intensely intimate and oddly private, deeply committed and yet riddled with gaps. All of this makes them perfect candidates for a queer reading – and yet, surprisingly, in the queer scholarship on Tolkien, they are noticeably absent. Perhaps this quote can explain that, too: the alternate explanation for Gimli’s desire to leave Middle-earth as a yearning to see Galadriel; the coy refusal to speak more of what happened upon their journey beyond the borders of the world. All through their relationship as depicted in the book, deep intimacy is juxtaposed with sudden privacy in a way that makes Legolas and Gimli intriguing yet ignorable as a queer relationship. This essay is an effort to address that gap. I thus concentrate on the potential of Legolas and Gimli for a queer reading – queer both in a sense of non-normative and transgressive, and in a sense of same-gender desire. I follow the development of their relationship through the text, pointing out the moments of queer potential and the moments of privacy.

In this paper, I define queerness in two ways, according to Sara Ahmed’s definitions of the word in *Queer Phenomenology*: “a way of describing what is ‘oblique’ or ‘off line’” and a way of referring to “those who practice nonnormative sexualities” (161). I argue that Legolas and Gimli have queer potential in both ways: their closeness transgresses the boundaries of culture and race in ways that are “strange” to those who observe them, and their affection for one another offers the potential for nonnormative sexuality. I want to acknowledge in my use of Sara Ahmed’s work that much of her theory is addressed specifically to the experience of being a lesbian, of turning towards women and away from men, and that her theory addresses stakes in the “real” or non-fantasy world. Legolas and Gimli are both male and both fictional, so I do not want to suggest that a reading of their queerness has the same stakes as Ahmed’s analysis, but I find her thoughts and perspective on queerness and orientation a useful framework for how they turn towards one another, how they occupy both “physical” space (in the world of Middle-earth) and space in our minds as readers and scholars. Their queer potential, after all, has effects that reach beyond the story itself: they speak to readers and scholars who might see themselves reflected – or who might choose to look away, using the privacy written into their relationship to ignore their potential.

Legolas and Gimli are, as described in the text itself, “a strange friendship” (586). From the beginning, they are set up to be at odds: they come from races with a long history of enmity – and with a personal familial history as well, which is noted in Legolas’s first introduction when Glóin, Gimli’s father, reminds the Council of Elrond of his own imprisonment at the hands of Legolas’s father (255). Though little attention is given to the relationships between characters in

the early days of the Fellowship's journey, we are given indications that Legolas and Gimli are at odds, in dialogue exchanges such as the following outside the doors of Khazad-dum:

"It was not the fault of the Dwarves that the friendship waned,' said Gimli.  
'I have not heard that it was the fault of the Elves,' said Legolas." (303)

Though we have not seen these two at odds with one another, these lines indicate a readiness to take offense, or to jump to the defense of their own people. Both Legolas and Gimli thus seem to see themselves and one another as they were appointed to their roles in the Fellowship – as representatives of their races, rather than as individuals in their own right who might become close friends. However, something interesting happens with their dialogue as the Fellowship moves into Khazad-dum: they are frequently seen together and their speech is nearly always in response to one another. They share no fewer than three further instances of the kind of parallel dialogue depicted above, in which their words echo one another or finish one another's thoughts. Though they are not yet friends, the text already establishes them as linked in some way, intertwined. Once they become friends, in the Golden Wood of Lothlórien, they become explicitly intertwined: they are inseparable from one another throughout the books. They share everything: dialogue, storytelling, experiences, a horse, even future plans. They declare their friendship defiantly before anyone who questions it, despite any strange looks they receive, and ultimately break all the rules by sailing into the West together at the end of the Appendices. Their friendship is one of the closest and most notable of all the relationships in the book, all the more so for its unexpected origins.

Interestingly, this friendship forms and occurs almost entirely outside of the view of the narrator or the readers. None of the characters whose perspectives we see know, and the omniscient narrator gives us no information beyond what these characters can see. In the forest of Lothlórien, where they first become friends, all we are told is that Legolas spends much of his time away from the rest of the Fellowship, and that "often he took Gimli with him when he went abroad in the land, and the others wondered at this change" (359). There is much to note in this moment, not least the significance of Lothlórien itself – the wood where Aragorn and Arwen, a distinctly romantic pairing, pledge their troth; a wood from which no one emerges "unchanged" (338). Lothlórien is also a space of mystery to the rest of Middle-earth – even Legolas does not seem certain whether there are still elves there or not, and so it is regarded with wonder and suspicion by others from other kingdoms. It is significant that Legolas and Gimli become friends here, in this space of privacy, in this space where reality feels slowed down and time passes differently (this is perhaps especially significant because Legolas's immortality and Gimli's mortality make time a significant feature of their intertwined futures). These words about their shared wanderings – that the others "wondered" about them – also highlights the strangeness of their friendship: that it is a change, a cause for wonder. This is the first, but not the last, example of the shield of privacy that protects the nature of their relationship from deeper scrutiny: we can wonder, but the characters themselves will never tell us.

This contradiction, this strangeness, follows Legolas and Gimli throughout the rest of their relationship – a startling juxtaposition between hidden, shielded moments and an almost defiant declaration of their closeness. As time moves on and they grow closer, Legolas and Gimli's words to one another become not only surprisingly intimate, but also plant seeds of a commitment to one another that will continue to grow throughout the narration and eventually bloom into their travels together into the West. They continue their earlier trend of echoing one

another's dialogue, but now in phrases such as "You comfort me" (said by Gimli to Legolas at the borders of Fangorn forest (491), and then by Legolas to Gimli at Helm's Deep (532). They pledge to follow where the other leads: Gimli outright says to Legolas, "Where you go, I will go" (491). They make a bargain to travel together to the Glittering Caves in Helm's Deep and then to Fangorn, "if [they] come safe out of the perils that await [them]" (548), and when begging Treebeard's leave to bring Gimli with him to Fangorn, Legolas declares, "While Gimli lives I shall not come to Fangorn alone" (586). They display no shame in their friendship or their commitment, defiant before anyone who would question them, constructing identities intertwined with one another. As the story continues, and Legolas is struck by the sea-longing (the yearning to sail west to Valinor), we see the threat of separation between them – and we see how Gimli reacts to that separation. When Legolas describes the onset of the sea-longing, and his yearning to leave these lands, Gimli says, "If all the fair folk take to the Havens, it will be a duller world for those doomed to stay." Merry agrees, telling Legolas that there will always be people "and a few wise dwarves, like Gimli, who need you" (875). In these lines, we see another example of the committed relationship Legolas and Gimli have already formed: Gimli does not want Legolas to leave. Their pledges to one another have created a need between them, a reliance: they have begun to depend on their future paths lying together. We also see in Merry's words that their intimacy has not gone unnoticed, that their friends are aware of this reliance, and that Legolas and Gimli have made no effort to hide it. For all the transgression of their friendship, it is one that they both wear with defiant pride.

And yet beside this performance of intimacy, this presentation before the eyes of others, we continue to see these moments of privacy, a secret world that belongs to only Legolas and Gimli. The two are rarely seen outside of one another's company, and frequently withdraw from the company of others to be alone together. Even in simple lines such as, "That night we rested while others labored" (878), during Gimli's description to Merry of their night at Pelargir, we see a shield created between Legolas and Gimli and the others they have traveled with. "We," Legolas and Gimli, are set apart from others, but still, always, together. Again, when they do come safely out of the war and hold to their bargains, they visit the Glittering Caves together. All that any character or reader knows of this expedition is that "when they returned [Legolas] was silent, and would say only that Gimli alone could find fit words to speak of them" (959). This line is yet another example of the screen of privacy drawn over Legolas and Gimli's shared space – an example of untold intimacy in their relationship that we do not see. It is reasonable to assume that something significant happened in those caves, something that rendered Legolas speechless. This could be something as simple as the beauty of the caves, or it could have been something that passed between the two of them – but we did not witness it, and so we do not know. I do not point out this line to speculate, but to point out the possibility that exists in that unknowing: that privacy provides space for speculation and a lack of confirmation. Crucially, they are also given privacy by the omniscient narrator of the books, who rarely gives glimpses into either Legolas's or Gimli's point of view – and almost never when thinking about one another. This privacy away from the other characters extends to the narrator and to the reader as well. Because we have so little insight into their perspectives, their friendship and any analysis of it is limited to what they say and do – what they are willing to show of themselves before the other characters and the readers – and, as mentioned above, what they show is a performance of deep and defiant intimacy.

Throughout the story itself, it can be argued that Legolas and Gimli are the least significant members of the Fellowship of the Ring. The hobbits, the characters whose

perspectives we most frequently see, each have an important role to play in the defeat of Sauron. Aragorn's destiny lies in becoming king of Gondor. And Gandalf's task is to steward Middle-earth itself, to see to the defeat of Sauron, and to bring people together in an effort to achieve that task. Legolas and Gimli have none of these, and perhaps this is why we see so little of their perspectives . . . but increasingly, it seems, the destiny that they have in this mission – and their role in the story – is to find one another. Again and again, they are privy to the main action only by virtue of being Aragorn's companions, present mostly to make commentary to one another and to form a deeper, stronger bond. For each of them, the story playing out in these books is the story of a relationship – and yet the absence of their viewpoints in the narration again creates a shield of privacy between the characters and the readers, so that the exact nature of that relationship is not ours to know.

This strange dichotomy of performance and privacy is what creates both the queer potential and the queer deniability of Legolas and Gimli's relationship. These moments in which we don't know what is passing between them create an ambiguity that does not exist in other relationships, such as that between Frodo and Sam. Frodo and Sam too spend the majority of the books in one another's company, but because their journey – both physical and emotional – is so crucial to the story, we readers accompany them on the way – and see into their minds. We bear witness to Sam's tenderness with Frodo, a physical tenderness not displayed in Legolas and Gimli's relationship, as Sam clasps Frodo's hands in his own (624) or rests his head in his lap (714). We even witness Sam's thought of "I love him," as he looks down on a sleeping Frodo (652). These elements of overt tenderness and explicit thoughts of love create an undeniability to the relationship – they must be engaged, even if scholars wish to dismiss the possibility of queerness. With Legolas and Gimli, on the other hand, we lack any such explicit acknowledgement of love. We see their commitment to one another, and their devotion, but we rarely witness them when they are alone together. The text also presents other ways of interpreting their relationship, such as Gimli's reverence for Galadriel. When speaking to Éomer of the beauty of Arwen and Galadriel, Gimli will say, "My love is given to the Morning. And my heart forebodes that soon it shall pass away for ever" (975). Ostensibly, he is speaking of Galadriel here, as the morning contrast to Arwen's evening. But it is not Galadriel with whom he has discussed the sea-longing, or departure from this world, but Legolas, who has lamented his sea-longing many times in Gimli's presence. Similarly, in the Appendices, when Gimli does sail with Legolas, the narrator posits that it may be because of the "great love" that grew between them, or because of Gimli's "desire to see again the beauty of Galadriel" (1080-1081). I do not argue here that either interpretation is correct, but the existence of both interpretations provides an opportunity to read queer potential into their relationship, as well as an opportunity to deflect scrutiny from a queer analysis.

To delve deeper into this queer analysis, I return to Sara Ahmed's concept of queer phenomenology. Ahmed describes phenomenology and queerness in terms of paths: paths or directions for life are created by those who have walked those paths before, whose work creates ease and encouragement for those who follow them (16-18). Heterosexuality is one such path, and in the case of Legolas and Gimli, their expected relationship paths likely included cleaving to their own people and their traditions. (I return to the word "strange," so constantly used to describe them and their connection.) The path to one another diverges from what is expected of them, by themselves and by others. And yet, as Ahmed says, "accidental or chance encounters do happen, and they redirect us and open up new worlds" (19). Legolas and Gimli encounter one another, and their paths become redirected towards one another. I bring up this metaphor of paths

for them especially because so much of their relationship is built on following one another: through the woods of Lothlórien, to the Glittering Caves. And when the Fellowship breaks for good, Legolas and Gimli depart together to Fangorn, to “journey on together to our own lands in Mirkwood and beyond” (981). In this moment, neither of them can say where “beyond” will take them – but in time, it will take Gimli to the Glittering Caves and Legolas to Ithilien, and then all the way to the West together. This commitment to following is another thing that makes their friendship non-normative: unlike many of the other male characters, neither of them is paired off safely with a female spouse. They are implied to have spent their lives together even in the Appendices, always mentioned within a few sentences of one another, all the way until they sail together into the West and out of the story – another wonder, for “it is strange indeed: that a dwarf should leave Middle-earth for any love” – but, of course, “more cannot be said of this matter” (1081).

That last line exemplifies how even this closeness, this strangeness, is inextricably bound with these moments of privacy, these moments in which the reader’s eyes are encouraged to turn away from them. Even in the above quote, we are assured that perhaps Gimli’s desire to go West is “to see again the beauty of Galadriel” (1081). It is also Galadriel who prompts Gimli’s first moment of turning away from an expected path, allowing him to see beauty and the potential for love in an elf. Such moments provide what I would describe as *plausible deniability* in a queer reading of Legolas and Gimli’s relationship, and, when read in coordination with the significant relationship developments we do not see, can work in contrast to their non-normative intimacy to create a shield for how their relationship is viewed. Dominic Pecorano analyzes this dichotomy of performance and privacy in a study of queer “coming-out” stories, suggesting that control over how identity is viewed is a crucial component of queer experiences. He uses the concept of “facework,” or construction of a public identity in different situations, to analyze the ways that different queer people might “[navigate] privacy roles” to construct their own queer identities in different settings and communities. The narration colludes with Legolas and Gimli in creating this privacy management, allowing them to control what they reveal of their relationship to the characters and the readers. Much of what passes between them occurs in privacy, such as their friendship in Lothlórien, their travels together to the Glittering Caves and beyond, and their final journey to the West. And yet the identity they perform before everyone they meet in the books is one of defiant affection. They do not specify the nature of their devotion, but will not allow their friendship to be questioned or doubted (Legolas’s words to Treebeard, for instance), to the point that their friends come to acknowledge and validate their intertwined identities.

The contrast between this non-normative performance and this strategic privacy has created a shield over Legolas and Gimli’s relationship – one that even the text itself seems reluctant to breach. Consider again the line that has followed us through this text: one of the last lines written of these two characters in the Appendices, concerning their unprecedented journey to Valinor, “More cannot be said of this matter.” It seems that scholarship has followed the path trodden by the text, frequently analyzing Legolas and Gimli as dear friends without investigating the queer potential in their transgressive relationship. I do not speculate here as to the extratextual reasons for this silence – that is a topic for a different paper. I intend this analysis both to point out a gap, and to create one small contribution to filling it.

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