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“But Not Alone:” The Necessity of Virtuous Friendship in *The Lord of the Rings*

Without a clear direction, the term “friend” can be widely applied and misapplied to anything from the relationship between two co-workers who only communicate with each other at work, to two people who have known each other for thirty years and talk every day, to a group of priests helping each other become more virtuous by praying for each other and making sacrifices to benefit the good of the others. It is evident that a clear definition of this term is beneficial to understand the extent of how each of these fit the term, “friend.” Aristotle defines three levels of friendship: friendship of utility, friendship of pleasure, and the fullest level, friendship of virtue. Friendships of utility form when there is something mutually beneficial for both parties (1156a10-12). Perhaps three women want to start a bowling league and find a mutual “friend” to be the fourth required member. A friendship of pleasure forms when people enjoy spending time together because of the mutual delight in the other person’s pleasant qualities (1156a12-14). This type of friendship would be something like a group of men who enjoy drinking together because they enjoy the others’ company. These first two levels of friendship are trivial as what is useful and pleasurable to people often changes, thus the friendship no longer serves its purpose and fades away (1156a19-21). The highest form of friendship, friendship of virtue, forms when two or more people are on the common pursuit of betterment and desire good for their friend for the friend’s sake not one’s own (1156b7-11). This is the level of friendship exemplified by numerous characters in J.R.R. Tolkien’s *The Lord of the*

*Rings*. Frodo embarks on a journey that has the power to change the course of Middle-earth. Many doubt the likelihood of success of the unlikely hobbit hero. His successes and failures cannot only be attributed to himself, however, as there is a group of eight others, the Fellowship of the Ring, who accompany him on his expedition. The Fellowship is not just any group though. It is made up of individuals whose friendship throughout the series helps Frodo accomplish what he sets out to do. There are numerous factors that influence the success of the Fellowship during the War of the Ring. One of the most important factors is the friendship between the characters. This friendship allows for many of the other factors that influence their success to be made possible. Tolkien proves that not just any type of friendship will be sufficient, rather the third, and highest level of friendship, a friendship of virtue, between the members of the Fellowship of the Ring is what allows them to be successful on their quest.

Frodo's journey itself begins surrounded by his friends and the hobbits clearly establish that their friendship is for more than just utility or pleasure. While Frodo does not yet know the extent of his upcoming dangerous journey, he is beginning to understand the perils of the Ring and how powerful it truly is. Frodo is fearful that he cannot trust anyone with the burden he must bear and does not want to harm his friends. Merry reassures him that "You can trust us to stick to you through thick and thin – to the bitter end... But you cannot trust us to let you face your trouble alone, and go off without a word. We are your friends, Frodo. Anyway: there it is... We are horribly afraid – but we are going with you; or following you like hounds" (*FotR* 103). Frodo accepts Merry, Sam, and Pippin into his company and is comforted knowing that his friends have pledged their loyalty to him. If this was just a friendship of pleasure or utility, Sam, Merry, and Pippin would not choose to accompany Frodo knowing his journey will be extremely dangerous, therefore, not pleasurable. They would also have little to gain from accompanying him,

therefore, it would not be useful for them to go. Rather, this friendship is one of virtue. The hobbits are sacrificing their comfortable lives in the Shire so Frodo does not have to face this battle alone. Overall, Sam, Merry, and Pippin want what is best for Frodo for Frodo's sake.

While the virtuous friendship of the hobbits is established, it could appear that the relationship between the rest of the Fellowship is one of utility and that they are all acting out of duty because they each have something to gain from the destruction of the One Ring (*FotR* 235-62). Elrond makes it clear to the members that they are free to leave at any time: "The Ring-bearer is setting out on a quest to Mount Doom. On him alone is there any charge laid... The others may go with him as free companions, to help him on his way. You may tarry, or come back, or turn aside paths, as chance allows" (*FotR* 274). Through all the trials the group experiences, none of them freely choose to leave. While it could again be argued that the members do not leave because it is their personal duty to stay and they have more to gain by staying, this idea does not account for Aragorn, Legolas, and Gimli's choice to go after Merry and Pippin after they have been taken by orcs instead of trying to follow Frodo and Sam (*TT* 409-10). If the relationship between the members of the Fellowship was just a friendship of utility or they were only acting out of duty, Aragorn, Legolas, and Gimli would have chosen to find Sam and Frodo. Frodo possesses the Ring, and destroying the Ring, or at least ensuring the Ring gets to Mount Doom, as Frodo is the one who must destroy it, is their main duty. However, this is not the choice they make. Aragorn, Legolas, and Gimli embark on a seemingly hopeless quest chasing orcs to save Pippin and Merry not knowing which way they went or if they are even still alive (*TT* 412). The choice to follow Merry and Pippin split the Fellowship away from Sam and Frodo, but this choice, rooted in virtue, allows for them to accomplish many tasks that

aided in their overall success such as reuniting with Gandalf and summoning the Army of the Dead.

The idea of the Fellowship being united only in a friendship of utility also does not explain the friendship between Legolas and Gimli. If this was just a friendship of utility, these two most likely would not have even become friends in the first place. From the start, there is animosity between Legolas and Gimli because of the existing conflict and distrust between their races. There is tension between the two on a few occasions, but clearly when trying to enter the gates of Moria: “‘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” (*FotR* 295). Gandalf shuts down their argument and asks them to put their differences aside, but they could even do this without becoming friends.

The journey through Lothlórien ignites a shift in the relationship between Legolas and Gimli. After meeting the Lady Galadriel, who makes a large impression on Gimli, his attitude, as well as Legolas’ change and they “had now become fast friends” (*FotR* 363). After this, Legolas and Gimli remain inseparable. They clearly enter a friendship of pleasure, but it is even more than this. Gimli and Legolas were each beneficial to the company before they were friends, but now that they together combine the agility and sight of Legolas and the strength of Gimli, their complementary and unique skills serve to greatly benefit the Fellowship, as well as healing the disparity between their two races. Their friendship is one of virtue as they long for the good of each other. During the fight at Hornburg, Legolas and Gimli have an orc slaying contest to pull some enjoyment out of their perilous situation (*TT* 522-24). Legolas loses sight of Gimli and worries about him, but the company must keep going onward. When Gimli is reunited with Legolas, he returns in jest, but Legolas’ reply shows that he truly cares for the wellbeing of

Gimli: “‘Forty-two, Master Legolas!’ he cried... How is it with you?’ ‘You have passed my score by one,’ answered Legolas. ‘But I do not grudge you the game, so glad I am to see you on your legs!’” (*TT* 530). The Fellowship has grown closer and developed mutual love for each other, they do not act only for the sake of duty or personal gain but out of care for each other and the desire for one another’s good.

With these previous examples, it is clear to see that friendship is present within the Fellowship and that these friendships are rooted in virtue. To further prove the necessity of virtuous friendship to the success of the Fellowship, though, it is important to examine the other characters who embark on a similar mission as the Fellowship but are not successful. Gollum, originally Sméagol, has been alone from the start of his journey with the Ring. After killing his friend, Déagol, to get the Ring, Sméagol hid the body and returned home alone (*FotR* 52). He learned how to use the Ring and then “became very unpopular and was shunned... by all his relations... They called him Gollum, and cursed him, and told him to go far away; his grandmother, desiring peace, expelled him from the family and turned him out of her hole” (*FotR* 52). Gollum originally had a family, and assumedly, love and friendship within that family. As soon as he allowed the Ring to control him, his ties with his family were cut and he lived for many years separate from any form of connection. Gollum was alone from the minute he got the Ring to the end of his life. For his short time with Frodo and Sam, he seemed to be breaking free of the corruption of the Ring (*TT* 616-41). However, Gollum went too long without anyone in his life to provide guidance or support. While he did attain his goal of getting the Ring back, this is exactly what leads to his death, as right after he gets the Ring, he falls into the crack of Mount Doom and dies, destroying the Ring with him, which is the only thing he cared about in his life (*RotK* 925).

There are many signs of Frodo becoming almost “Gollum-like.” As Frodo is in possession of the Ring for longer periods of time, it begins to have more negative effects on him. When Sam offers to hold the Ring as the burden seems to be too much for Frodo, Frodo becomes extremely upset: “‘No, no!’ cried Frodo, snatching the Ring and chain from Sam’s hands. ‘No you won’t, you thief!’ He panted, staring at Sam with eyes wide with fear and enmity” (*RotK* 891). This response is very similar to what would be imagined of Gollum. In fact, in the first story where Gollum appears, when he loses the Ring, he calls Bilbo a thief: “Thief, thief, thief! Baggins! We hates it... forever!” (*Hobbit* 82). Frodo is showing a similar, though lesser, obsession with the Ring. If he possessed the Ring for a longer time and was without Sam’s friendship and positive influence as well as the previous support of the other members of the Fellowship, Frodo definitely could have continued becoming more like Gollum.

Unlike Gollum, who is totally alone, Sauron has armies and servants but still fails in his attempt to rule Middle-earth. Instead, he is destroyed by a group whose most important asset is a hobbit. In the War of the Ring, the odds were in Sauron’s favor, but he still failed. Sauron’s main defense came by orcs and Uruk-hai. Orcs are known for their brutality, but this does not always benefit Sauron. The orcs are acting under him mainly out of fear of death rather than loyalty, so they fight amongst each other. When Sam first finds Frodo in the Tower of Cirith Ungol, he notes that there must have been hundreds of orcs “But they’ve done all the killing themselves” (*RotK* 890). Because the orcs have no direct loyalty to Sauron, they often forget their greater goal and fight and kill each other, making it much easier for Sam and Frodo to escape to Mount Doom.

Sauron does have some “friends,” but these prove to be friendships of utility at most. Sauron acquires his friends through deception and only holds them as they are beneficial for him.

While clear sacrifices were made in the Fellowship, such as Sam giving Frodo the shirt off his back (*RotK* 897), Sauron would never sacrifice anything as he did not desire friendship from which he could not directly benefit. Anytime Sauron feigns friendship with a group, he betrays them or other wickedness comes upon them. This is most clearly noted earlier in the history of Middle-earth in his relationship with the Númenoreans. Sauron tricks the Númenoreans into worshipping Melkor and questioning human mortality. They try to fight the Valar, which results in Númenor being covered with water and few Númenoreans surviving and escaping to Middle-earth (*Silmarillion* 271-9). Clearly, what appeared to be a positive relationship with Sauron turned very bitter for his mislead “friends.”

The friendship that Sauron least understood, which most closely led to the destruction of the Ring, was the friendship between Frodo and Samwise. Because Sauron was incapable of understanding anything more than a weak friendship of utility, if it could even be called friendship at all, he did not think Sam and Frodo would succeed. Their relationship began as an amicable relationship between servant and master, but through their journey, the relationship developed into much more. This is why Sauron would not understand it. He had many servants, but he never saw them as anything more than means to an end, whereas both Frodo and Sam truly benefit from their friendship with each other.

Above all else, Sam wants what is best for Frodo, and this often comes with sacrifices. Sam never abandons Frodo even though numerous times Frodo tries to leave Sam, for his safety, and proceed alone, but Sam never allows this: “But not alone. I’m coming too, or neither of us isn’t going” (*FotR* 397). Sam knows that Frodo should not have to take this journey alone even though accompanying Frodo comes at a cost of much suffering for Sam. His strong love for Frodo leads Sam to realize the burden is too much for Frodo and that he can no longer continue

climbing. Sam makes a choice to carry Frodo the rest of the way: “‘Come, Mr. Frodo!’ he cried. ‘I can’t carry it for you, but I can carry you and it as well’” (*RotK* 919). Sam musters up all his strength to carry his friend to allow him to complete what they set out to do. Even though Frodo is feeling defeated, Sam does not allow him to give up, using all his remaining strength to give aid to Frodo.

Throughout the journey and their encounters with Gollum, Frodo repeatedly shows pity to the creature. Pity is another factor that greatly influences the success of the Fellowship. Frodo and Gollum’s fates are intertwined. Without pity on Gollum, he would not have been able to come back and take the Ring from Frodo and fall into Mount Doom in his celebration, thus destroying the Ring after Frodo could not do it himself (*RotK* 924-5). Frodo learns pity from Gandalf when he questions why Bilbo did not just kill Gollum. Gandalf informs him, “It was pity that stayed his hand. Pity, and Mercy: not to strike without need... Many that live deserve death... Can you give it to them? Then do not be too eager to deal out death in judgement. For even the wise cannot see all ends... My heart tells me that [Gollum] has some part yet to play” (*FotR* 58). As Frodo holds the Ring, he begins to understand Gollum in a different way. Frodo places his trust in Gollum to help lead him to Mordor, as Gollum has been there before and is willing to take Frodo and Sam (*TT* 604-5). Sam never fully trusts Gollum and is constantly watching and waiting for him to turn on them. In the fight between Frodo and Gollum on Mount Doom, Sam tells Frodo to go on, leaving him to deal with Gollum:

His mind was hot with wrath and the memory of evil. It would be just to slay this treacherous, murderous creature, just and many times deserved; and also the only safe thing to do. But deep in his heart there was something that restrained him: he could not



strike this thing lying in the dust, forlorn, ruinous, utterly wretched... But Sam had no words to express what he felt. (*RotK* 923)

Through his virtuous friendship with Frodo, Sam learns the virtue of pity, and though he had anger built up towards Gollum because of his betrayal, Sam understands the power of pity and allows Gollum to go. This is a crucial moment of growth for Sam. His understanding of pity, learned through his virtuous friendship with Frodo, allows for the final destruction of the Ring.

While the presentation of the friendship between Sam and Frodo seems one-sided so far, this is clearly not the case. Again, while Sam and Frodo are climbing Mount Doom, Frodo is past the point of exhaustion and feels the power of the Ring and the Eye of Sauron becoming too much: “‘Help me, Sam! Help me, Sam! Hold my hand! I can’t stop it.’ Sam took his master’s hands and laid them together, palm to palm, and kissed them; and then he held them gently between his own” (*RotK* 921). This encounter shows Frodo relying on his friend to comfort him in these difficult moments. It becomes more than that when the connection to medieval relations are understood. The “gesture in which Sam holds Frodo’s hands, laid palm to palm, is... a specific gesture that was part of the medieval ritual of paying homage to one’s lord” (*Smol* 323). Typically, the vassal lowers himself to the lord, who then holds the vassal’s hands to show he will protect the vassal. In this situation, however, Frodo, who originally was Sam’s master, is the one offering his hands and Sam is taking the higher role and showing Frodo that he will offer his help and protection (*Smol* 324). The relationship between Sam and Frodo began as the connection between master and servant, but it is made clear that their friendship is so much more than this now. There is mutual love, respect, loyalty, and shared virtue between Sam and Frodo.

Frodo also recognizes the power of Sam’s friendship. Sam’s friendship is what gets Frodo to Mount Doom and while he falters and chooses not to get rid of the Ring, he would not

have even made it to the crack of Mount Doom without Sam. Sam imagines the future when their story is told from a father to his child, expressing the greatness of Frodo, to which Frodo replies, “you’ve left out one of the chief characters: Samwise the stouthearted... Frodo wouldn’t have got far without Sam, would he, dad?” (*TT* 697). Frodo understands how important Sam has been throughout the entire journey, even if Sam does not realize it himself. A final acknowledgment of his close friendship with Sam comes after the destruction of the Ring when Frodo thinks he is going to die: “For the quest is achieved, and now all is over. I am glad you are here with me. Here at the end of all things, Sam” (*FotR* 926). In his perceived final moments, Frodo is happy to share the end of his life with his friend. Friends united in anything other than virtue enjoy what they can gain from their relationship with the other. Frodo has nothing to gain through his friendship with Sam in the final moments before he thinks he is going to die, and yet, he is grateful that Sam is there with him and happy he can spend his final moments united in virtuous friendship.

Frodo would not have made it nearly as far as he did without his friendship with Sam, and Sam would not have shown pity on Gollum without learning this virtue from Frodo. Without uniting in virtue, Legolas and Gimli would have stayed enemies and not have provided their joined resources to the Fellowship. The Fellowship truly began with the virtuous friendship of Merry, Pippin, and Sam showing Frodo he was not alone. Friendship is something that Gollum never had, and Sauron could not understand, leading to their failures. While numerous factors influence the success of the Fellowship of the Ring, it is evident that virtuous friendship is essential. This friendship makes possible the necessary pity and reminders of strength the characters need to be successful in their journey. After all the hardships the Fellowship faced, they could always count on each other, their friends, to unite them with good.

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