J.R.R. Tolkien's Genealogies: The Roots of his 'Sub-creation'

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As many critics have noted, Tolkien's books have provoked both condemnations and laurels. However, to borrow the author's view from his "Valedictory Address," I do not think it is helpful to confront simplistic opinions of a given work and then provide fuel for a "faction fight" (Tolkien, 1983, p. 231). A role of a scholar is to offer perspectives on the depth and significance of a text, and minimize a political agenda or self-aggrandizement. It is much more worthwhile to focus on subjects where Tolkien's accomplishments are widely acknowledged. Foremost of these, of course, is the vast and intricate Middle-earth: Tolkien's unique "Sub-creation," which is unmatched by any English literary work. Tolkien's genealogies not only exhibit the complexity of this "Sub-creation" but in fact serve as one of the central grounds – the roots, if you will – of his fictional invention.

First, let us consider Tolkien's concept of "Sub-creation." In "On Fairy-Stories," Tolkien proposes that significant naturalistic details provide the foundation for enchanting fantasy: "The achievement of the expression, which gives (or seems to give) 'the inner consistency of reality,' is indeed ... Art, the operative link between Imagination and the final result, Sub-creation" (Tolkien, 1983, p. 139). In this instance, then, Tolkien's descriptions of the genealogies of his "sub-created" sentient beings function to encourage readers to believe in the existence of hobbits, elves, dwarves, and unusual humans – not just pre-empt a potential disbelief in them.

We see can Tolkien's intent to evoke "Secondary Belief" in the "Prologue" to *The Lord of the Rings*:

> All Hobbits were, in any case, clannish and reckoned up their relationships with great care. They drew long and elaborate family- trees with innumerable branches. ... The genealogical trees at the end of the Red Book of Westmarch are a small book in themselves, and all but Hobbits would find them exceedingly dull. Hobbits delighted in such things, if they were accurate: they liked to have books filled with things that they already knew, set out fair and square with no contradictions.
> (Tolkien, 1966a, p. 26)

Tolkien's tone is light here, and there is some irony apparent when he says hobbits like "books filled with things that they already knew;" many who disparage *The Lord of the Rings* do it because the work is not *real* to life, as they purport to know it. Still, all the details given are contrived to be serious and authentic. If we had nothing more to go on, the mere size and appearance of hobbits could work against attempts to suspend our disbelief. Tolkien's narrator plainly states he is relating a 'history' – not a fiction. *The Lord of the Rings* is said to be an account drawn from the "Red Book of Westmarch" (Tolkien, 1966a, p.34), a book that was originally a private diary of Bilbo and which later contained all the materials we see in the appendices.

The "Family Trees" are an important part of these materials (Tolkien, 1966c, pp. 478-82). I wonder how many of us ever pause and reflect on the incredible ingenuity of Tolkien's genealogies. Notice how many names there are, and the sheer variety and inventiveness of them. The attention to detail, the care and diligence evident in the design of these "Family Trees," shows that Tolkien wanted to immerse the reader so deeply into hobbit-lore that these beings become virtually alive; they attain an existence beyond some whimsical wish-fulfilment for a fairy-tale character. The fact that Tolkien enthusiasts have formed local hobbit clubs and have worn lapel pins denoting, "Frodo lives," indicates the imaginative power of Tolkien's work. Middle-earth's "Family Trees" are a significant part of the myriad details that Tolkien has devised to induce "Secondary Belief" in his "Sub-creation."

Tolkien's genealogies also have implications with regard to anthropogeny. Tolkien was no professional in this field (and I am not even an amateur), but it seems plausible that emerging societies require strong familial ties to guard against outside threats – both from the natural world and from other sentient beings. Languages and customs, as well, would likely begin in small groups bonded in nurturing familiarity. In Tolkien's cosmology, the history of Middle-earth, which is distinctive from the timeless existence of Valinor, begins when the first flesh and blood beings were created. *The Silmarillion* states:

> In the changes of the world the shapes of lands and of seas have been broken and remade; rivers have not kept their courses, neither have mountains remained steadfast; ... But it is said among the Elves that it [the place of their awakening] lay far off in the east of Middle-earth, and northward, and it was a bay in the Inland Sea of Helcar; ... Long they dwelt in their first home by the water under the stars, and walked the Earth in wonder; and they began to make speech and to give names to all things that they perceived. Themselves they named the Quendi, signifying those that speak with voices; for as yet they had met no other living things that spoke or sang. (Tolkien, 1992, p. 56)

The key stage in the development of the Elves' consciousness occurs when they acquire speech and, more particularly, start to *name* things. They gradually become attuned to their natural world and its ecological order. The designations or "names" that the elves assign, and the relationships within their society and environment, are emblematically represented by the genealogies.

Later in this part of the book, we see the Elves attain an awareness of other kinds of beings and their places within a cosmic design. At first, the Elves were a homogeneous people with no clear ethnic or tribal segregations. However, as the experience and knowledge of their existence (and the apparent divine plan behind it) evolves, the Elves are forced to come to terms with their individual free-wills. They must choose between the joyful tidings of Oromë and the insidious words of Melkor. Consequently, the elves experience a sort of loss of innocence and can no longer view the world as a place of unambiguous wonder:

> Thus it was that when Nahar neighed and Oromë indeed came among them, some of the Quendi hid themselves, and some fled and were lost. But those that had courage, and stayed, perceived swiftly that the Great Rider was no shape out of darkness; for the light of Aman was in his face, and all the noblest of the Elves were drawn towards it. (Tolkien, 1992, pp. 57-8)

Furthermore, we see the process where this single group of people start to branch off into sub-groups, based on different outlooks and aspirations of worldly life. The diagram of "The Sundering of the Elves" details the beginnings of what later would become complex and extensive genealogical structures. The reason for the divisions among the groups of elves are the choices and mishaps – both fully plausible – during settlement and migration activity.

> Then befell the first sundering of the Elves. For the kindred of Ingwë, and the most part of the kindreds of Finwë and Elwë, were swayed by the words of their lords, and were willing to depart and follow Oromë; and these were known ever after as the Eldar, by the name the Oromë gave to the Elves in the beginning, in their own tongue. But many refused the summons, preferring the starlight and wide spaces of Middle- earth to the rumour of the Trees; and these are the Avari, the Unwilling, and they were sundered in that time from the Eldar, and met never again until many ages were past. (Tolkien, 1992, p. 61)

There are also philosophical matters involved here, but for our purposes now it is clear that Middle-earth's genealogies are not provided as mere "window-dressing"; they relate fundamentally to Tolkien's interesting perspectives on both anthropogeny and cosmology.

The genealogical diagrams serve practical as well as thematic functions. Without the charts at the back of *The Silmarillion*, a reader could soon become lost in the multitude of names and the inter-relationships among them. More significantly, the genealogy of "The House of Finwë" stands as a record of the tragic divisions among the Eldar, resulting in the betrayal of Elven kindreds and their departure from the Blessed Realm. The chart vividly complements the narrative as we see Fëanor separated (schematically *and* morally) from his brothers Fingolfin and Finarfin, bringing about events both sorrowful (e.g. death of Fingolfin) and joyous (e.g. birth of Eärendil).

As for the appearance of humans, that is, the race of Men, in his Secondary World, Tolkien provides views that can be related to ideas on the anthropology of our Primary World. In "On Fairy-Stories" he rejects Andrew Lang's myopic and ill-advised comments regarding our "naked ancestors."

Tolkien states:

> But do we really know much about these 'naked ancestors', except that they were certainly not naked? ... Yet if it is assumed that we have fairy-stories because they did, then probably we have history, geography, poetry, and arithmetic because they liked these things too. (Tolkien, 1983, p. 134)

Tolkien's humans appear in Middle-earth, quite appropriately, soon after the creation of the Sun. (Before this cosmic event, the land was lit only by brilliant starlight.) These Men were oppressed from the beginning by the evil one of the Valar, Melkor/Morgoth, who embodies all that is vile and destructive in humanity. And so, naturally, these beings sought a peaceful and nurturing existence:

> Now these were a part of the kindred and following of Bëor the Old, as he was afterwards called, a chieftain among Men. After many lives of wandering out of the East he had led them at last over the Blue Mountains, the first of the race of Men to enter Beleriand; and they sang because they were glad, and believed that they had escaped from all perils and had come at last to a land without fear.
> (Tolkien, 1992, p. 168)

The aspirations of this group seem to exhibit what Tolkien describes in "On Fairy-Stories" as "the satisfaction of certain primordial human desires;" one of these is to "survey the depths of space and time," and another is "to hold communion with other living things" (Tolkien, 1983, p. 116). Thus the genealogical chart of "Bëor the Old" not only situates his folk within the natural order of Middle-earth, but it is emblematic of the worthy desires of these humans to understand their environment, which includes the birds and the beasts, as well as to interact peaceably with other societies of people.

One could certainly expand on these type of associations evident from Tolkien's genealogies. Due to space constraints, I can only mention a few issues involved with these structures. The diagram of "The descendants of Olwë and Elwë" shows that Tolkien's emphasis is usually on bonds of *kindred*, and not necessarily those of *race* or *creed*. The genealogical record displays certain ethnologic traits, but it largely depends on individual free-will rather than, solely, on group predilections. We see here the common links through bloodlines *and* marriages among Maia, Elf, Half-elf, and Man. Tolkien indicates the importance of personal choice in the establishment of kindred bonds (e.g. that of Melian, Lúthien, Elrond, Elros or Arwen), rather than favouring a closed, ethnocentric state where different peoples remain forever insular and distinct.

Racial differences can cause strife in Tolkien's Secondary World, as it unfortunately does in our Primary one. Yet these long-standing conflicts, however deep-rooted, do not remain immutable in Middle-earth. In Appendix A of *The Return of the King*, the genealogical table of Durin's line reflects the insularity of the dwarves and their seemingly male-centred society: "Dís was the daughter of Thráin II. She is the only dwarf-woman named in these histories" (Tolkien, 1966c, p. 450). While the dwarf- women rarely wander from their homes, they apparently have autonomy in choice of mate; and many male dwarves, "being engrossed in their crafts," prefer to remain apart from the females (Tolkien, 1966c, p. 450). But as is usual with Tolkien, there are exceptions to ancestral tendencies:

> We have heard tell that Legolas took Gimli Gloin's son with him [over the Sea to Valinor] because of their great friendship, greater than any that has been between Elf and Dwarf. If this is true, then it is strange indeed; ... But it is said 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. (Tolkien, 1966c, p. 452)

Old enmities and innate predispositions may have prejudiced Gimli at times in *The Lord of the Rings*, such as in his confrontations with Haldir and disputes with Legolas (e.g. Tolkien, 1966a, pp. 450-1). Yet the fact that Gimli, an individual of a supposedly stubborn and steadfast people, could expand his perceptions of the world – and of the other beings in it – indicates that the possibility exists for anyone.

Still, we cannot avoid the sad reality that racial distinctions, strong family ties, and "clannish" affiliations have negative consequences too. Given his vast knowledge of ancient languages and literature, Tolkien was well aware of the devastating nature of ethnic conflicts and clan feuds. He draws attention to these destructive practices in a couple of ways. First, one of Morgoth's and Sauron's most pernicious devices is to sow discord among groups of people who should band together to oppose tyranny. In *The Silmarillion*, we learn that "they [some Men] feared the Eldar and the light of their eyes; and then dissensions awoke among the Edain, in which the shadow of Morgoth may be discerned" (Tolkien, 1992, p. 173); in *The Fellowship of the Ring*, Haldir states "Indeed in nothing is the power of the Dark Lord more clearly shown than in the estrangement that divides all those who still oppose him." (Tolkien, 1966a, p. 451).

Secondly, the 'histories' related in both *The Silmarillion* and *The Lord of the Rings* (including Appendices A and B) chronicle a litany of woes, many of them conflicts among different kinds of people. There were the disputes between the dwarves and elves that led not only to the ruin of Doriath, but to the rare event of the "slaying of Elf by Elf" (Tolkien, 1992, pp. 282-6). Gondor fell into decline, both because of internal dissension, "the civil war of the Kin-strife," and because of outside attacks, such as "the invasion of the Wainriders" (Tolkien, 1966c, pp. 398-403). And thus genealogical tables and diagrams also represent a nostalgic desire, sometimes in grief, sometimes in gladness, to preserve a cultural heritage from decay or demise.

Tolkien also shows us that even among the less violent and more community-oriented hobbits, clan affiliations can lead to difficulties. The following pair of quotes represents the beneficial and malignant aspects of family associations:

1) 'I cannot thank you as I should, Bilbo, for this, and for all your past kindnesses,' said Frodo. 'Don't try!' said the old hobbit, turning round and slapping him on the back. ... 'But there you are: Hobbits must stick together, and especially Bagginses'. (Tolkien, 1966a, p. 363)

2) 'Then we shall be master, *gollum*! Make the other hobbit, the nasty suspicious hobbit, make him crawl, yes, *gollum*.

'But not the nice hobbit?' 'Oh no, not if it doesn't please us. Still he's a Baggins, my precious, yes, a Baggins stole it. He found it and he said nothing, nothing. We hates Bagginses.'

'No, not this Baggins.'

'Yes, every Baggins. All peoples that keep the precious. We must have it!'

(Tolkien, 1966b, p. 298)

Frodo, an orphan, was raised by his uncle and received all the needful elements, such as a home and education, that a relation could provide. He develops his kindness for people in general, and most importantly for the treacherous Gollum, because Bilbo, as Frodo's role model, showed pity and mercy towards others. For his part, Gollum retains a hatred for a family name because of a past grievance. Many years earlier, he had left his familial ties, murdering his childhood friend, because of his lust for individual power and self- aggrandizement. As it turns out, Bilbo's, Frodo's, and even Sam's pity for Gollum – a feeling of positive kinship – directly contributed to the destruction of the Ring and the salvation of all the families of Middle-earth.

Again, this observation leads to other broader topics which cannot be dealt with here. I will just note in passing that the very idea of "The Council of Elrond," a group of disparate peoples gathered together for a common cause, suggests that ethnic distinctions need not be a barrier to mutual cooperation. And Tolkien does not just show deference towards the beings of the West. Sam wonders if the people from the southeast of Middle-earth are really evil in their war against the West, or if they had been beguiled by the lies of Sauron (Tolkien, 1966b, p. 335). Also, when the quest has been achieved and the war won, Aragorn as King recognizes the efforts of all people, including those living in primitive communities, and grants them lands of their own – *unhindered* by more developed civilizations (Tolkien, 1966c, p. 307). Lastly, at the end of *The Lord of the Rings*, Frodo is reconciled with his former adversary Lobelia Sackville-Baggins: "Frodo was surprised and much moved [when] she had left [upon her death] all that remained of her money and of Lotho's for him to use in helping hobbits made homeless by the troubles. So that feud was ended" (Tolkien, 1966c, p. 366). The community is nurtured by family ties and cultural bonds, rather than remaining as a collection of individuals who, like Gollum, may become obsessed with personal power and greed.

Tolkien is indeed a profoundly persuasive writer. The Middle-earth books and other tales have been translated into over 25 languages, and there are Tolkien journals in places as disparate as Belgium, United Arab Emirates, and Japan. Tolkien's genealogies reflect both cultural diversity and common bonds of kinship, and so it is perfectly logical that people read Tolkien with delight. After all, giving pleasure should be the central function of literature – despite what some in the cloistered critical community might believe. Given the present state of English studies, where "Dead White Male" authors are routinely vilified, and interest has often switched to dense theories of literature and away from the literature itself, a writer such as Tolkien sometimes receives an indifferent or even indignant reception in academia. This presentation on Tolkien's genealogies hopefully shows that narrow-minded and hostile views are best countered through sound analyses of the author's works, rather than by bellicose rebuttals.

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" Thief, Thief, Thief! Baggins! We hates it, We hates it, We hates it for ever! " — The Hobbit V