

Realism in fantasy: *The Lord of the Rings* as “history . . . feigned”

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When I was a graduate student in English at UCLA, 1984 to 1987, the literary criticism of Jacques Derrida, called Deconstruction, was in vogue. A complete stranger in the same PhD program, a woman, once said to my face in a hallway of Rolfe Hall, “It’s all just tropes!” She meant, I fear, we can make literary text mean things other than its author’s intent. And her chance commentary gives one the gist of the Derridean critical game: to undermine the novelist’s, poet’s or playwright’s authority. Evidently Derrida’s springboard was the assumption that no author knew what he or she was talking about when it came to his or her own work. In this essay upon the feigned historicity of Tolkien’s *LOTR*, I defy such 1980s critical nonsense and pursue an answer to the question, “What did it mean for this specific author to ‘feign history’?” Many readers of *LOTR* over the decades have confessed to me, “I know it’s only fantasy fiction, but it feels more real to me than the history of our world.” By “many readers” of *LOTR* I mean American people. Maybe they do not know U.S. history very well, or feel less connection to American history? For instance, my ancestors did not arrive in the States until after 1900, so I have less visceral connection, for example, to the American Civil War, 1861 to 1865, than some of my current neighbors do. But no, we Americans, though lacking a history as long as British history, are pretty well schooled in our country’s history, involuntarily!

Regarding history, permit me to get something unpleasant over with now: readers of *LOTR* who feel more connection to Gondolin or Númenor or Minas Tirith than they do to their own real history; are not losers. They are not fearful little geeks and nerds who cannot make it in this world, the real world, so they do not bother with its history, choosing instead to lose themselves in fantasy books. Rather, these readers’ overwhelming feeling that the history of Middle-earth is real is a highly intelligent reaction to Tolkien’s inspired composition of *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*.

Indeed, JRRT’s “history . . . feigned” makes somewhat unnecessary mere “willing suspension of disbelief.” My first *Mallorn* essay (May 2013) argued that Tolkien’s making *minor characters full- or three-dimensional characters* was one way to make *LOTR* feel realistic. Another way Tolkien made *LOTR* feel real, not fantastic, was by feigning history. The present essay considers JRRT’s *locating the plot in “realistically ‘feigned’ history”* in a fantasy novel. These are his words from the now-famous and oft-mined “Foreword to the Second Edition”:

But I cordially dislike allegory in all its manifestations, and

always have done so since I grew old and wary enough to detect its presence. I much prefer history, true or feigned, with its varied applicability to the thought and experience of read-ers [italics mine]. (Tolkien, *LOTR* 50th xxiv)

One easily imagines JRRT writing this passage in his “Foreword” not only to us readers but to his friend C.S. Lewis, whose allegorical Narnia books by this time had all appeared in print. In fact, by 1965 Lewis was dead, but that would hardly stop their conversation in Tolkien’s mind! “History . . . feigned”; not “allegory.”

How does an author feign history?

Some of Tolkien’s feigned historical brush strokes as it were, are so light, we do not notice them as such. For example, at the beginning of “The Council of Elrond”, Frodo tells Gandalf:

‘I feel ready for anything,’ answered Frodo. ‘But most of all I should like to go walking today and explore the valley. I should like to get into those pine-woods up there.’ He pointed away far up the side of Rivendell to the north.

‘You may have a chance later,’ said Gandalf. ‘But we cannot make any plans yet. There is much to hear and decide today.’ (Tolkien, *LOTR* 50th 239)

There is no evidence that poor Frodo ever got to hike up “the side of Rivendell to the north.” But Tolkien’s inclusion of this minor plot detail—a plan of Frodo’s to do some walking like Tolkien, Lewis and the other Inklings did in summer—is not merely a sign of Frodo’s wishing to be relieved of the terrible responsibility of bearing the Ring, by going hiking! Tolkien’s inclusion of this minor detail not only depicts Frodo as a normal sentient being; it also adds historical realism to the text. Writers of history sometimes record in their text’s odd minor details. In the New International Version of the Bible, one reads:

Seated in a window was a young man named Eutychus who was sinking into a deep sleep as Paul talked on and on. When he was sound asleep, he fell to the ground from the third story and was picked up dead. Paul went down, threw him-self on the young man and put his arms around him. “Don’t be alarmed,” he said. “He’s alive!” Then he went upstairs again and broke bread and ate. After talking until daylight, he left. The people took the young man home alive and were greatly comforted. (Acts 20: 9-12)

The phrase “talked on and on” is very funny. And the inclusion of such a plot detail in the New Testament of the English Bible is certainly historical. Did the young man

fall both asleep and to his death out of fatigue or boredom? Would St. Paul have wanted Doctor Luke to include this detail in the account of the Acts of the Apostles because he, Paul, was proud of what happened? Odd details like this are part of history. And Tolkien's feigned historical brush stroke regarding Frodo's hiking plans is an odd, oft-forgotten detail in the plot of LOTR.

LOTR is bracketed by farmers—Maggot and Cotton. But the novel is also bracketed by history, immediate and ancient. So, Ham Gamgee holds forth in Chapter 1, "A Long-Expected Party." He recounts the immediate past regarding Bilbo; Sam's dad is speaking to Miller Sandyman and



the unnamed stranger at the The Ivy Bush, not to mention Daddy Twofoot. And the very title of "The Shadow of the Past," Chapter 2 of LOTR, was originally "Ancient History" according to Christopher Tolkien's *History of Middle-earth Vol. VI The Return of the Shadow*. Decades later at the end of LOTR how many times is Frodo told that he is about to be locked up in a tower, so he can write the tale of the Fellowship's quest, else poor old Bilbo (and the whole world) will be dreadfully disappointed? Tolkien's emphasis throughout LOTR on *recording* what really happened, makes us readers literally feel lucky that we have the *true history* of Middle-earth. Indeed, Frodo hands Sam *The Redbook of Westmarch*, one of whose prior titles crossed out was *What we did in the War of the Ring*, and turns his face from the Grey Havens to the Sea (Tolkien, LOTR 50th 1027).

First mention of an event or a place in feigned history can confuse readers, but subsequent reference begins to accrue the ring of authenticity. For example, the Mines of Moria are repeatedly named in *The Hobbit*. Therefore, when we get to mention of Azog and Bolg in "The Battle of Five Armies," we have heard the history of Thorin's sires Thrain and Thror in their lifelong battles with goblins (Tolkien, H 95 and 339). Clearly, *adumbration* is necessary to feign history. The Mines of Moria become inter-textual history, bridging *The Hobbit* and LOTR in "Journey in the Dark." Another form of inter-textual adumbration is Tolkien's love of *revisiting scenes*, of rewriting them, of revision itself. One of readers' favorite examples are the inter-textual wolf attacks, one in *The Hobbit* and the next in LOTR. Whereas Tolkien stages an exciting wolf attack including Bilbo in "Out of the Frying Pan, Into the Fire," the wolf attack in LOTR, omitted from the Peter Jackson movies, takes the cake. This time Gandalf does not chuck pretty-colored flaming pine cones down on vicious Wargs. He grows to enormous height, stoops, plucks a flaming log from the Fellowship's protective campfire, and directly addresses the Hound of Sauron before setting the whole grove atop the low hill on fire.

Eyewitness accounts abound in LOTR. But many are not accounts of the immediate past. Gandalf cautions Frodo in "Shadow" that he knows so much that he cannot for time's sake and will not, for Frodo's sake, tell him everything he knows. And much of that knowledge is first-hand. Elrond is even more ancient:

'You remember?' said Frodo, speaking his thought aloud in his astonishment. 'But I thought that the fall of Gil-galad was a long age ago.'

'So, it was indeed,' answered Elrond gravely. 'But my memory reaches back even to the Elder Days. Earendil was my sire, who was born in Gondolin before its fall; and my mother was Elwing, daughter of Dior, son of Luthien of Do-riath. I have seen three ages in the West of the world, and many defeats, and many fruitless victories.

'I was the herald of Gil-galad and marched with his host. I was at the Battle of Dagorlad before the Black Gate of Mordor, where we had the mastery: for the Spear of Gil-galad and the Sword of Elendil, Aiglos and Narsil, none could withstand . . .'

(Tolkien, LOTR 50th 243)

Not only the highest, like Elrond, function as living history. So, do the lowest, including Gollum. In LOTR Book IV, Gollum's "Tales out of the South" are told during his guiding Frodo and the reluctant Sam to Mordor, first during the abortive walk to the Black Gate, then the deadlier one to Shelob's Lair (Tolkien, LOTR 50th 641). He had heard of Gondor 500 years ago when Deagol yet lived as did Gollum's or Smeagol's grandmother.

Mention of Aiglos and Narsil leads us readers to a fifth way of feigning history. Frodo has the One Ring, and reluctantly displays it in "The Council of Elrond." Aragorn bears Narsil, and before "The Ring Goes South," it is re-forged into Anduril. Bilbo possesses the sword he names Sting,

which shines blue when orcs are present because it was forged in Gondolin. Aragorn asks Frodo to draw Sting on the Nine Walkers' journey. These **objects from the distant past** arise throughout LOTR. One such object, a Palantir, literally enables one of the strong to look into the past, so a Palantir is doubly history feigned in that it came from the past and allows one to look into the past. Marvelous, literally. At Aragorn and Arwen's wedding, Lord Elrond not only places his daughter's hand in Aragorn's; he surrenders to the King the Scepter of Annúminas (Tolkien, LOTR 50th 972). Readers learn in the Appendices that the Scepter is the most ancient "work of Men's hands" in Middle-earth (Tolkien, LOTR 50th, 1043 note 1). Ancient stone doors the protagonists often can neither initially open nor even locate at first,



abound in *The Hobbit* and LOTR: the trolls, the one into the Lonely Mountain; the Doors of Moria Gate, the smaller stone door leading off Balin's Tomb over which Gandalf and the Balrog vie, the one atop Cirith Ungol that Sam cannot open, which turns out to be no door at all.

After reading the over-one-thousand-page text of the novel, bracketed by history immediate and ancient, one is not left bereft. As Tolkien recalls in his "Foreword to the Second Edition" readers who had written to him by 1965 had one criticism of LOTR with which JRRT agreed: "the book is too short" (Tolkien, LOTR 50th, xxiii). But the door of the sub-created world is not closed after Sam returns to Rose and Elanor! The **Appendices** themselves contribute to

the sense of true history one gets while reading LOTR. Even if one only glances at them, the Appendices offer timelines and family trees of both the high and the low, Aragorn and Sam. The Appendices also offer mini-histories of the languages of various races, from Elves to orcs. My phrase "both the high and the low" is significant: British readers were probably sick of reading kings-and-battles histories that ignore common people. Furthermore, Lewis and Tolkien shared a grand philosophical idea: the highest cannot exist without the lowest.

Intra-textual and inter-textual confirmation of the history of Middle-earth, arises often in LOTR. This method of feigning history differs from authorial adumbration in that characters within the text confirm other races or countries' history for them. Théoden tells Merry and Pippin (information given by the high to the low) that the people of Rohan in fact have knowledge of the Holbytla from 500 years ago when they were new to the Anduin, Gollum was still Smeagol, and Deagol yet lived. LOTR thus confirms the pre-history of the "Stoors" (Tolkien, LOTR 50th, 52 and 557). Gandalf first suggests that Gollum and the Hobbits are connected genetically, to Frodo's disgust, in "The Shadow of the Past." But this is confirmed by King Théoden as another "legend of Rohan" (Tolkien, LOTR 50th 499 versus 557). And the testimony of peoples more ancient than the Rohirrim, like the Pukel Men or Wild Men, confirms the history of other more-ancient peoples. Ghan-buri-Ghan tells Théoden how "Stonehouse folk" of Gondor were stronger 3,000 years ago (Tolkien, LOTR 50th 832). As written above, the Ages-old conflict of the Dwarves and the Uruks over Moria, bridges *The Hobbit* and LOTR in a deep way.

Most people who open the book LOTR comment on its **maps**. Fans of the book consult and enjoy its maps. They lend a touch of the historical that probably derives from Tolkien and his son Christopher's having consulted maps in The Great War and its sequel. Merry tells Pippin in "The Uruk Hai":

'You seem to have been doing well, Master Took,' said Merry. 'You will get almost a chapter in old Bilbo's book, if ever I get a chance to report to him.'

* * *

'I shall have to brush up my toes, if I am to get level with you. Indeed, Cousin Brandybuck is going in front now. This is where he comes in. I don't suppose you have much notion where we are; but I spent my time at Rivendell rather better. We are walking west along the Entwash. The butt-end of the Misty Mountains is in front, and Fangorn Forest.'

(Tolkien, LOTR 50th 458)

Knowledge of maps is important not only to avid readers of LOTR, but to the Fellowship's quest to save Middle-earth. Yes, much derivative fiction penned in the shadow of LOTR through the years boasts maps, but they often appear to have sprung out of nowhere, which they did. In contrast, I note the smaller, more focused maps of *The Hobbit* yielding to the comprehensive maps of Middle-earth in LOTR. Yet even

they give little detail at their eastern edges, since the cruel peoples of Harad, the Southrons, the Easterlings, the Black Númenoreans—all are better left unknown!

Readers of British literature are used to novels' epistolary conventions. Late 18th and all 19th Century novel readers enjoyed reading other people's mail, so to speak, while reading a novel. But epistolary conventions do not necessarily feign history. If one broadens the topic to *old documents*, which include letters, we can find many, many texts within the text in LOTR. 16 years after Bilbo's party, Gandalf rode to Minas Tirith and gained access to Denethor's hoard of lore in the nick of time to find Isildur's handwritten description of the fiery writing still visible on Sauron's ring before it cooled. Only thus—by reading a 3,000-year-old paper—is Gandalf the Grey able to perform the test of putting the Ring in Frodo's little fire, verifying that it is in fact The One. And Gandalf himself commits Ring-information to writing but leaves it in Butterbur's inept hands at Bree. Gandalf's letter does and does not help. It becomes recent history by the time Butterbur remembers it! And the letter does convince Frodo to take the road with Aragorn. But Butterbur's months-long delay in delivering the letter to the Ring-bearer, nearly destroys the quest before it has begun. The fact that none except Saruman and Gandalf has ever read the Isildur account, coupled with Butterbur's not valuing Gandalf's letter enough to have it delivered, may be Tolkien's oblique comment upon most of the world's placing low value upon language committed to paper. By "placing low value" I mean our real world in 2018 doing so, not ancient people's on Earth and in Middle-earth who did not practice any writing. Some races in Middle-earth have never taken up writing, have remained committed to oral tradition: the Ents and the Rohirrim maintain oral traditions both ancient and detailed, as did the ancient Greeks.

In the documentary DVDs following Peter Jackson's movie renditions, Patrick Curry says LOTR is "profoundly pluralistic"; thus, one expects a feigned history of Middle-earth to include much on *race relations*. And readers are not disappointed. Treebeard is puzzled by the fact that Halflings have been omitted from "the old lists" (Tolkien, LOTR 50th 464). But Treebeard calls the lists "old" and he himself is around 27,000 years old, so the lists "that I learned when I was young" must be older still (Tolkien, LOTR 50th 464). No need to recount the age-old conflict between Elves and Dwarves. Its adumbration between *The Hobbit* and LOTR all readers acknowledge. The conflict is adumbrated further by Legolas and Gimli, whose friendship brings a kind of reconciliation and literary closure that gets sealed when we readers learn in the Appendices that Gimli goes with his friend to Elven home where Galadriel awaits him, her lock bearer. Those who don't bother to read the Appendices miss this closure. Historic.

One common means of feigning history from 18th Century fiction Tolkien notably avoids: using a dash to "protect people's privacy by concealing their first name." So, Joseph Heller mocks Richardson, Fielding, etc. by calling the one character Major ———de Coverly in *Catch-22*. Authors

used the long dash to give their novels (nouvelles = news in French) a sense of having really happened. Heller mocks this cheap trick, and Tolkien does not bother using it at all. In "The Council of Elrond" Boromir calls Sauron "Nameless" for different reasons (Tolkien, LOTR 50th 245)!

In the "Foreword to the Second Edition," Tolkien faces the issue of historicity most directly by pointing us to LOTR Chapter 2, "The Shadow of the Past":

The crucial chapter, 'The Shadow of the Past,' is one of the oldest parts of the tale. It was written long before the foreshadow of 1939 had yet become a threat of inevitable disaster, and from that point the story would have developed along essentially the same lines, if that disaster had been averted. Its sources are things long before in mind, or in some cases already written, and little or nothing in it was modified by the war that began in 1939 or its sequels . . .

(Tolkien, LOTR 50th xxiv)

By contrasting the War of the Ring with World War II's coming to England, Tolkien is halting allegorists who would see "The Ring as nuclear energy" or whatever (again, Patrick Curry in the DVD documentaries, referring to Tolkien's letter on the subject of the U.S. using atom bombs). Tolkien is also using language such as "crucial," "oldest," "long before," and using "foreshadow" as a noun, a thing, not a literary verb. Again, 'The Shadow of the Past' was originally entitled "Ancient History"—that class in school that nearly bored British and American students to their own untimely deaths in Tolkien's day: kings and battles. And strong evidence of Tolkien's genius lies in the indubitable fact that he has interested, not bored, us hundreds of millions of LOTR readers in a 1,000+ page war novel about, in the abstract, nothing but kings and battles! Even for Americans who are subconsciously and Constitutionally anti-monarchical, the passage describing Aragorn's coronation, at which Faramir gives the King's lineage at length, is very moving. Perhaps we Americans relish it because we distinguish it from the sordid history of murderous European kings; as feigned?

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