

Endogamy and Exogamy in the Works of Tolkien

by Lisa Hopkins

Anyone who reads the tragic tale of the children of Húrin, Túrin Turambar and his sister/wife Nienor, cannot fail to be struck by its marked resemblances to the classical legend of Oedipus, the subject of Sophocles' Theban trilogy. In each of the two stories the events are set in motion by the actions of the hero's father: in the tale of Túrin, it is the refusal of his father, Húrin, to reveal the whereabouts of Gondolin which calls down Morgoth's wrath on the family and initiates their tragic destiny, while in the legend of Oedipus it is the attempt by Oedipus' father, Laius, to obviate the prophecy which has told him that his child is destined to kill his father and marry his mother which leads to the terrible events which follow: the baby Oedipus is exposed on a mountainside to die, but is rescued by a shepherd who gives him to the childless king and queen of Corinth to bring up as their own. When Oedipus eventually discovers the prophecy, he runs away from his supposed parents, only to meet a strange man at a crossroads whom he falls out with and kills - who is of course, unbeknown to him, his own father, Laius. Oedipus then proceeds to Thebes, where he liberates the city from the curse of the Sphinx which is hanging over it, and as a reward is given the queen, Jocasta, widow of Laius and hence his own mother, as his wife. Oedipus and Jocasta produce four children before the awful truth of Oedipus' identity is finally discovered, upon which Jocasta hangs herself and Oedipus gouges out his eyes with her brooches.

That Túrin's unwitting taking of his own sister to wife because of a curse on his family is related to the Oedipus story is clear. Tolkien even refers repeatedly to Túrin's state of mind while in exile as 'blindness', which parallels the metaphorical blindness of Oedipus before he discovers his true identity and his literal blindness afterwards. There are other striking similarities between the two stories, too: Oedipus' exposure on a mountainside with his ankles riveted together to stop him crawling

away led to permanently deformed feet (hence his name, which means 'Swollenfoot'), while the *Tale of the Children of Húrin* features a character originally called Tamar Lamfoot, who later is renamed Brandir the Lamé; and even more interestingly, both Oedipus and Túrin are eventually seen as purged from the shame and sorrow of their unwitting crime and are elevated, after their respective deaths, to a status noticeably above that of ordinary mortals - Oedipus' body will keep the ground of Athens inviolate for ever in *Oedipus at Colonus*, while in the *Book of Lost Tales, Part II* we are told that 'Turambar shall stand beside Fionwe in the Great Wrack, and Melko and his drakes shall curse the sword of Mormakil'(p. 116). There is even a connection between the names the two adopt: on his return to Thebes Oedipus is given the title of 'Tyrannus', the Greek term for a *de facto* ruler who holds his power effectively by force, but of course the fact that he is in reality the only son of the last king means that he is actually the *de jure* hereditary ruler, for which the correct term would be the alternative word for king, 'basileus'. Similarly, Túrin in the *Lost Tales* arrogates to himself the title *Turambar*, 'Conqueror of Fate' (p.87), which is of course precisely what he is not, being rather the blind victim of the fate which pursues Húrin and his house.

There are, then, enough connections between these two tales of a king who inadvertently married his mother and a hero who inadvertently married his sister to make it reasonable to postulate a direct connection between the two, and that Tolkien was influenced in his writing of the story of Turin by the legend of Oedipus. This is not, however, simply a matter of literary influence. For the central strand of the narrative of both stories - the committing of incest - has an important place both in many major mythological cycles, especially those concerning creation stories, and also in the history of Middle-earth itself.

Most myths which attempt to offer any kind of account of the creation of the world have to deal, at some time or another, with the question of incest. This arises because a standard ploy of such creation myths is to postulate an original pair of founders or originators of the race; and this, naturally and inevitably, will automatically lead to incest. Who are the children of Adam and Eve going to marry, if not each other? And all animals, according to the Biblical account, must be the products of incest, since only two of each kind went into Noah's Ark. Incest must inevitably lie at the heart of all single-pair accounts of creation, as can be seen by its centrality in the Greek and Egyptian cosmogonies, where Zeus and Hera, and Osiris and Isis, are both brother and sister and also husband and wife; and it is important too in other myths, so that (in Wagner's version at least) the Germanic hero Siegfried is the product of an incestuous marriage. Incest features, too, in more recent, overtly fictional accounts of creation, such as the *Voyage to Venus* (originally entitled *Perelandra*) of Tolkien's friend C.S. Lewis, where the single man and single woman who are the sole inhabitants of Venus will not be enough to propagate a race without involving incest.

Tolkien, however, goes to considerable lengths to exclude the necessity for incest from his own creation stories. Instead of arising from an original primal couple, the Elves awake by the shores of Cuiviénen in such great numbers that there are already three separate kindreds established; instead of being descended from an Adam and an Eve figure, men too are produced in numbers sufficient to avoid any need for intermarriage amongst kin. The same applies to the Valar. So careful is Tolkien to avoid a primary creation dependent on incest that it almost looks as though the subject is of special interest to him, something that he was particularly anxious to avoid.

The idea that incest is absent from Tolkien's creation myth by design rather than by simple omission gains support from an examination of the important marriages in the history of Middle-earth. Anthropologists divide marriages into those which are endogamous - those which are within the tribe - and those

which are exogamous, where the marriage partner comes from outside the individual's own social grouping. It is strikingly notable that the central marriages of Tolkien's cycle are all markedly exogamous. The important realm of Doriath is founded on a marriage between Thingol, an Elf, and Melian, a Maia; in the greatest romance of all, their daughter, Lúthien Tinúviel, in turn marries a mortal man, Beren son of Barahir. Another Elven-princess, Idril Celebrindal of Gondolin, similarly marries a mortal, Tuor, and from their union is born Earendil, the mariner who eventually succeeds in reaching Valinor. *The Lord of the Rings* culminates in a marriage between a man, Aragorn, and an Elf, Arwen; and the hero of *The Hobbit*, Bilbo Baggins, is the product of an alliance between a stolid Baggins father and a more eccentric Took mother. Other examples could also be adduced, but the central point should now be clear: the exogamous marriage in Tolkien's works enjoys a special status, a power to bridge divides, and generate love that can transcend death². Endogamy, on the other hand, is determinedly avoided, and the extremest example of it, actual incest, is presented as the worst fated Morgoth can imagine to punish the defiance of Húrin. It is also notable that, whereas in other incest myths, the offspring of the forbidden union survives, and is indeed often gifted with unique or magical properties (Antigone, the daughter of Oedipus, and Wagner's hero Siegfried are two examples here, and Horus is remarkable even for a god), the child of Turin and Nienor is not allowed to live, but is destroyed in its mother's womb by her suicide.³ Instead it is the children of notably exogamous marriages, such as Earendil and Lúthien, who are perceived as special, fated, and endowed with more than ordinary portions of beauty, courage and luck. Almost alone of creation cycles, Tolkien's world needs exogamy to survive, and regards marriage between kin as the primal curse.

NOTES

1. See *The Book of Lost Tales, Part II*, p.134.

2. Marie Barnfield, in 'Celtic Influences on the History of the First Age', *Mallorn* 28 (September 1991), 2-6, p. 5, argues that 'the motive in Tolkien's work of the union of mortals with women of immortal race is ... intimately woven with that of the Celtic notion of kingship, and is therefore to be found in several Celtic tales. As the representation of the land, the goddess became symbolic of its sovereignty, and no king could claim the right to rule save that she had accepted him as her spouse.'

3. [An example of another "fruitless" incestuous union is that of Kullervo and his sister in the *Kalevala* (Runo 35), particularly interesting since the tale of Kullervo served as the starting-point for the *Narn i Hîn Húrin*. - Ed.]