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Mythopoesis

Sarah Beach

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Abstract

Studies the process of creating fantasy worlds, or sub-creation, with observations from several authors including Le Guin, Lewis, and Tolkien.

Mythopoesis

A Column by Sarah Beach

History

Human beings are born in time, live in time and, in time die. The whole of our lives is spent with the flow of time, and so it is only natural that we tend to think of the history of things in a straight chronological and sequential order. Yet, when it comes to the matter of mythopoesis, if we remain locked in such habits of thought, we shall become lost. The history of a fantasy world rarely comes to its author in a chronological fashion: that is, the author rarely begins at the beginning and goes on to the end. He usually begins, like Tolkien's *Niggle*, with a single leaf, and in going on finds that there are branches, other leaves, trunk and roots to be accounted for.

When considering the matter of the "internal history" of fantasy worlds, one finds that there are three types of worlds. The first is the Single Story World, where the fantasy world was created for the particular story being told. The history that the reader learns is included because it is significant to the story being told. Of course, the author may take more than one volume to tell his story, but it is one story. The second type of world is the Multi-Story World, which was originally conceived by the author as holding more than one story. Many of these worlds, it is true, are created for the purpose of a string of stories about one particular character, like Conan, but it is also the type of world Tolkien made. The third type is the World Revisited. This is a fantasy world which was originally a Single Story world, but which, because of readers' demands or affection for it on the part of the author, the author re-enters with a new story.

For the Sub-Creator, each of these three types of worlds present different problems in the making of their history. The Single Story World is the simplest situation, for if the history of the world enters the story at all, it is significant to the story line. The World Revisited is the most awkward, for the author has to be careful in opening out the history, in order that he not introduce impossible inconsistencies or change the significance of previously established "history." The Multi-Story World is the most complex, for the Sub-Creator is really involved in discovering the world.

Ursula K. LeGuin in The Language of the Night (G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1979) uses just that word: "discovering." And "exploring." "I am not an engineer, but an explorer. I discovered Earthsea" (p. 50). But in mythopoesis, discovery is only rarely a chronolo-

gical (in the fantasy world's reference) process. Various story ideas may randomly appear to the author anywhere along his world's time-line. Additionally, new stories grow out of older (in the author's mind) stories, like leaves appearing on the branches of a sapling.

On top of this hap-hazard chronology, the Sub-Creator has to deal with the fact that stories may change shape under his hands. Walter Hooper in Past Watchful Dragons (Collier Books, 1979) observes this in Lewis's notebooks for the Narnia tales:

Although [Lewis's notebooks] don't tell us very much, there is nevertheless sufficient to give us an idea of the "deliberate inventing" that was sometimes necessary when his mental "pictures" did not group themselves into a complete tale. It is also obvious that his first pictures were sometimes supplanted by others, and that pictures that were not used in one story often found a place in some other. (p. 45-46)

Christopher Tolkien in an editorial note in Unfinished Tales (Houghton Mifflin, 1980) in the section on Aldarion and Erendis makes a related observation about this process:

From the point where Aldarion read the letter from Erendis, refusing to return to Armemelos, the story can only be traced in glimpses and snatches, from notes and jottings: and even those do not constitute the fragments of a wholly consistent story, being composed at different times and often at odds with themselves. (p. 205)

If the author is aware of which type of world he is creating, handling its "history" becomes a slightly easier chore, but only "slightly" easier, for story-ideas, like a band of mischievous monkeys, are likely to bounce up and down and hop from one place to another, while the author scrambles to get them into their proper places.

An author, additionally, needs to be "in tune" with his fantasy world, so that he can tell when a story (or "historical") idea has finally settled down into its proper shape.

These, then, are the two forces a Sub-Creator has to deal with while forming the history of his fantasy world: the non-chronological fashion in which story ideas present

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I think that it would be of no value to really defend my epithets except to say (and by so doing leap to the defense of my epithets) that in my own idiolect I distinguish between modified and unmodified phrases. Adjectives play a dynamic role in expression and I use them as often as occasion permits. Therefore, "penchant for drollery" differs somewhat from the admittedly "knee-jerk" phrase which I chose to use. I apologize if I created an ambiguity as to what I meant.

With regard to his counter-evidence: I don't recall having ever said that the Elvish "derives from some real historical source", except to the degree that Tolkien himself says they do. Since I have not done so in the past nor intend to do so in the future, I find it somewhat disconcerting that I am now "persisting" in it. In Freshman Composition, this kind of counter-argument that Thomas uses is called the "strawman Argument" and he has given us a fine example of one.

Mr. Donahue's point is well-taken with regard to the anagram of "-ind(e)" and now I confess my eyes are open to his thinking, but being a cranky and a stiff-necked sort, I find myself disagreeing with his conclusion simply because Mr. Donahue "persists in his belief that Elvish may derive from some real historical source." Donahue continues by saying that Quendi "doesn't have to have an Indo-European grammar or syllable structure," but our author asserts this very thing in his first paper. I mildly objected to the etymologies because I thought JRRT would. In Unfinished Tales (388-402), there is a rather long discussion on the Istari and of Gandalf's names in particular. On page 399, his name Incanus is treated in some detail. Jim Allen (and many, many others) concluded before the publishing of The Silmarillion and Unfinished Tales that Incanus came from the Latin "incanus", meaning "grey". Tolkien, in an unpublished note referred to by Christopher Tolkien in UT, makes the same observation, but concludes that note by saying that "the coincidence in form of the Quenya name and the Latin word MUST (my emphasis) be regarded as an 'accident' in the same way that Sindarin "orthanc" 'forked height' happens to coincide with the Anglo-Saxon word "or anc" 'cunning device', which is the translation of the actual name in the language of the Rohirrim" (p. 400). Now, I suppose we are free to believe JRRT or not; I chose and choose to take him at his word. Otherwise the whole thing degenerates into Edmund Wilson's "philological game". To pursue "endless linguistic geneologies" of Elvish roots in the real world lexicon is to engage in an activity for which neither Thomas Donahue nor myself have time enough in the world. If Tolkien does borrow morphological elements and their semantic values for his invented languages, he does so unconsciously and, in addition, denied that borrowing when confronted with them.

In his sweeping denunciation of the "wearing down" theory, Mr. Donahue has effectively eliminated from his list of "real

linguists" the likes of Barbara M. H. Strang, Theodora Bynon, Anthony Arlotto, M. L. Samuels, Winfred Lehmann, Elisabeth Closs Traugott, Dwight Bolinger, Robert D. King, Raimo Antilla, and a host of others. With regard to "simple phonetic changes", I was referring to Mr. Donahue's description, not the historical linguistic development of Middle-earth languages.

Mr. Donahue has not disabused me of point 4. In point 5, I do not assume the phonetic relationship between Quenya and Sindarin as correlary with Latin and Welsh; Tolkien states that that is the fact. While it is true that such a statement does not preclude Tolkien's use of Grimm's and Verner's Laws, I personally have a difficult time imagining the Professor emphatically describing one process operational in language relationships and not mentioning such an extraordinary superimposition of Germanic phonetic principles in the process. There is also a subtle difference between Sindarin being Welsh and Sindarin phonologically resembling Welsh. Mr. Donahue asserts that I affirm the former when in fact Professor Tolkien and I state the latter.

Why "Gorbadoc" has anything to do with Celtic was partially answered in point 8. Most all of the Hobbit names in the Shire are in real languages and a great deal of effort was expended by JRRT to make sure that the names were geographically consistent. Phono-aesthetic? To be sure, but tightly woven into the entire tapestry of the linguistic pattern.

With regard to point 13, Mr. Donahue simply dismisses my contention with an assertion of his own. I realize that this is a two-edged sword (that is, I am guilty of the same), but I believe that the inelegance of Mr. Donahue's explanation of the relationship between "atani" and "edain" would give our list of "unreal linguists" palpitations.

Except for a point or two wherein Mr. Donahue clarifies ambiguity in his original paper, I stand by my original critique.

Mythopoesis, continued from page 26

themselves, and the fact that the story may change shape (sometimes drastically) under his hands. Yet even being aware that this is often how the mythopoeic process works will not save the Sub-Creator from a degree of frustration. His creatures may not have free-will such as we possess, but they do often have an adamant determination to be consistent that can border on the wilful. If the Sub-Creator pays attention to his creatures he may even find the course of the history which he has mapped out being changed by some wilful hero or heroine in one of his stories.

The whole process of creating a history is a slippery one, and should be approached with care. One slip, and the creatures will be leading the (Sub-) Creator-- not necessarily in a bad manner, but certainly in an unexpected one.