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'Uncle me no uncle!' Or Why Bilbo Is and Isn't Frodo's Uncle.

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Cover Page Footnote

I would like to thank Allan Turner and the anonymous Peer Reviewers for their help with and comments on this paper.

Introduction

Jane Chance, in her *Tolkien, Self and Other: "This Queer Creature"* writes: "It is axiomatic that Bilbo and his cousin and nephew Frodo belong to the bourgeoisie of the Shire, [...]" (Chance 2016: 167).¹ Leaving aside the question of a 'Shire bourgeoisie', I was puzzled by the possible combination of "cousin and nephew", making Bilbo both Frodo's cousin and uncle.

A person's cousins are, in the genealogical sense of the word, the children of his or her parents' siblings, i.e. the sons and daughters of the father's or mother's sisters or brothers. They usually belong to the same generational cohort and are therefore, more or less, of a similar age. A nephew is the son of a person's brother or sister – and thus usually belongs to a younger age cohort. To be both nephew and cousin is, in the strict genealogical sense and under normal circumstances (i.e. disregarding time travel and similar phenomena), quite impossible.

The problem with Bilbo and Frodo seems to arise from mixing genealogical terminology and the more relaxed use of these terms in everyday speech. Therefore, we have to look in detail at their genealogical relationship and contrast it with the actual social context in which it is set.

Genealogy

Luckily, Tolkien has given us very accurate and detailed information on Bilbo's and Frodo's shared genealogical background. We have, on the one hand, a selection of hobbit family trees in Appendix C of *The Lord of the Rings* (*LotR* 1099-1105), and, on the other, Gaffer Gamgee's informed comment on their rather entangled family relationship in the chapter 'A Long Expected Party' (*LotR* 23). The former provides the basis for the following reconstruction of Bilbo and Frodo's common ancestry.

¹ Chance identifies Frodo repeatedly as Bilbo's nephew (cf. Chance 2016: 156-157 and Chance 2001: 148, 151). She is not the only critic to do so. Most recently, Werber (2018: 95) talks about Bilbo's "Neffe Frodo" ('Bilbo's nephew Frodo').

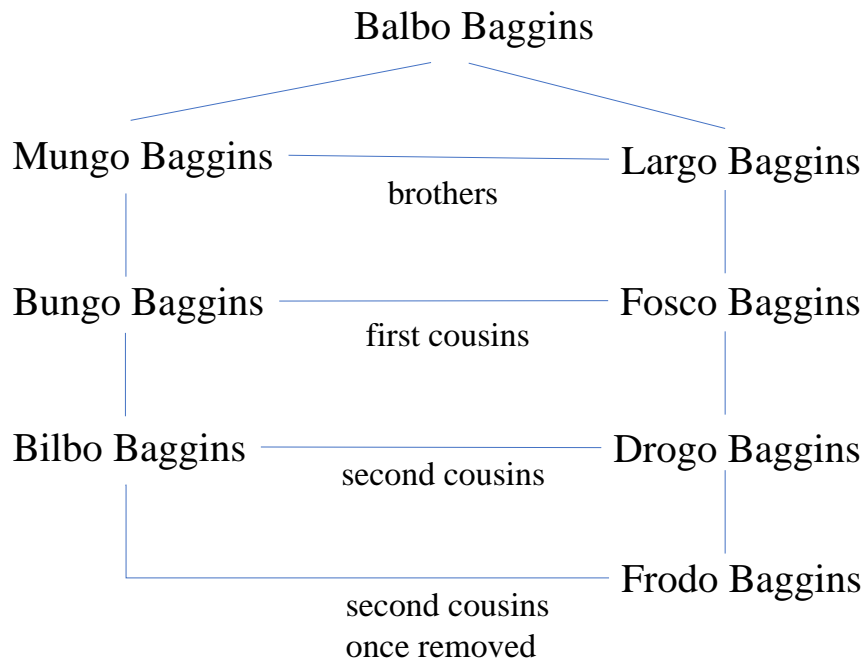


Figure 1: Radically simplified family tree of Bilbo and Frodo (male elements only) based on the information given in the family trees in Appendix C (*LotR* 1099-1105).

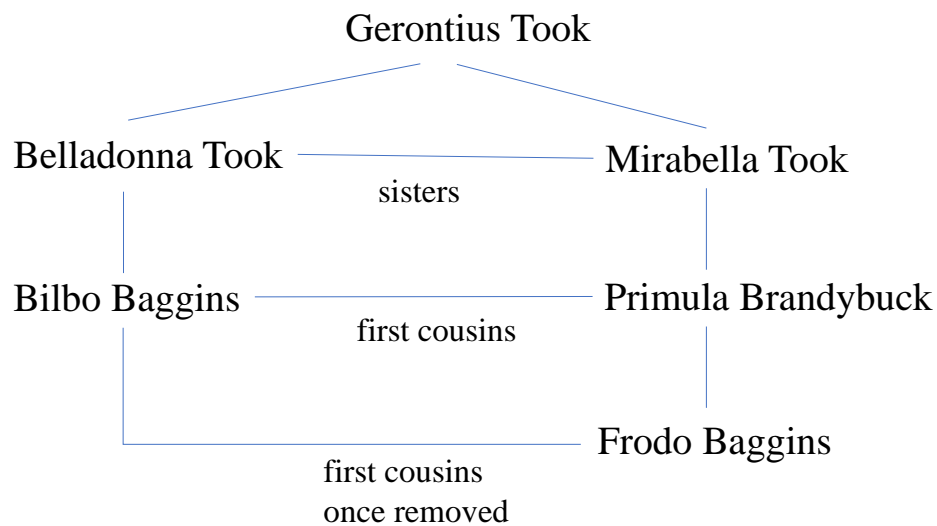


Figure 2: Radically simplified family tree of Bilbo and Frodo (focussing on the relevant female elements) based on the information given in the family trees in Appendix C (*LotR* 1099-1105).

In September 2012, the teenage sisters Megan and Laura posted the following easy-to-understand explanation of Bilbo and Frodo's family relationship on the paternal side:

If you look carefully at the family tree, you will notice that Bilbo and Drogo are on the same generation level. That means if you go back the same number of generations from either descendant you will reach their common ancestor. Go back three generations from both Bilbo and Drogo, and you reach Balbo Baggins. If you go back three generations from Frodo, you reach Largo. That's not the same ancestor Bilbo reached, so that means that Frodo is not on the same generation level as Bilbo.

To be a first, second, third etc. cousin, you have to be on the same generation level. So what do you call relatives who are on different generation levels?

This is where it can get pretty complicated! If your extended relative is one generation above or below you, they are once removed. For example, a first cousin once removed is your parent's cousin, or your cousin's child. And a first cousin twice removed is either your grandparent's cousin or your cousin's grandchild. A second cousin once removed is your parent's second cousin, or your second cousin's child. (See why this gets confusing?)

Now Frodo's dad, Drogo, is Bilbo's second cousin. This would make Frodo and Bilbo second cousins once removed.
(<http://shealynns-faerie-shoppe.blogspot.com/2012/09/hobbit-genealogy.html>; accessed 31 March 2020)

The same explanation holds true for the maternal pedigree, but there Frodo and Bilbo are first cousins once removed (Figure 2).

The information gathered from the family trees and its interpretation is corroborated by Gaffer Gamgee, who puts it as follows:

'You see: Mr. Drogo, he married poor Miss Primula Brandybuck. She was our Mr. Bilbo's first cousin on the mother's side (her mother being the youngest of the Old Took's daughters); and Mr. Drogo was his second cousin. So Mr. Frodo is his first *and* second cousin, once removed either way, as the saying is, if you follow me. [...]' (*LotR* 23)

Unfortunately, not many readers and critics were able to follow Gaffer Gamgee. As a consequence, we have a dissociation of genealogical facts, namely Bilbo and Frodo being first and second cousins once removed either way, and of their perceived family relationship.

Perceived Reality and Everyday Usage

Genealogical reality does not always coincide with perceived reality and genealogical correctness is often sacrificed on the altar of pragmatic

practicality. This means that complex family relationships are re-interpreted as simpler and easier to understand concepts. Thus, the genealogical nephew-uncle relationship is generalized to include other relationships between an older relative and a younger one – as we have typically between first and second cousins once removed. This re-interpretation becomes visible in the forms of address habitually used between first (and second) cousins once removed. www.famlii.com, which is representative for all the other webpages consulted, points out:

While from a genealogy standpoint, your cousin's child is your first cousin once removed, but the common name to call them is *niece* or *nephew*. They would call you *aunt* or *uncle*, and your children would simply call them cousins...although of course, they are really second cousins.

(<https://www.famlii.com/what-call-cousins-child-family-relation/>;
accessed 1 April 2020)

This seems to be the case with Bilbo and Frodo, too. While it is quite clear that they are, genealogically speaking, first and second cousins once removed, they seem to think of and call each other *uncle* and *nephew* respectively.² This is corroborated by the evidence from the text itself. Bilbo, in his birthday speech, refers to Frodo as “my heir and nephew” (*LotR* 30). It is important to remember that he is addressing a good-natured and mostly slightly inebriated crowd of relatives, friends, and acquaintances, and not a group of lawyers. Thus, it would be more than odd if he were to refer to Frodo in such a setting as ‘my heir and first and second cousin once removed either way’. Second, when Frodo wakes up in Rivendell after having recovered from his close encounter with the Ringwraiths, he gets up and looks into the mirror and

was startled to see a much thinner reflection of himself than he remembered: it looked remarkably like the young nephew of Bilbo who used to go tramping with his uncle in the Shire; but the eyes looked out at him thoughtfully. (*LotR* 225)

The focalizer in this passage is clearly Frodo, and he is very unlikely to think of himself as Bilbo's first and second cousin once removed either way. In this case, the genealogically correct terms lack the necessary emotional-affective quality that characterizes the two hobbits' relationship. *My dear first and second cousin once removed either way* simply won't do as a suitable and appropriate form of address.

² This usage can be seen as a modern-day equivalent to the semantically less specified meaning of Old English *nefa*, which could refer to: a) a nephew, b) a grandson, or c) a step-son (Bosworth-Toller, *nefa*). I would like to thank the anonymous Peer Reviewer #3 for his/her very helpful comments on this point.

Matters are somewhat different in the Prologue. Here the 'voice' is that of the editor-translator rather than that of one of the alleged original authors of the *Red Book of Westmarch* (Bilbo, Frodo, and Sam).³ Interestingly, the first edition (tenth impression 1961) has, on page 21, the following sentence:

[...]; but much evidently still remained of the considerable wealth that he had brought back. How much or how little he revealed to no one, not even to Frodo his favourite nephew.

This was changed later by adding inverted commas to *nephew*, so that we find now:

[...]; but much evidently still remained of the considerable wealth that he had brought back. How much or how little he revealed to no one, not even to Frodo his favourite 'nephew'. (*LotR* 10)

Whoever added the inverted commas had obviously realized that Bilbo might speak about Frodo as *nephew*, but that the editor-translator must not do so. The inverted commas were a simple and effective way of amending this mistake – which was probably a relic from the times when the relationship between Frodo (or Bingo, as his predecessor was called in some of the drafts) and Bilbo had been different.

Indeed, the development of the relationship between the protagonists that we know as Bilbo and Frodo went through several stages until it reached its final form – like so many other elements in Tolkien's texts.⁴ The various drafts and versions of what would become the chapter 'A Long Expected Party' have been made accessible by Christopher Tolkien in *The Return of the Shadow*. There we find, for example, a version in which Bilbo's heir is his son Bingo Baggins (*Return* 40). This relationship was rejected in the subsequent re-workings of the text, and Bingo Bolger is transformed into Bilbo's 'nephew' (*Return* 36-39), while Bilbo is referred to throughout as Bingo's uncle. Even a legal notice, though drafted by Bingo and thus with a clear focalizer, "was signed *Bingo Bolger-Baggins for self and uncle*" (*Return* 39). Luckily, clarification of the true genealogical relationship is given by the narrator, who writes:

He [Bilbo] did two more things that caused tongues to wag. At the age of ninety-nine he adopted his nephew – or to be accurate (Bilbo scattered

³ See Vanderbeke and Turner (2012) for a competent discussion of the questions surrounding authorship and voice in Tolkien's work.

⁴ Take, for example, the development of the ranger-hobbit Trotter into the Dúnedain Strider/Aragorn, or how the nature of the Ring changed during the writing of the first chapters of *The Lord of the Ring* from being merely a magical ring in *The Hobbit* to the One Ring.

the titles nephew and niece about rather recklessly) his first cousin once removed, Bingo Bolger, a lad of twenty-seven. (*Return* 36)

This tallies with what we have established in the preceding section, namely that the form of address *nephew* is also used for people who are not nephews in the genealogical sense of the term. Unfortunately, this clarifying sentence did not make it into the final version of the text, where we have only the much less accurate *younger cousins*:

But he [Bilbo] had no close friends, until some of his younger cousins began to grow up. The eldest of these, and Bilbo's favourite, was young Frodo Baggins. When Bilbo was ninety-nine he adopted Frodo as his heir, and brought him to live at Bag End. (*LotR* 21)

Thus, while the genealogical relationship is stated quite clearly for those who read the text attentively and won't mind studying the family trees in Appendix C, more casual readers come away with the impression that Bilbo and Frodo are uncle and nephew. One reason for the persistence of such a misapprehension can be found in the fact that the emotional bond that links Bilbo and Frodo is very much modelled on an ideal genealogical uncle-nephew relationship – and the focalizers in the text share this view. This is further strengthened by the accepted use of *nephew* and *uncle* as forms of address for first (and second) cousins once removed. As a consequence, the hasty reader may be excused for thinking of Bilbo and Frodo as uncle and nephew.

There remains one question, however: Why didn't Tolkien make them uncle and nephew in the genealogical sense? In order to answer this question, we have to put their relationship into a wider context.

Nephew vs. Sister-Son and the Avunculate

The Lord of the Rings and *The Hobbit* do have their share of prominent uncles and nephews – with a niece thrown in for good measure. Thus, we have Éomer (nephew) & Éowyn (niece) and Théoden (uncle), Fili & Kili (nephews) and Thorin (uncle), Meneldil (nephew) and Isildur (uncle), and Fréaláf (nephew) and Helm (uncle). The term *nephew*, however, is rarely used in the context of these relationships.⁵ In *The Hobbit*, we have only three instances of *nephews* and two of *nieces* (both always in the plural). Two tokens of *nephews* and of *nieces*, respectively, occur in the context of the narrator's account of Bilbo's return to Bag End after his adventure:

⁵ The term *nephew* does occur several times, but mostly in the historical accounts relating the history of Númenor and Gondor in the Appendices of *The Lord of the Rings*.

He was in fact held by all the hobbits of the neighbourhood to be 'queer' – except by his nephews and nieces on the Took side, but even they were not encouraged in their friendship by their elders. [...] His gold and silver was largely spent in presents, both useful and extravagant – which to a certain extent accounts for the affection of his nephews and his nieces. (*Hobbit* 271)

Since Bilbo, like Frodo, was an only child,⁶ he could not have had nephews or nieces in the genealogical meaning of the words, and the narrator must have used them to refer to first and second cousins once removed.

The third instance of *nephews* occurs in Thorin's answer to the Great Goblin's inquiry as to why they were crossing the Misty Mountains:

“We were on a journey to visit our relatives, our nephews and nieces, and first, second, and third cousins, and the other descendants of our grandfathers, who live on the East side of these truly hospitable mountains,” said Thorin, [...]. (*Hobbit* 60)

Interestingly, Thorin pays scrupulous attention to the differences between the various degrees of kinship and I do get the impression that dwarves would not look kindly upon lumping together *first cousins once removed* and *nephews*, as the more relaxed (and modern) hobbit-culture does. Thorin, at the same time, seems to try and avoid antagonizing the Great Goblin by assuming a humble and inoffensive tone. This becomes clear when we compare his answer to the Great Goblin with the one given to the captain of the guard at Lake-town:

“And who are these?” he [the captain of the guard] asked, pointing to Fili and Kili and Bilbo.

“The sons of my father's daughter,” answered Thorin, “Fili and Kili of the race of Durin, and Mr. Baggins who has travelled with us out of the West.” (*Hobbit* 176)

No talk of *nephews* this time! In order to impress the captain of the guard, Thorin returns to the formal and heroic diction that seems to have been his usual “style”, since, as we have been told early on in the story, “[h]e was an important dwarf” (*Hobbit* 17). Actually, Tolkien may be poking a bit of fun at Thorin by means of the slightly pompous seriousness of the exchange. The usual epithet for *nephew* in heroic Germanic literature is *sister-son* or *sister's son*. Thorin's “sons of my father's daughter” is similar in structure to the *kenning* “the slayer of the son of the giantess” (i.e. Thor; in *Njal's Saga* 177)

⁶ See the family trees in Appendix C.

and is even more elevated in tone than *sister-son*.⁷ To a modern audience, Thorin's expression is likely to oscillate between the truly heroic-epic and the slightly ridiculous and exaggerated.

Sister-son or *sister's son* and its female equivalent *sister-daughter* are the habitual terms employed by the Rohirrim in *The Lord of the Rings*. They are not only used to highlight the archaic quality of the Rohirrim language⁸ and society, but they are also more accurate in specifying the exact relationship between the two parties. What is more, Tolkien, by using these terms, consciously and deliberately forges a link to the well-known real-world concept of the avunculate.⁹ As Laurent Gabail writes in *The International Encyclopedia of Anthropology* (2018):

The term “avunculate” designates any special relationship between a mother's brother (MB) and a sister's son (ZS). Identified as an institution by ethnographers in many unrelated societies, it covers a large spectrum of configurations [...].

Many cultures have a special term to denote the maternal uncle (e.g. Old English *ēam*, (Old) High German *Ohm* and *Oheim*, or Dutch *oom*), and the maternal uncle-nephew relationship plays an important role in many of the medieval English texts studied by Tolkien. The Old English epic poem *Beowulf* mentions Hygelac (uncle) and Beowulf (nephew), Hrothgar (uncle) and Hrothulf (nephew), as well as Sigemund (uncle) and Fitela (nephew). Furthermore, the Old English heroic poem *The Battle of Maldon* and Tolkien's sequel 'The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth, Beorhthelm's Son' both have Byrhtnoth/Beorhtnoth (uncle) and Wulfmær (nephew), and the later Arthurian tradition features not only Arthur (uncle) and Gawain (nephew), but also the more troubled pair Arthur (uncle and father) and Mordred (nephew

⁷ Later on, the relationship is described as follows: “Fili and Kili had fallen defending him with shield and body, for he was their mother's elder brother” (*Hobbit* 261) – which Shippey (2003: 79) calls “a motif immemorially old.” Appendix A of *The Lord of the Rings* notes: “There fell also Fíli and Kíli, his sister-sons” (*LotR* 1078); and the family-tree of the line of Durin lists them as the sons of Thorin's sister Dís (*LotR* 1079). Interestingly, Tolkien first introduced Fili and Kili as Thorin's great-nephews, i.e. his sister's grandsons (Rateliff 2007: 444, note 11). On Jackson's treatment of the motif of Thorin's sister-sons, see Smol 2015.

⁸ On the linguistic framework and the relationship between the different languages in *The Lord of the Rings*, see Honegger 2004.

⁹ The term *sister-daughter*, like its better-known counterpart *sister-son*, goes back to Old English times. Whether the existence of the term *sister-daughter* implies the existence of a special relationship between the sister's daughter and her uncle, similar to that of *sister-son* and uncle, would be a suitable topic for future research.

and son).¹⁰ The list could be extended to other literatures and languages,¹¹ but suffice it to say that the avunculate is a well-known and well-established concept.

Conclusion

Why, then, didn't Tolkien make Frodo Bilbo's sister-son? A few changes in the hobbit family trees would have sufficed and the two would have fit the pattern. Indeed, they *do* fit a pattern, but not the genealogical one. Verlyn Flieger, in her article 'Frodo and Aragorn: The Concept of the Hero',¹² was the first to make some very important observations concerning Frodo and his relationship with Bilbo. She noted that the "sister's son relationship is [...] obliquely alluded to" (Flieger 2004: 137) by making Frodo's mother Bilbo's first cousin, in contrast to Drogo, who is only his second cousin. She (2004: 137) further observed that "Tolkien avoids a one-to-one correlation between Frodo and medieval heroes" and argued convincingly that Tolkien created the figure of Frodo in order to complement (and make possible) Aragorn as the "warrior, lover, healer, renewer, a hero worthy of the heroic aspects of *The Lord of the Rings*" (Flieger 2004: 134).¹³ As such, Frodo partakes in the well-established tradition, one could almost call it a literary motif, "that some action initiated by the uncle is brought to its conclusion, whether for good or bad, by the nephew" (Flieger 2004: 137). Yet he does so on a lower mimetic level than most of its literary predecessors – which is why *sister-son*, next to being genealogically wrong, would sound rather preposterous. As much as Thorin has been able to heighten the heroic tone by making the *sister-sons* into *sons of my father's daughter*, so the hobbit culture has succeeded in toning down the same heroic tone by making Frodo *first and second cousin once removed either way*, while still preserving his central narrative function as 'nephew'. As a consequence, that "which is universal and symbolic is

¹⁰ Chance also discusses this relationship and writes: "In the medieval romance the quest-hero frequently appears as the nephew to the king – the son of the king's sister, or "sister-son" – as was Gawain, nephew to King Arthur in the fourteenth-century *Gawain and the Green Knight* and son of Morgan le Fay and her half-brother, Arthur, in the fifteenth-century Sir Thomas Malory's *Morte Darthur*" (Chance 2016: 234). The last part of the statement, however, is obviously wrong and it seems to me that Gawain and Mordred got mixed up. See also Chance (2016: 118) for a discussion of the "faithful nephew and knight" Gawain and the "bad nephew (and bastard son) Mordred."

¹¹ Potts (2018: 531-540) gives a useful, up-to-date overview and discussion of instances of the avunculate in literature, history, and ethnography.

¹² Flieger's essay was first published in 1981 and has been reprinted at least twice. I use the 2004 version.

¹³ For a development of this idea into a concept of 'co-operative heroism', see Honegger 2018.

filtered through the particular and literal. Frodo evokes the greater figures who stand behind him, but he is not engulfed by them. He remains Frodo” (Flieger 2004: 135).

Frodo is therefore *nephew* not only from a pragmatic and interactional point of view because he and Bilbo interact with each other very much like nephew and uncle, but also from a narrative and structural point of view since he brings to a conclusion what started with Bilbo’s finding of the Ring. Genealogically speaking, however, Frodo is only *first and second cousin once removed either way* – and I think Tolkien scholars and readers alike should pay attention which terms they use since a *first and second cousin once removed either way* may sometimes be a *nephew*, but never a *sister-son*!

List of Abbreviations

- Hobbit* Tolkien, John Ronald Reuel. 1995. *The Hobbit*. Fourth edition. First edition 1937. London: HarperCollins.
- LotR* Tolkien, John Ronald Reuel. 2004. *The Lord of the Rings*. 50th Anniversary One-Volume Edition. First edition 1954/55. Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Company.
- Return* Tolkien, John Ronald Reuel. 1994. *The Return of the Shadow*. (*The History of Middle-earth 6. The History of The Lord of the Rings: Part I*) Edited by Christoph Tolkien. First published 1988. Paperback edition. London: Grafton.

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