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Abstract

A pre-Silmarillion speculation on how immortality is inherited in elf-human crosses, based solely on information then available in the Appendices to Lord of the Rings.

Additional Keywords

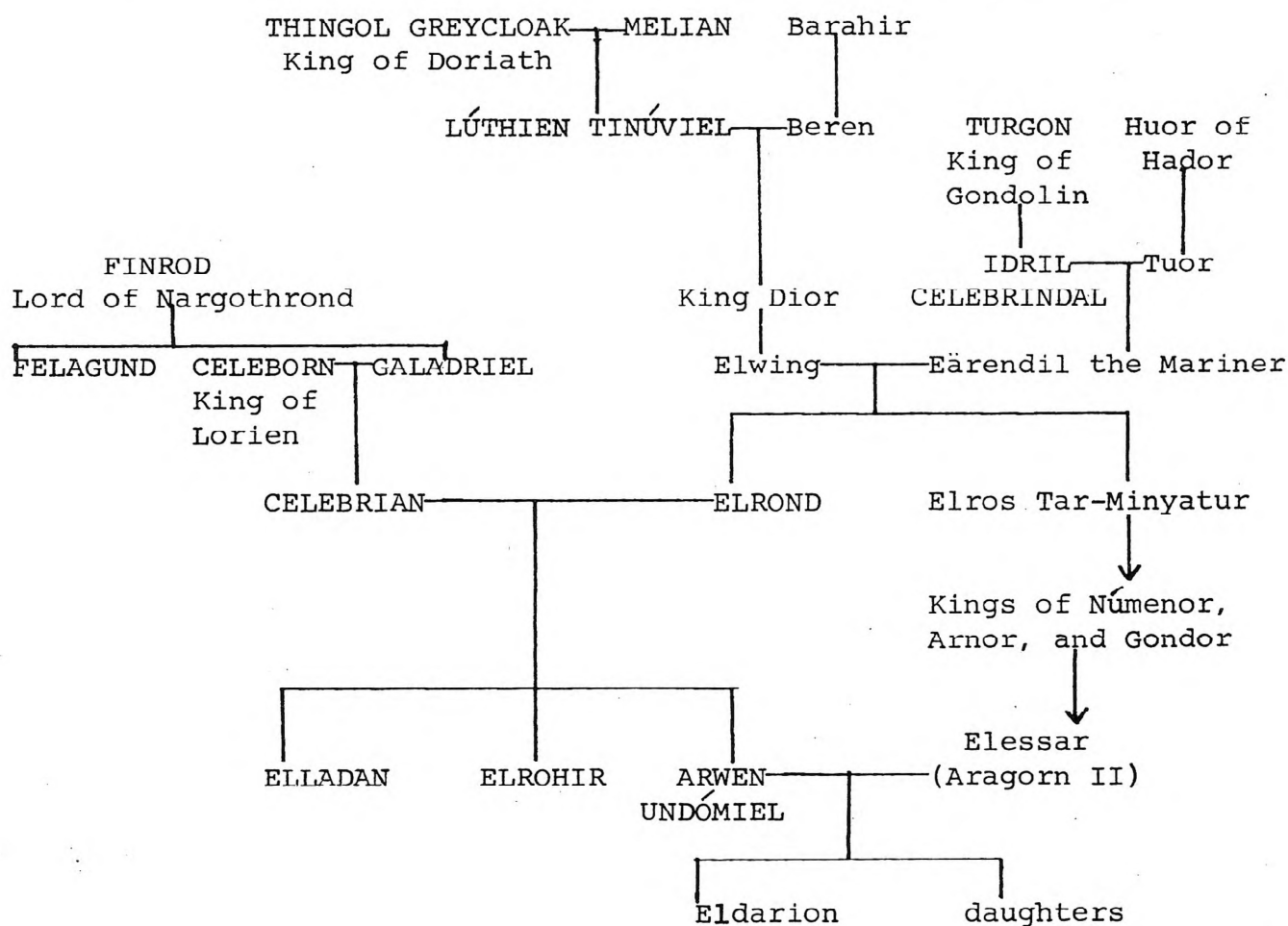
Immortality and mortality in J.R.R. Tolkien; Tolkien, J.R.R.—Characters—Elves

THE HEREDITARY PATTERN OF IMMORTALITY IN ELF-HUMAN CROSSES
by John Boardman

The cross-fertility of the various races of the Third Age has been a matter of considerable speculation among students of that period. Although orc-human¹, orc-hobbit², and elf-hobbit crosses are briefly mentioned in The Lord of the Rings and its prolog The Hobbit, the crosses of principal interest are elf-human. Three such crosses are mentioned³.

Wide psychological differences between elves and humans are frequently mentioned in the canonical works of Tolkien. The physiological differences are less pronounced; elves, one has the impression, are slender of build and fair of complexion, with more musical voices than humans possess.

And, of course, elves are immortal. This being the case, how is immortality passed on in the elf-human crosses? It is known that the descendents of these crosses include both mortals and immortals. The following table shows their relationships to one another. The names of immortals are given in capital letters.



None of the offspring of elf-human crosses are immortal, but some immortals appear in the second generation (see Elrond, above). This strongly suggests that immortality is a recessive characteristic, and is transmitted to the descendants of an elf-human cross by the Mendelian Law.

Let us denote the dominant gene for mortality by the letter "M", and the recessive gene for immortality by "m". Then clearly the gene combination was (Mm), that is, he carried a recessive for immortality. His daughter Elwing may also be presumed to be (Mm). Her husband Eärendil, also the offspring of an elf-human cross, would have the same combination.

Under the circumstances, it may be expected that both mortals and immortals, in the 3:1 Mendelian ratio of probabilities, could be present in the next generation. Both did appear: Elrond inherited the recessive "m" gene from both parents and had the Elvish gene combination (mm). Furthermore, he bred true with an Elvish woman, since all three of their children were immortal.

Elros, the other son of Eärendil and Elwing, was mortal, though he had a lifetime far beyond the usual mortal expectancy. This indicates the gene combination (Mm), and we may presume that the presence of a single gene for immortality extends the usual mortal life-span. Since his descendants were noted for long lifetimes, this recessive gene was probably passed on to them.

1. The Two Towers, p. 171.
2. The Hobbit, p. 12.
3. The Return of the King, p. 314 et seq.