

Fall 11-15-1969

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Recommended Citation

Panshin, Cory Seidman (1969) "Old Irish Influences Upon the Languages & Literature of *The Lord of the Rings*," *Tolkien Journal*: Vol. 3: Iss. 4, Article 4.

Available at: https://dc.swosu.edu/tolkien_journal/vol3/iss4/4

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Abstract

First looks at historical changes in Old Irish as possible sources for similar changes in the development of Sindarin from Quenya. Then considers the subject matter and rhyme scheme of "Eärendil," Bilbo's poem composed in Rivendell, and "Errantry," its comic companion from *The Adventures of Tom Bombadil*, as similar in structure and subject matter to Old Irish "voyages" poems.

Additional Keywords

Irish language—Influence on J.R.R. Tolkien; Tolkien, J.R.R.—Languages—Quenya; Tolkien, J.R.R.—Languages—Sindarin; Tolkien, J.R.R. "Eärendil"—Rhyme scheme; Tolkien, J.R.R. "Errantry"—Rhyme scheme

Old Irish Influences upon the Languages & Literature of the Lord of the Rings ~by Cory Seidman Panshin

It is a frequently mentioned fact, that the Celtic elements in *The Lord of the Rings* are very strong, being second in number only to those from Germanic history and mythology. The character of the Elves in particular is often cited as stemming more from the *aes sídhe* and Tuatha Dé Danaan of the Irish myths than from the Old English *Ylf* or Norse *alfar* from which they derive their name. Likewise, the situation of the Shire and of Rivendell as outposts of civilization surrounded by wilderness is reminiscent of the status of the Romanized Celts of England under King Arthur, a century after the departure of the Roman eagles. And Tolkien himself tells us ((III:413/516)) that he has made the Breemen and the Dunlendings analogous to the Celtic remnants within and on the borders of Anglo-Saxon England.

But these parallels are all rather general. We would expect Tolkien, as a philologist, to have drawn inspiration also from the languages and literatures of the Celtic peoples in the construction of Middle-earth. And indeed such is the case. In this paper, I intend to discuss a few of the most obvious borrowings from Old Irish. Since I have only a fairly superficial knowledge of this language, and none at all of Welsh, I will direct my discussion towards the Middle-earth phenomena themselves, as elucidated by their Irish equivalents. The more general question of the full range of Celtic influence upon Tolkien I leave aside, in the hope that it will be taken up by one with the background to do it justice.

The first area in which Tolkien's borrowings from Old Irish appear to be significant is that of phonetics. Here one can look almost anywhere in the Elvish tongues and find points of comparison. For example, Tolkien states of final vowels in Quenya that "they had nearly all formerly been long vowels (or they would have disappeared)" ((RG:61)). This same reduction in final vowels took place in the development of Old Irish. Likewise, the Cirth contains a rune for that sound of Archaic Sindarin which can be described as either a spirant *M* or a nasal *v*. ((III: 404/501)) This exceedingly peculiar sound occurs, to the best of my knowledge, alone in Old Irish of all the Indo-European languages.

However, such comparisons, although they may be of mild interest, are unsystematic, and therefore of no use for the understanding of the Elvish languages themselves. Of much deeper import is an apparent Sindarin equivalent of the Irish phenomena of *lenition* and *nasalization*. These two phenomena occur both as historical changes in the development of Old Irish from Indo-European and as grammatical processes within the language. In lenition, a stop between two vowels becomes the corresponding fricative. Thus, we have *p* going to *f*, *t* to *th*, *k* to *kh*, and similarly for the voiced equivalents. Nasalization can follow either of the two processes. In one, the combination of nasal plus voiced stop becomes a double nasal: *mb* to *mn*, *nd* to *nn*, *ng* to *nn*. These clusters may also be simplified.

Now, when we look at those pairs of cognates between Quenya and Sindarin which are given in *The Lord of the Rings*, we find that processes similar to these must have been going on in the development of the latter from the archaic form of the former. Nowhere is the evidence complete, and there are many apparent exceptions to the rules, but they do allow many puzzling correspondences to be clarified.

As one example of lenition, the word for the month of May is *Lotesse* in Quenya and in Sindarin *Lothron*. ((III: 388/493)) Similarly, the Quenya *alda* 'tree' has as its Sindarin cognate the form *galadh*. ((III: 391/487)) Finally, with the Sindarin change apparently conditioned by some sort of prefix, we have the season-names *tuile* 'spring' equivalent to *ethuil* and *coire* 'stirring' equivalent to *echuir*. ((III: 386/480))

For nasalization, the second process, where the original stop was voiced, is explicitly described by Tolkien and the exceptions noted. He gives as an example of the change the relation of Q. Endore 'Middle-earth' to S. Ennor. It is only in final position that the double nasal is simplified, as in

the development of Q. *rembe* 'net' into S. *rem* and in the derivation of the name *Rohan* from the earlier *Rochann*, originally *Rochand*. ((III: 393/490))

Examples of the other kind of nasalization are rather rare. However, the fact that voiced stops and fricatives occur independently in Sindarin, while in Quenya they are found only after a nasal or in the combinations *ld* *hd* *rd*, would seem to indicate that some such voicing process must have occurred. One possible example is the Quenya form *Antwari* 'Men' which is given at one point in the revised edition as equivalent to S. Edain. ((III: 506)) However, both in the first edition ((III: 406)) and elsewhere in the second edition ((III: 388)), this appears as *Atani*.

These historical correspondences are illuminating, but more important, if it could be demonstrated, would be the use of lenition and nasalization as grammatical processes within Sindarin. And there is evidence for this also. Lenition and nasalization in Old Irish affected the beginning of a word when it was preceded by another word that ended, or had originally ended, in a vowel or nasal respectively. This initial nasalization was generally indicated by writing the nasal immediately before the following word. This is what appears to be going on in the phrase meaning 'Forest of Great Fear' *Taur e-Ndaedelos*. ((III: 412/515)) Since *nd-* is not a permissible initial cluster in Sindarin, we may assume that this is a case of initial nasalization, to be pronounced /taur enaedelos/. *E*, derived from an earlier *en*, would then be an attributive prefix.

Initial lenition in Old Irish was not as regularly indicated, but the initial voiceless stops *p*, *t*, *c* were, when lenited, written as *ph*, *th*, *ch*. The first of these, although apparently pronounced simply as /f/, was thus distinguished in



Grima: Wormtongue

writing from the independent *f*-sound derived from the Indo-European *w*. Tolkien employs this same convention for Sindarin: "PH has the same sound as *f*. It is used...where the *f*-sound is related to or derived from a *p*, as in *i-Pheriannath* 'the Halflings'." ((III: 392/488)) But this usage is not justified for Sindarin, which inherited an entire fricative series, *f*, *th*, *ch*, from Quenya. We therefore have a clear indication that Tolkien borrowed this spelling convention from Irish. The phrase *i-Pheriannath* is thus seen as a direct counterpart of examples of initial lenition in Old Irish.

But Tolkien's borrowings from Old Irish are not all of a purely linguistic nature. It is also possible to trace literary influences between the two. As the outstanding example, the two poems "Earendil" ((I:246/308 ff.)) and "Errantry" ((TB:24 ff.)) are closely based on Old Irish models in both poetic structure and literary content. First, in order to demonstrate the structural parallels, I will consider one by one the characteristics of Old Irish poetry as given in Thurneysen's *Old Irish Reader* under the heading "Notes on Irish Metrics." ((37)) In each case, I will indicate whether Tolkien's poems adhere to these characteristics, as well as any degree of partial adherence.

1. "The normal stanza has four lines." True of Tolkien.
2. Every line has seven syllables." Not true. Here Tolkien has used an iambic tetrameter more appropriate to the ballad-form beloved of the Hobbits.
3. "In Irish the normal rhyme extends from the vowel of the stressed syllable to the end of the word: it consists in the agreement of the vowel...and in the 'affinity' of the consonants." This is essentially true of Tolkien. Given the eccentricities of the English vowel system, it is difficult to discern any patterns of agreement there, but the consonants definitely are required to have an affinity as to voicedness. Tolkien also follows the Irish rules in allowing the rhyming of two clusters of related consonants or of a cluster with one of its members.
4. In the fourth section, Thurneysen considers various sorts of internal rhyme. Tolkien uses only one sort *aicill*-rhyme, but that invariably. This consists in the rhyming, in each half of the couplet, of the end of the first line with the middle of the second.
5. "Alliteration within the stanza is always between stressed words which are either contiguous or separated only by unstressed words." Substantially true,



although Tolkien seems not to follow the Irish in using alliteration to link succeeding stanzas.

Examples of all these devices may be seen in the first few stanzas of *Errantry*. (Rhyming words and alliterating letters have been italicized.) In *Earendil*, which is a much more serious poem, their use is correspondingly more subtle.

There was a merry passenger,
a messenger, a mariner:
he build a gilded gondola
to wander in, and had her in
a load of yellow oranges
and porridge for his provender;
he perfumed her with marjoram
and cardamon and lavender.

In content, too, these two poems closely resemble the class of Old Irish poems and stories known as "voyages," of which perhaps the best known is "The Voyage of Bran Son of Febal." These tales typically share the theme of a voyage westward oversea to enchanted lands. And it is this same theme that is the connecting link between these two poems of Tolkien's, otherwise so different.

We may ask, then, granted that these works are 'Irish' in the sense that the songs of the Rohirrim are 'Anglo-Saxon' what place we may assign them in the ethnic structure of Middle-earth. Tolkien himself tells us that "Elbo invented its metrical devices...They do not appear in other places in the Red Book." ((TB: 8)) However, in light of what we have just seen about these metrical devices, I do not think we can take this statement entirely at face value. Rather it would seem to be in the nature of a joke played by Tolkien-the-author upon Tolkien-the-commentator. For even if Bilbo had invented the devices, why would he have been driven to write about the ocean-voyage, so alien to both Hobbit-tradition and his own experience, without some literary example to draw upon?

It is the source of this literary example that is the problem here. Bree will not do: Besides the definite unbookishness of its inhabitants, it is set up as analogous to Wales rather than Ireland. The only solution is to postulate some otherwise unknown people of this same aboriginal kind, one that flourished sufficiently under the rule of Arnor to have its own literature but disappeared of the realm. One example of their writings, discovered by Bilbo in some old horde of mathoms or perhaps purchased by him in Bree, would have sufficed to inspire these two poems without leaving any other trace of influence on the literature of the times. Bilbo's pride in the form would then be not that of the innovator but rather for having successfully adapted the ornaments of a foreign poetic tradition to the basic ballad-structure of the hobbits. That "Earendil" uses more true rhyme and less consonance than "Errantry" might then represent a failure in this adaption rather than a sudden upsurge of good taste.

