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Quenti Lambardillion: A Column on Middle-earth Linguistics

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Abstract

Introductory column with some discussion of anomalies in the writing systems used on various title pages.

Additional Keywords

Tolkien, J.R.R.—Languages

Quenti Lambardillion

A Column on Middle-earth Linguistics

Paul Nolan Hyde

It is an ominous and overwhelming task to "initiate" a forum for the study of Fantasy Linguistics. Much has been done in conjunction with the Mythopoeic Society by Paula Marmor, Jim Allen and others, but considerably more has been done independent of our specific interests in J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, and Charles Williams. While the focus of this column will be directed at the works of our three authors, primarily on those of Professor Tolkien, yet there will be occasion to address the nature of Tolkien's influence on those who have used linguistic techniques to intensify the perception of their creations in the minds of their readers. While source studies often create unhappy controversies, it will be worth the effort to investigate pre-Tolkien writers who used similar techniques to develop their characters and to enrich the worlds wherein those characters exist.

Definitive declarations concerning Tolkien's literary use of linguistics are impossible to make for the Master is gone. What remains is that which he recorded or verbally related to others. One of his genius and sensitivity comes so seldom into this world as to be unique in our lifetimes and only one of his stature could fathom the depth of his talent. At best our delvings into the philological "Niggle's Parish" will be confined to a flower here, a distant mountain there, and, perhaps, a Leaf, one so deftly created as to render us completely awestruck when we perceive it. As Atkin's says, so we too will say, "I can't get it out of my mind."

So, where do we begin? We could ask questions like why Professor Tolkien spells his first name "Jhon" in Angerthas on the title page of LR (I have a speculation about this that is absolutely delightful) or we could discuss how it is that Frodo speaks Quenya and Sam speaks Sindarin when they are in identical situations with the Star-glass of Galadriel (the narrator says that neither one knew the language they spoke). We could speculate as to what Gandalf is really doing when he is casting spells in the Misty Mountains and how that relates to his stewardship of the Secret Fire and his confrontation with the Balrog. The topics are endless and fascinating.

Both Glen and I feel that this column should be more of a forum than anything else; an opportunity to share insights, to get at the heart of a matter as closely as we can. Much of Tolkien's appeal is in discovery, in the perception of his creation. It is also true that while Tolkien disliked allegory, he did encourage application. In other words, his works were not to be understood in only one way, but in many ways, according to the reception of the reader. While the nature of language is such that it tends to be a little more structured and less susceptible to personal interpretation, yet Tolkien would undoubtedly approve of our attempts to find a richness in his creations as there is in real language. Exchange, then, is

our goal; a comparison of notes in order to enhance our mutual appreciation of Tolkien's facility for linguistic invention.

In order to begin somewhere, we have chosen to consider briefly (at first) the inscriptions on the title pages of LR, S, and UT.

Most everyone who has had some interest in Elven calligraphy has attempted to transcribe the various inscriptions which appear throughout Tolkien's works, but often to their dismay they discover that the Angerthas in LR differs considerably from the Runic system of The Hobbit and that the Tengwar used in LR isn't quite the same as that of S or UT. Having the three title pages in front of you at this point would be helpful.

Rendered into recognizable English, the title page inscription of LR reads as follows: "The Lord of the Rings translated from the Red Book of West-March by John Ronald Reuel Tolkien: herein is set forth the history of the War of the Ring and the Return of the King as seen by the Hobbits."

A letter-by-letter transcription, however, presents some interesting problems, particularly with the use of the Angerthas as compared with the use of the Tengwar.

The transliteration of the title page of S reads thusly: "The tales of the First Age when Morgoth dwelt in Middle-earth and the Elves made war upon him for the recovery of the Silmarils: to which are appended the Downfall of Numenor and the history of the Rings of Power and the Third Age in which these tales come to their end." There are some distinct differences in character usage between the first inscription and the second, a condition which is seemingly aggravated by the inscription on the title page of UT. This last, transliterated, reads: "In this book of Unfinished Tales by John Ronald Reuel Tolkien which was brought together by Christopher Reuel Tolkien, his son, are told many things of men and elves in Numenor and in Middle-earth, from the Elder Days in Beleriand to the War of the Ring and an account is given of the Druedain, of Istari, and the Palantiri."

A letter-by-letter transcription of these three title page inscriptions demonstrates radical differences in the writing systems used. The question is why do we have three different forms of the Tengwar implemented in essentially the same functioning position in the three works? Some possible answers present themselves by comparing the facsimiles themselves, noting the handstyle. I think that it would be useful to look at the Hugh Brogan letter of December 1948 (Letters, pp.132, 224). While it is possible to present reasons for the differences which are based in actualities external to Middle-earth, I believe it is possible to explain the differences in a way consistent with the linguistic history of Tolkien's world. What do you think?