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Quenti Lambardillion: A Column on Middle-earth Linguistics

Abstract
Discussion of transcription of “Bombadil poem” reproduced in 1978 *Silmarillion Calendar*, and what it reveals about the orthography of the writing system used and the differing dialects represented.

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Quenti Lambardillion
A Column on Middle-earth Linguistics
Paul Nolan Hyde

One of the earliest and most joyous surprises in my study of J.R.R. Tolkien's works was the revelation that the inscriptions on the Title Pages of the Lord of the Rings were actually something other than decoration, that they actually contained information about the books. I suspect that there have been many, like myself, who have spent hours pouring over Appendix E trying to decipher the hidden messages contained in these and other facsimiles of elvish art. Aesthetically speaking, there is something rather stimulating about having my own Hobbitish curiosity satisfied even though the task has often been somewhat tedious. The task reminds me of the hours I spent laboring with Beowulf and Chaucer; I hated it, but I loved it.

Why Tolkien produced such facsimiles is an issue all by itself. The simplest answer, I believe, is that he was an artist-scholar, one who desired to create the academically beautiful or (better said) beautiful academia. One does not have to invest much time to academically beautiful or (better said) beautiful though the task has often been somewhat tedious. The result is an intensive seeking out, a peering under every linguistic stone and brick, a questioning spurred by curiosity and the delight of finding the hidden. In short, a master teacher has duped a recalcitrant student into a fit of mind-developing research; painlessly, without tuition or threat of expulsion. This is no game, of course, unless all of true education is mere gamesmanship.

Once addicted to this kind of expectant study, our student is continually on the lookout, anticipating some new find to be explored. From a purely orthographic point of view, imagine the excitement generated by The Silmarillion Calendar 1978, particularly the plate for October [2]. Three pieces of Elvish Script, exquisitely reproduced, given without transcription. As Christopher Tolkien explains in another place, the facsimiles have no connection with The Silmarillion, being in fact the beginnings of (versions of) the poem "Errantry and "The Adventures of Tom Bombadil". Those at the top and on the left are in the 'pointed' style; that on the right is in 'decorated verse-hand'. (Pictures, 48)

Transcribing the three poems is not unusually difficult. Needless to say, space does not permit presenting them all here. However, the "Bombadil" poem in 'pointed' style is short enough and sufficiently germane to our topic that it will bear transcription.

"Jhon" is a thirteenth century spelling used with reference to the flowering barberry. This turns out to be an extraordinary fact, one which further demonstrates Tolkien's affection for his Hobbits to the point of self-identification with them. Tolkien tells Deborah Webster that, except for size, he is himself a Hobbit (Letters, p.288-9) With the simple shift of the single letter "h" in his first given name, Tolkien not only made an academic appeal to an earlier century, one which he loved dearly, but he also gave himself a Hobbitish name similar to the majority of the inhabitants of the Shire had given names inspired by flowering plants. This philological tidbit is not the sort of thing that an author of Tolkien's temperament would bandish about in a garish manner. It is the sort of thing that, once pointed out, the good Professor would undoubtedly smile at and (in the fashion of a Louis Agassiz) say "That is good, that is good! But that is not all; go on. Look, look, look."[1] The end result is an intensive seeking out, a peering under every linguistic stone and brick, a questioning spurred by curiosity and the delight of finding the hidden. In short, a master teacher has duped a recalcitrant student into a fit of mind-developing research; painlessly, without tuition or threat of expulsion. This is no game, of course, unless all of true education is mere gamesmanship.

The oddity is easily seen in #10-#12; Tolkien's own first given name, John, is spelled "Jhon". An appeal to the Oxford English Dictionary reveals that...
There is much that could be said about the transcription, especially by comparison with the other two pieces. Leaving that aside, however, there are three oddities which substantiate the purposeful use of metathesis (as mentioned above) and the deliberate use of phonetics in writing to depict character.

The first involves the use of "w-following", which is generally used to form falling diphthongs. In #225, the diacritic is attached to the character transcribed as "s" in order to produce "sw" in "swallowing". The seemingly unusual usage is in the word "wallowing" (#197-#202) where the "w-following" diacritic is superscripted above the "l". It is obvious that this word is "wallowing" and is so written by Tolkien in his English text of the poem (Adventures, p. 11). However, the word "wallow" in the OED has several fourteenth century variants which have the "w" following the "l".

Again, the appeal to a beloved linguistic (and literary) time through a simple, yet academic way.

The second oddity has to do with "bubbling" (#217-#222) and "bubbles" (#276-279). Although the words are substantively the same, particularly in the root syllable, the root vowel is written differently in each and, thus, is to be pronounced differently; /u/ in #218 and /u/ in #277 (compare #146 and #254 for the phonetic value of #277). The problem is solved when it is noted that the word "bubbling" is in the voice of the narrator of the poem and "bubbles" is a quote from Goldberry's actual dialect. The third oddity has to do with Goldberry's dialect specifically. When she says "you" followed by a word with an initial stop, the vowel is /u/ (#291); when she says "you" followed by a word that is vowel initial, the vowel of "you" is /uw/ (#291). Who would have thought of that? Why, J.R.R. Tolkien, of course.

There is one seemingly inexplicable orthographic element in the transcription. In #184-#186, the word "hair" is phonetically represented. Character #186 is the character used for retroflex "r", but it is immediately followed by #187 which is a trilled "r". Why there are two "r"s is represented is difficult to say, as the OED provides no immediate answer. I might offer one speculation. "The Adventures of Tom Bombadil" was undoubted written to be read as a rather comic piece, one appealing to the ear of the audience (Ibid.). Tolkien says that the Hobbits were fond of strange sounding words and metrical tricks. The trilled "r" in context is at the very point where Goldberry is pulling Tom by the beard into the water, almost as if the long trill were meant to onomatopoeically represent Tom's startled consternation as he is suddenly and rudely awakened by his tumble. The trilled
expanding upon this idea, Lewis explains, "my children's stories are the real side-chapels, each with its own little altar." (p. 3) Exactly. These works are chapels which invite the reader to worship God who is revealed in them. And every one of the letters in Letters to Children is a little gift of the love of God, of His creation and of humankind, laid in the hand of each child. And since we have been told to become as little children, this book is a gift for the rest of us too.

Nancy-Lou Patterson

Switches and Ashes


As waspish a work as it has ever been my disagreeable task to review, this book seems bent upon presenting its readers with stones instead of bread. It must be written from some very specific point of view, and the author evidently desires to persuade his reader of the truth of that viewpoint. He is so very modest, not to say secretive, however, that one is left with the impression that his real goal is pure Lewis-bashing. I think the author wants to persuade us that it is totally irrational to believe in God for rational reasons. I am not quite sure what he thinks it is rational to believe in. Quite possibly he believes that it is in fact irrational to believe in God, or perhaps that only an irrational belief will do. In any event, he creates the impression that Lewis recommended Christian faith exclusively on the basis of human reason. To support this odd point of view he must of course leave out all of Lewis's mythopoeic works with the exception of his early and allegorical The Pilgrim's Regress, admittedly Lewis's least eirenic work. But even a reading confined to his apologetics does not confine Lewis to reasoned argument only. It is the image, breath-taking, heart-breaking, vision-making, which in the end persuades us: I concede that willingly. Not that Beversluis would approve of this, of course.

In the process of demolishing Lewis's arguments by means of every weapon available including liberal use of the argument ad hominem. (wielded like a club when reason won't do the trick), such personal experience of the divine is ruled out too. Nothing Lewis says is acceptable, it seems. So what is left to us? Are we really expected to think that only a faith entirely devoid of reason will do? Evidently Beversluis thinks so, and as his final prooftext he offers A Grief Observed. Nothing like hitting your opponent when he is down! Lewis himself, Beversluis says, found his reasoned faith wanting in the face of brute bereavement, when the beloved wife of his old age died of a cruel cancer after a brief but glorious remission. As it happens, I have read A Grief Observed. Its voice is absolutely authentic. This is the very cry that was uttered upon the cross, "My God, my God, why has thou forsaken me!" Reason is not enough when the dark night of the soul descends. But nor is anything else. In the end, nothing is enough, not reason, not mysticism, not faith, not even revelation. Only God is enough. Lewis never really told us anything else.

But he was an intellectual, and he had read the biblical injunction to love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength. And he was never ready while he lived to leave any of these faculties out. Would Beversluis have it otherwise? He doesn't tell us. You are cautioned hereabout with this book: it will very likely ruin your day, though the faith, including its reasoned elements will survive this author's efforts. On the other hand, maybe you like hair shirts!

Nancy-Lou Patterson

An Eirenic Spirit


In a book which offers exactly what it claims, Father Willis sets forth chapter by chapter the theological premisses which Lewis promulgated, on "God as God," "God as Creator," "Man's Problem: Man," "Jesus Christ and Redemption," "The Church and the Sacraments," "Scripture and Prayer," "Ethics," and "The Last Things." Readers will find this a clear, simply-expressed summary of formal Christian teaching as expounded by Lewis, together with a critique from a Roman Catholic viewpoint of a few areas of perceived deficiency in Lewis's presentation of these teachings. As a summary the book is fairminded; as a critique it will certainly be of interest to Roman Catholics. Surely nobody ought to be surprised to find that the Anglican Lewis is silent on the Primacy of the Pope and is unready to agree that what makes the Roman Catholic Church unique is its living magisterium speaking authoritatively on matters of faith and morals. (p. 77) Anglicans think that they — and many, many others — share in that "living magisterium." Naturally it would be impolite to dwell upon the point in a book with broad application; Lewis's genius at producing such works is attested by the fact that most of Father Willis's Pleasures Forevermore praises his efforts to teach faith. Lewis's appeal is deep as well as wide, and Willis presents it well. Lewis chose to teach in an eirenic spirit, and so has his commentator in this useful work.

Nancy-Lou Patterson

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"..." combined with a rising inflexion in the voice of the narrator would startle the audience as well, producing what the Hobbits would call "a fine jest". The similarity with the end of Frodo's rendition of "The Man in the Moon" (I, p. 172), I think, is no accident.

Again, we can justifiably ask ourselves the significance of all of this. We have demonstrated Tolkien's attention to detail before, but why buried deep in facsimiles of the written languages, cloistered away in an almost impenetrable places? The simplest view is that the detail shows up spontaneously, the product of an exacting mind. I for one, however, would like to believe that some of these delightful little gems are rewards, marks in some ethereal grade book, a soft and pleasant voice saying "Of course! Of course! But that is not all; go on. Look, look, look!"

NOTES