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Bilingual Puns in *The Lord of the Rings*

Abstract

Elvish/English homonyms are the basis of some obvious and less-obvious puns in Tolkien's work.

Additional Keywords

Tolkien, J.R.R.—Languages; Tolkien, J.R.R.—Use of language—Word play

correct. I did not realize how soon the manuscript was to go to press. I stopped to read MacDonald's *Phantastes* in the midst of Eilmann's book. As a result the corrections for the latter part of the book did not reach the editors before press time. But they will be corrected in the second edition.

Julian Eilmann and Friedehelm Schneidewind are the co-editors of Walking Tree's forthcoming *Music in Middle-earth and Beyond*.

NANCY MARTSCH is the editor of *Beyond Bree*, newsletter of the J.R.R. Tolkien Special Interest Group of American Mensa. A long-time Tolkien enthusiast, she has given talks and published articles on Tolkien, and co-edited *Tolkien in the New Century: Essays in Honor of Tom Shippey*.



BILINGUAL PUNS IN *THE LORD OF THE RINGS*

PIERRE H. BERUBE

AMONG MANY OTHER LITERARY DEVICES, Tolkien deploys a trope which must be unique to himself: the bilingual pun. An Elvish (Quenya or Sindarin) word evokes an English (or Old English) homonym.

In order for this to work, (1) the English word of the pair must resonate strongly with the reader, (2) the correspondence of sound must be close enough to be noticed by an ordinarily well-read person, and (3) the narrator must feign not to notice the resemblance. In addition, (4) the reader must be vain enough to suppose that he can detect resemblances where the author cannot. Finally, (5) the author must have on hand a proper etymology for the Elvish word, regularly deduced from its earliest root.

This technique can produce powerful effects, but it must be used sparingly. Each use detracts from the theory that the author is merely translating an existing text. Moreover, retrofitting such a pun into an existing text and language is a time-consuming job and can mean pages of rewriting.

Here are the cases that I have noticed; there must be others.

1. *Mordor/murder* and *Númenor/numinous*. These resemblances I take to be intentional. They are not very powerful, but they are not obtrusive either, and they help to set the atmosphere. Lewis approved of *Númenor*, or at least he borrowed it (misspelled) for his own use.

2. *Sauron/saurian* and *hobbit/rabbit*. These are red herrings, and were among the many false sources “detected” by the earliest reviewers. I don’t believe that Tolkien intended these pairings.

3. *Avallónë/Avalon* and *Atalantë/Atlantis*. Both are places in Númenor, from “The Akallabêth” in the *Silmarillion*. I was thunderstruck upon first encountering these. I saw at once that here was the explanation for both Tennyson’s Avalon and Plato’s Atlantis! Secondary belief solidified into primary belief the way supercooled water crystallizes into ice at the first tap. Until I got a grip on myself, I was ready to accept the *Red Book of Westmarch* as an actual historical document. I’m over it now, but I still think the resemblances are too great to be anything but intentional.

4. *Orthanc*. This is the only such pun acknowledged by Tolkien himself, who tells us (*LotR* III.8.555) that its name means both “Mount Fang” in Sindarin and “Cunning Mind” in Old English. You have to read Old English to appreciate this one, so I suspect JRRT was indulging a private joke here.

5. *Gnome/know*. “Gnome” had been intended to suggest the Greek word for knowledge, cognate with English “know.” To most, it suggested instead silly plaster statues. So Tolkien wisely replaced it with *Noldor*.

6. *Beleriand/Belerion*. I have not seen this mentioned by any critic, so I will expatiate a little. Pytheas of Massalia (*ie*, Marseilles) was the first Greek to travel to Britain (*circa* 240BC). His writings survive only in fragments quoted by later authors. Pytheas describes Britain as an island off the Atlantic coast of Europe, on the hither side of Ultima Thule. It resembles Sicily in that it is triangular. He identifies two of the corners as Kent and Orkney. The third corner, which he calls Belerion, must therefore be Land’s End (at the tip of Cornwall). This is where the tin mines are (see Carpenter 170).

Pytheas was interested in more and cheaper tin. Tin was needed to make bronze, and the only known source was the Cassiterides or Tin Islands. These were vaguely located as “beyond the Pillars of Hercules.” Nothing came of Pytheas’s voyage, except that for a few centuries the native name *Belerion* replaced the Greek *Cassiterides* in the vocabulary of Greek geographers. The existing trade route to Massalia was in the hands of Celtiberian middlemen, and consisted of pack trains across the neck of the Iberian Peninsula. This proved to be more cost-effective than the long sea voyage around the peninsula, especially when the Carthaginians reimposed their blockade of the Straits of Gibraltar following the First Punic War.

Belerion encompasses, or at least adjoins, the site of Tennyson’s Lyonesse, that “land of old upheaven from the abyss” (in *Morte Darthur*), then downheaven again. The Scilly Islands are supposed to be a remnant of lost Lyonesse.

Since Tolkien's Beleriand was also heaved down under sea, and since it had a history markedly resembling that of Cornwall, the name fits. Beleriand is larger than Tennyson's Lyonesse or Pytheas's Belarion, and occupies the west side of a continent instead of the west side of an island, but you can't have everything.

Beleriand was an early replacement for *Broceliande*, a name from the Arthurian cycle. It looks like Tolkien was determined on a pun at this point, but decided that an Arthurian referent was not appropriate. So he changed the name to refer to a much earlier period of history. It seems hardly worth the considerable trouble this must have cost him. *Broceliande* is well known to Arthurian enthusiasts (Lewis uses it), but "the drums and tramlings of three conquests" (Browne, chapter V) have effaced the name *Belarion* from modern maps (though it has since been revived as a character name in *Game of Thrones*). Hardly anyone would have recognized the pun.

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