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Abstract

Notes Tolkien's careful use of the archaic forms of English pronouns to indicate significance, relationship, or affection. He uses them "sparingly but effectively."

Additional Keywords

English language—Archaic words; Tolkien, J.R.R.—Use of language—Pronouns, archaic

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Archaic Pronouns in The Lord of the Rings

Betty J. Irwin

Part of the charm and value of Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* is the author's use of language. He creates specific languages for his distinctive peoples. He gives names to those of Middle-earth which are known to our culture: lembas, mallorn trees, ents; he uses archaic English words for items and ideas we know only from literature: corselet, worm (for dragon), minstrel; he uses Old English words: orthane, eord. All of these words give the book an archaic flavor making the prose difficult to read.

Tolkien adds one other linguistic touch which, for those who are aware of it, conveys attitudes of the speakers: he makes a clear distinction in the use of the archaic second singular thou, thy, thee, and the second person plural ye, paralleling the usage in English which began before Chaucer's time. As early as the thirteenth century the plural pronouns, ye, your, and you were used as singulars in a "ceremonious use... by persons of the upper class in addressing those who were their superiors in rank" (Moore, 151). Eventually the plural forms were used as singulars by most speakers, and the old singulars, thou, thy, thee, were by "the latter part of the sixteenth century... ordinarily used only in addressing those who were admittedly inferiors and in addressing familiarly equals with whom one was on intimate terms" (Moore, 151). Tolkien states that in the Westron language such a distinction was made. However, the "deferential" forms were not used in the Shire except as terms of "endearment." The th- forms were used in "ceremonious language" and "a change from you to thou, thee [was] sometimes meant to show, there being no other means of doing this, a significant change from the deferential, or between men and women normal, forms to the familiar" (III, Appendix F, II, p. 411, and note). (Because you and your have not changed in form for centuries, there is no way of knowing whether Tolkien is using an "old" form or a "modern" one. Therefore, these words are not included in the following discussion.)

Tolkien rarely uses the archaic ye in *The Lord of the Rings*, and when he does the intention seems to be for the speaker to show respect for the person spoken to. In two scenes, a person speaking to a group uses ye, the plural form. Galadriel gives gifts to the visitors at Lorien and says, "Here all ye Elves" (I, 392). Near the end of the Trilogy, Aragorn addresses the several peoples after he regains the throne as "... lords and knights and men of valour unashamed, kings and princes, and fair people of Gondor, and Riders of Rohan, and ye sons of Elrond" (III, 232). In both instances, the speakers use the correct plural form which also indicates the respect they have for the people being addressed.

Twice ye is used to remind men that they owe allegiance to a cause. Aragorn, speaking to the Dead, asks them, "Oathbreakers, why have ye come?" (III, 63). And when they assure him they have come to "fulfil [their] oath," Aragorn tells them that "when all this land is clean of the servants of Sauron, I will hold the oath fulfilled, and ye shall have peace and part forever" (III, 63). Similarly, Theoden in speaking to the men of his household encourages them to battle by telling them: "Oaths ye have taken: now fulfill them all..." (III, 110). In both of these scenes, the ye

form is used both as the plural and as a formal term suggesting the strength and responsibility which the warriors must exhibit in the approaching battle.

The most extensive use of the ye pronoun is in the eagle's song to Faramir and Eowyn. T.A. Shippey writes in his *The Road to Middle Earth* that Tolkien is using a Biblical style and an almost Biblical theme in this song (Shippey, 151 ff.). Shippey points out the parallels between the eagle's song and Psalms 33 and 24, showing how the eagle's song, like the two Psalms, states that evil will be defeated and good will triumph: "the Dark Tower is thrown down," "the Black Gate is broken," and the "King shall... dwell among [them]" (III, 241). And like the Psalms, the eagle's song uses ye: ye people (twice) and ye children, paralleling the usage in the Psalms: ye righteous and ye gates, etc.

Tolkien's use of the plural ye is effective for the simple reason that he does not use the form often; when he does use this archaic pronoun, the reader is alerted to some significant and serious event.

Tolkien uses the th- pronouns, thee, thou, and thy, with the variant meanings of the words as both familiar and insulting.

Several poems and songs include th- pronouns. The elves' song to Elbereth states: "Clear are thy eyes and bright thy breath" and concludes with "We still remember... /Thy starlight" and "We sing to thee." Yet in the same song are the words, "We see your silver blossom blown!" (I, 88-9) Tolkien seems to make no semantic distinction here between the archaic th- pronoun and the later you; th refers twice to physical aspects of Elbereth, while the other thy and your refer to what could be called her possessions.

In two other songs, not religious, thee is used. Sam's humorous song about Tom and Troll has the line, "Thy nuncle was dead as a lump o' lead..." to which Tom replies, "I don't see why the likes o' thee... should go makin' free with the shank... o' my father's kin." The Troll replies in troll-like cruelty, "I'll eat thee too, and gnaw thy shins... I've a mind to dine on thee now" (I, 219). Here the familiar th-pronouns fit a song of the ordinary folk.

An affectionate usage of th- pronouns is found in the Ents' song. In the last stanza appears the line, "I'll look for thee, and call to thee; I'll come to thee again!" This line is echoed in the Entwife's following stanza which is almost identical: "I'll look for thee, and wait for thee, until we meet again..." (II, 81). Here the familiar pronoun is used between husbands and wives, albeit treeish couples.

But humans also use the th- pronouns familiarly. Faramir's cry in his dream of his dead brother Boromir, "Where is thy horn? Whither goes thou? O Boromir!", shows the affectionate use of this pronoun by one brother to another (II, 274). Another such usage occurs when the Ranger Elrohir brings Aragorn a message from his father, who reminds Aragorn, "If thou are in haste, remember the Paths of the Dead." And at the same meeting, Halbarad gives to Aragorn the standard Arwen has made for her future husband,

with a message in which the thee indicates the affection she has for Aragorn: "Thee days now are short.... Therefore I send thee what I have made for thee..." (III, 48).

Galadriel, in her messages to Aragorn, Legolas, and Gimli, uses the th- pronouns either because she is their superior or because of the affection for them. She was, after all, "One of the Queens of the Noldorin High-elves of Eldamar during the Elder Days..." and at the time of the trilogy is the "mightiest of the remaining Eldar in Middle-earth..." (Tyler, 189). But she is concerned for the success of the Fellowship's quest, and her use of th- pronouns reinforces her concern for the personal safety of the individual. Her message to Aragorn is that "...dark is the path appointed for thee"; to Legolas she sends a warning that he will be content in forests "If thou hearest the cry of the gull on the shore"; and she assures Gimli that "wherever thou goes my thought goes with thee" (II, 106-7).

In one instance the th- pronouns are used in the humble plea of a woman to a man: Eowyn begs Aragorn to allow her to go with him to battle. "...[W]ilt thou go," she asks "...[W]ilt thou not let me ride with this company..." At Aragorn's refusal, she kneels saying, "I beg thee." Aragorn again refuses and uses only the more formal y- pronoun when he tells her that she cannot go without the permission of "your brother" (III, 58-9).

The most effective use of the th- pronoun is as an expression of contempt and anger. In Book VI, Aragorn tells of Sauron's rise in power, after which Isildur had challenged the "Men of the Mountains to fulfil their oath" but the latter refused. Isildur then addressed their king: "Thou shalt be the last king. And if the West prove mightier than thy master, this curse I lay upon thee and thy folk: to rest never until your oath is fulfilled" (III, 55). He changes to the plural y- pronoun when making reference to the Men as a people, but the four th- pronouns leave no doubt as to Isildur's attitude toward the king.

An even more angry and insulting usage of the th- pronoun is that of the Lord of the Nazgul who, astride the creature sitting on the body of Snowmane with Theodan beneath, replies to Dernhelm's challenge of "Begone" with "Come not between the Nazgul and his prey. Or he will not slay thee in thy turn. He will bear thee away in the houses of lamentation... where thy flesh shall be devoured, and thy shrivelled mind be left naked to the Lidless Eye." And to Dernhelm's challenge "Do what you will; and I will never hinder it, if I may," the Lord answers contemptuously, "...Thou fool. No living man may hinder me!" (III, 116).

A contrast in pronoun usage is seen in the dialogue between Gandalf and Denethor in the house of the dead, where Gandalf uses only y- pronouns while Denethor uses both the y- form and the th- forms. Denethor addresses the wizard: "Since when has the Lord of Gondor been answerable to thee?," "Didst thou think that the eyes of the White Tower were blind?," "For thy hope is but ignorance," "I have read thy mind...," "I will not be thy tool!," "Thou shalt not deny my will," etc. But Denethor also uses you in the same speeches: "For a little space you may triumph," "Do I not know that you commanded this halfling...," Gandalf, on the other hand, maintains a formal attitude throughout the encounter by using only you and your (III, 128-130).

As with his use of the archaic ye, Tolkien's use of the archaic th- pronouns is rare; in only nine scenes does he express an attitude by using these distinctive words. Tolkien, a master of his language, uses these archaic pronouns sparingly but effectively to add another dimension to his world of the past.

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