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Tolkien and Sanskrit (2016) by Mark T. Hooker

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Tolkien and Sanskrit: "The Silmarillion" in the Cradle of Proto-Indo-European, by Mark Hooker. [no place]: Llyfrawr, 2016. xxxvi, 196 pages. \$14.95 (trade paperback) ISBN 9781534610187.

Overview¹

Mark T. Hooker has published a series of essay collections on Tolkien and various subjects, often with a linguistic (especially onomastic) and folk-lore bent, which he treats in a series of short, often overlapping essay-chapters. His latest work takes on the seemingly unpromising subject of Tolkien and Sanskrit, an area which has so far remained relatively unexplored in Tolkien criticism. After a short defence of Tolkien's possible engagement with Sanskrit at Oxford (on which see further below) and an introductory glossary, Hooker treats a variety of subjects more or less related to his main theme. The bulk of the book (1-91) outlines a particular series of perceived onomastic and geographical links between the Indus river watershed and Tolkien's legendary Beleriand. This is followed by short discussions on a variety of Sanskrit terms for customs, cultural elements, and creatures, as well as Sanskrit grammar (93-133). A brief closing chapter (135-42) and one of the appendices (155-63) build on the preface (vi-viii) to hint at a possible investigation of Tolkien as a writer of Raj literature, though without developing this idea very greatly. Other appendices summarize other relevant topics in Sanskrit literature or Indian culture, and provide a tabular outline of the various proposed onomastic links with *The Silmarillion*.

The book as a whole is very readable, and introduces readers to a wide variety of potentially obscure subjects with an admirable clarity. As in his other writings, Hooker chooses to refer primarily to late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century works, in order to approach Tolkien's own intellectual context more closely, uncoloured by modern scholarly paradigms. In his specific analyses, Hooker's usual method is to try and establish links between real-world words or names (especially place-names) and terms in Tolkien's fictional writings. Both of these methodologies are in principle sound, and could potentially tell us much about how Tolkien did (or did not) engage with Sanskrit.

The potential value of this work is, however, often undermined by pervasive methodological flaws, which do not leave much room for confidence in many of Hooker's claims. While in some of his earlier writings Hooker concentrated on works Tolkien was reasonably likely to have known and read, and even to have engaged closely with (such as Sir John Rhys's *Lectures on Welsh Philology*, which Hooker treats extensively in his earlier *Tolkien and Welsh*), in this book

¹ I would like to thank David Doughan and Andrew Higgins for helpful comments on a draft of this review. The views, along with any errors, in here are of course solely my own.

Hooker relies heavily on books for which he gives no evidence of Tolkien's familiarity or interest. For instance, Hooker frequently quotes from Edward Balfour's *Cyclopædia of India and of Eastern and Southern Asia*, but I know of nothing to suggest that Tolkien read with this work (much less in the extremely close detail implied by Hooker). Balfour's name does not appear in the index to Scull and Hammond's *Reader's Guide*. It is of course difficult to say conclusively that Tolkien did *not* use the *Cyclopædia* as a source, but Hooker does nothing at all to explain to the reader why we should consider this book a plausible touchstone for Tolkien's engagement with India. Nonetheless, as irrelevant as Hooker's quotations can appear at times, they are often interesting in themselves, and most readers should be perfectly able to judge for themselves whether they do or do not see the resonances Hooker proposes.

A more serious problem is Hooker's approach to linguistics and philology. Since Hooker explicitly claims for himself authority as a linguist (ix-x, 1-2), and since many interested readers may not have a linguistic background with which to question many of Hooker's claims, it has seemed to me worthwhile to explain in a little more detail the shortcomings with what is in many ways the dominant methodology of this book. Since it is impossible to discuss in detail every dubious linguistic analysis or tenuous equation, I focus on Hooker's most prominent and purportedly secure links—the mythological depictions of the *Sapta Sindavaḥ* in early Sanskrit literature, which Hooker links to the Seven Rivers of Ossiriand—which readily illustrate most of the more problematic practices and assumptions which diminish the usefulness of Hooker's linguistic arguments.

Seven Rivers

Hooker describes his approach as the investigation of 'Tolkiennymy', in his words 'a branch of Tolkienian linguistics that studies the lexicology of place and personal names in Tolkien's *Legendarium* which are derived from, and often intended to be perceived as names in first-world languages' (xxxiii). For Hooker, this consists of identifying words in our primary world and in Tolkien's invented one, and establishing some sort of link of sound or meaning which is meant to be in some way significant. Successful examples of this type of study abound in Tolkien studies: for instance, reading the name *Frodo* as the Old English name *Fróda*, and linking it to the *Fróda* of *Beowulf* and to the Norse *Fróðafriþ*, 'the Peace of Fróði/Frodo', is justified and illuminating (Shippey 2003, 204-9).

The same is harder to say of Hooker's attempt to link the *Sapta Sindavaḥ*, the 'seven rivers' obliquely referred to numerous times in the *Ṛgveda*,² with the Seven

2 This is the more philologically precise transcription of the oldest Sanskrit text, which is more popularly known as the *Rig Veda* or *Rigveda*. The *ṛ* symbol refers to an 'r' sound forming its

Rivers of Ossiriand. There is, to begin with, a problem of what sources Hooker is using as his point of comparison. He himself hints at the problem:

The list of the Seven Rivers of the *Rig Veda* is a matter of considerable scholarly debate, but, for the purposes of this study, the Land of the *Sapta Sindhavah* is bounded by the River Sindhu on the west, and the trinity of Rivers Saraswati, Jamunā, and Ganges on the East, with the Rivers Satadru, Vipāśā, Asikni (Chandrabhaga), Parusni (Iravati), and Vitastā in between. (9; all *sic*)

Hooker does not mention that the exact names of the seven rivers are so debated because they are never once enumerated in the ancient Sanskrit literature. Rather, ‘seven rivers’ is used as a conventional term referred to in passing, without elaboration. A typical reference to the *sapta sindhavaḥ* comes from a famous hymn in the *Ṛgveda* to the god Indra:

[He is Indra] who, having slain the serpent released the seven streams,
who drove out the cows by the unclosing of Vala ...
(RV II.12.3, trans. Macdonell)

What specific ‘streams’ the Vedic poets may have had in mind—if any—is not to be found in Sanskrit texts, but rather in Victorian scholarly discussions about the Vedas. If Tolkien is making a reference, the immediate ‘source text’ must be something like Max Müller’s *A History of Ancient Sanskrit Literature*, where this famous philologist passingly locates the ‘Seven Rivers’ as ‘the Indus, the five rivers of the Panjāb and the Sarasvati’ (1859, 12). (Note that *panj-āb* means ‘five rivers’.) This indeed seems to be more or less the list that Hooker uses, except that for some reason he sets aside the Sarasvati—the most important Vedic river—in favour of the geographically removed Ganges and Yamunā (which he spells consistently in German fashion as Jamunā).

Hooker’s claim is that Tolkien modelled Ossiriand after this Vedic landscape, and that this is reflected both geographically and in the meanings of the river-names. The geographical correspondance is, at first glance, not very precise. The mere fact of seven rivers is interesting, though the number ‘seven’ has such a pervasive presence in Tolkien’s writings that its application here is not necessarily very distinctive. Looking at the details, the order of the rivers (according to the name equivalences Hooker advocates) is not very close on the two maps. Hooker argues that the order was closer in the draft map reproduced in *The Shaping of Middle-earth* (4), but even here the matches are not exact. Furthermore, the larger

own syllable (this can be approximated by an American pronunciation of the r’s in *grt*). It is perhaps the single most important document in Indo-European philology.

arrangement, as well as the order, does not match very well. In Ossiriand, the six tributary rivers all flow independently from the Ered Luin to join the Gelion directly. In the Panjab, the rivers merge one-by-one into each other: the Beas joins the Sutlej, which are joined by the confluence of the Ravi, the Chenab, and the Jhelum. Only after all five tributary streams have merged does their combined flow join with the Indus. Hooker's final river pair (which he counts as a single unit), the Yamunā and the Ganges, is not a part of this watershed at all.

The names of the rivers, which Hooker presents as the centrepiece of his argument, unfortunately correspond no better than do the rivers' courses. We can see most of the relevant problems by looking at the first of Hooker's proposed pairs: the Indus, which he says is the source of Tolkien's river Gelion. As Hooker notes, the name *Indus* is a somewhat altered form of the Sanskrit name *Sinduh*, which can be either a proper name for the Indus, or a common noun meaning 'river' (3, 10). Hooker tries to link this to the meaning of the name *Gelion*, which he incorrectly derives from the Eldarin root KEL- 'go run (especially of water)' (see *The Lost Road*, 363).

There are three problems with this identification. Firstly, even if Hooker was correct about the meaning of *Gelion*, the link with the Indus would not be very strong: *Gelion* would mean 'runner, running water', which is not the same as a generic word for 'river' being applied as a proper name, as is the case for the Indus. Secondly, Hooker plays fast and loose with Tolkien's carefully constructed Eldarin philology. To get from KEL- to *Gelion*, Hooker needs the initial **k* to turn into a *g*, which he says happened by 'appl[ying] standard Sindarin (and Welsh) lenition to the root KEL-' (10). The casual reader may be tempted to take him at his word, but in fact lenition of word-initial **k* to *g* would not be standard for either Sindarin or Welsh. In both languages, initial **k* would normally remain unchanged, except for being rewritten as *c* (a trivial matter of spelling, not pronunciation).³ Examples from Sindarin⁴ abound, such as Beren's epithet *Camlost* 'Emptyhand' (root KAB-). This approach is unfortunately very typical of Hooker's methodology, and he tends to regard Tolkien's Elvish derivations as unconstrained fancies where anything is possible—what matter is a little difference like that between *c* and *g*?—rather than as the rigorous philological construct Tolkien invented for himself. The third problem is that Tolkien himself did devise an etymology for *Gelion*: he includes it under the root GYEL-, where he seems to imply that it has the sense 'merry singer' (*The Lost Road*, 359).⁵

3 Lenition of **k* to *g* can happen, but only in very precise linguistic contexts (such as in the middle of the word between voiced sounds). At the beginning of a word, such lenition serves only as a grammatical marker in certain syntactic environments, not as a general sound change affecting the usual form of a word.

4 Or more properly for this stage of Tolkien's work on the language, Noldorin.

5 Tolkien's gloss of the name isn't entirely clear, and he may have imagined it as an Ilkorin

There seems to be nothing in the meanings ‘Merrily Singing River’ and ‘River River’ which would suggest a really compelling connection between Gelion and the Indus in Tolkien’s imagination.

Hooker does not stop there, but professes to find in the first syllable of *Gelion* linguistic resonances with a wide range of names and elements in Sanskrit and Indo-European. So he sees a connection with the Tibetan mountain name *Kailāśa* (which Hooker spells *Kailas*), with the (possible) Proto-Indo-European root **ghel* ‘to shine’, with Tolkien’s own distinct (and equally phonologically implausible) roots KAL- ‘shine’, KHEL- ‘freeze’, and KHELEK- ‘ice’, and finally implicitly with the Proto-Indo-European root **gel* ‘be cold’⁶ (11-12). It is typical of Hooker to cite a such wide range of forms which have only the vaguest phonological or semantic resemblance, and to offer them to the reader with little interpretation of what it all might mean. What is the citation of KHEL-, which would have become **hel-* in Noldorin, meant to tell us about the river name *Gelion*? At least to this one linguistically-minded reviewer, it does not seem that there *can* be much significance to most of these wide-ranging lists that feature frequently in the book.

Among the other six river names discussed by Hooker, which generally show similar problems, the third river of Ossiriand, *Thalos*, stands out as a particularly clear example of questionable methodology. Hooker links Tolkien’s *Thalos* to the Indian river he calls the *Satadru*⁷ (3, 19). Characteristically, Hooker dismisses Tolkien’s own gloss of *Thalos* as ‘torrent’ (from a root sense of ‘falling steeply downwards’) as ‘an afterthought’, and instead links the name to a group of Germanic words represented by Dutch *talloos*, German *zahllos*, and Danish *talløs*, all meaning ‘countless’ (19). This meaning would indeed have a very general overlap with the Epic Sanskrit form of the name, which looks as if it should mean ‘hundred-running, many-running’, though the resemblance is still somewhat vague. The phonological match of *Thalos* and *Talloos* is very imprecise: the Noldorin name begins with a fricative (the *th* here has the same sound as it does in English *thin*),⁸ has but a single *l*, and has a short *o* in the second syllable, while the Germanic words differ from these sounds to varying degrees.

More importantly, even if the sound-match of *Thalos* with *talloos* were absolutely perfect, such an equation privileges a proposed resemblance with some real-world term over Tolkien’s own meanings and etymologies. Tolkien sharply

name meaning ‘bright one’ adapted into Noldorin, where it was folk-etymologized as ‘merry singer’.

- 6 The source of English *cold* and Latin *gelū* ‘frost’ (which has made its way into English in borrowed words such as *gelato*).
- 7 Properly, *Śatadru*, *Shatadru*, which is the Epic Sanskrit form of Vedic *Śutudrī*. These are older names of the river now known as the *Sutlej*.
- 8 Hooker later refers to Tolkien’s use of *th* for, as he sees it, *t* as a ‘spelling trick’ (23), which does not seem to me an apt way to describe Tolkien’s approach to his philological creations.

criticized this type of practice in his draft letter to ‘Mr. Rang’ (letter #297 in the published collection):

It is therefore idle to compare chance-similarities between names made from ‘Elvish tongues’ and words in exterior ‘real’ languages, especially if this is supposed to have any bearing on the meaning of ideas in my story. To take a frequent case: there is no linguistic connexion, and therefore no connexion in significance, between *Sauron* a contemporary form of older **thaurond-* derivative of an adjectival **thaurā* (from a base √THAW) ‘detestable’, and the Greek *σαύρα* [saúrā] ‘a lizard’ (*Letters*, 380)⁹

These sentiments can be inferred from Tolkien’s practices and preferences elsewhere throughout his works, but it is convenient to have them stated so plainly by the man himself. Tolkien is clear that he does not play the kinds of linguistic games that Hooker attributes to him, nor does he have much sympathy or tolerance for them. His names do have meanings, and etymologies to work out, and sound-correspondences to see through, but these are all within his invented philological framework. This is unfortunately not the only time that Hooker engages in this un-Tolkienian mode of analysis.

There is no need to go over each of the other river names in turn, since Hooker analyses them using the same problematic approaches he applied to *Gelion* and *Thalos*. All of Tolkien’s seven Ossiriandic river names have fairly natural and straightforward Elvish names, the meanings of which correspond poorly, if at all, to Hooker’s Sanskrit river names. Hooker’s bold claim that ‘[t]he meanings of all seven names in both river systems are demonstrably the same’ (9) is simply unjustified, leaving no real support for his conclusion that ‘the [Indic] system of river names for Ossiriand was the conscious product of Tolkien’s imagination’ (28).

The point here is not to refute Hooker’s specific claim that Tolkien modeled the Sever Rivers of Ossiriand after (scholarly interpretations of) Vedic geography. I would even say that a very general form of this claim—that Tolkien may have gotten the phrase ‘seven rivers’ through a reference to Sanskrit materials—is potentially plausible, though hardly proven (the phrase ‘seven streams’ is a relatively late addition to Tolkien’s description of Beleriand, introduced during revisions in the 1930’s, and could perhaps have been prompted by Tolkien encountering a fortuitous phrase during his reading). The point is rather that the methodology used to link the Sanskrit and Tolkienian names is problematic, blurring the lines between actual languages and Elvish philology in a way that

9 Hooker is apparently aware of this letter, which he quotes from at the beginning of his study (2). Nonetheless, he consistently engages in analyses that are in all essentials identical to those criticized so sharply by Tolkien here.

Tolkien strenuously objected to, and seizing on chance resemblances—which are often philologically very imprecise—in a manner reminiscent of what Shippey has called ‘pre-philological’ thinking (2011, 10). This is the same approach that led scholars to once think that Greek *θεός* (*theós*) and Latin *deus* must be cognates, since they have vaguely similar sounds and both mean ‘god’, though this equation is wholly untenable from the perspective of comparative philology (there’s a good discussion of this by Meier-Brügger 2010, 187f.). Such methodologies have rightly been abandoned in real-world linguistics, and were roundly condemned by Tolkien; it is unfortunate that Hooker should attempt to reintroduce them to Tolkienian linguistics, and that he should claim linguistic credentials while adopting such an un-philological approach. The occasional isolated etymological fancy here and there is no serious issue, but Hooker places this method front and centre: the examples I have discussed here are entirely typical, and indeed are among those examples which Hooker considers the best and clearest links between India and Beleriand (and which are used to justify further, even more speculative equations, themselves arrived at using precisely the same pseudo-linguistic methodology).

These philological problems are particularly striking when set against the other approaches Hooker employs. He is clearly well-read, imaginative, and energetic, and he does a good job of communicating his enthusiasm for his subject matter to his readers. Even with the pervasive issues of linguistic methodology discussed in this section, his books remain potentially informative and suggestive of innovative angles of research. His discussion of Tolkien’s *Maia*¹⁰ in the context of Sanskrit *māyā* ‘mysterious power’ (126-28), is intriguing, for instance, especially in light of Tolkien’s own considered opinions on the nature of ‘magic’ (cf. *Letter* #155). This is speculative, but interesting, and not immediately undermined by linguistic improbabilities. Furthermore, Hooker’s treatment of the importance of Sanskrit as a root-based language is very well-founded, and though he perhaps focuses too specifically on Monier-Williams’s dictionary, the general importance of Sanskrit in shaping philologists’ approach to Indo-European (and in Tolkien’s case, Eldarin) grammar and etymology is certainly immense (131-33). If Hooker had chosen to focus his energies more along these lines, and less on the pursuit of fanciful non-etymologies, this book could have been an outstanding foundation for understanding Tolkien’s potential engagement with the ‘queen’ of Indo-European languages.

A Road to Sanskrit?

10 This word is another late entry into the *Legendarium*, first arising during revisions following the completion of *The Lord of the Rings* (*HoMe X*, 56, note 4).

Although I have been rather hard on Hooker for his extensive use of poor linguistic methodologies—though I hope I have not been unfair—discussion of Tolkien and Sanskrit more generally seems long overdue. Building on Hooker’s initial justifications for this book, it is perhaps worthwhile to spend a little time sketching out what Tolkien’s relationship with Sanskrit might have been like, and pointing the way to topics that could bear further investigation.

Hooker confidently assumes Tolkien’s ‘knowledge’ of Sanskrit at the beginning of the book:

Commentators with a literary background insist that there is no evidence of Tolkien’s knowledge of Sanskrit (C&G ii, 461), while commentators with a linguistic background see a knowledge of Sanskrit as implicit in the course of study that Tolkien followed at Oxford. Tolkien was on the Language side of the English School at Oxford, where he took Comparative Philology as a special subject for Honour Moderations (C&G ii, 758).

Sanskrit is *de rigueur* for any serious philologist interested in etymologies like Tolkien . . . (1)

He goes on to note that Tolkien owned the second volume of Thumb’s *Handbuch des Sanskrit*, which contained texts and a glossary (2), though it is not clear that Tolkien actually read or used the book (5-6, note 3). Hooker also observes that Tolkien included references to Sanskrit words in his etymological entries for the *New English Dictionary* (2).

Hooker provides one further piece of evidence, arguing that:

Tolkien’s knowledge of Hindu myth is demonstrated in a memoir by a student of Tolkien’s, in which the student [B.S. Benedikz] records that Tolkien enjoined his students to compare the *Mahábhárata* [sic¹¹] . . . with that English masterpiece of the Middle Ages, *The Pardoner’s Tale*, one of Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales*. (2)

11 Hooker has an unfortunate habit of (inconsistently) symbolizing Sanskrit long vowels with an acute. While this use of the acute is well-established for some languages, such as Icelandic and Irish, and was favoured by Tolkien for Old English, it is not appropriate for Sanskrit, where the acute has a distinct traditional use (at least among philologists, for whom it is often of immense comparative interest) in marking the location of the accent. Sanskrit long vowels are more properly indicated by a macron (or, much less commonly, a circumflex). Perhaps in some cases Hooker is merely following the usage of a referenced source, but he sometimes even introduces acutes into quotations from authors who used macrons to indicate vowel length.

If Tolkien actually claimed such a connection between the *Mahābhārata* and *The Pardoner's Tale*, he was almost certainly mistaken. I am inclined to think that the student has misremembered, and that Tolkien was in fact referring to the one of the early Buddhist *Jātaka* tales, or 'Birth Stories' (remembrances of past lives), written in the Pāli¹² language. This is not Tolkien's own discovery, however, but a connection made by W.A. Clouston in one of his contributions to the influential *Originals and Analogues of some of Chaucer's Canterbury Tales* (from 1888). It seems to me very likely that Tolkien did read the translation (by C.H. Tawney) included in this book, and was understandably struck by the long and wide-ranging history of this tale. But this gives us no evidence that Tolkien engaged with the Pāli original in any deep way—and doesn't get us to Sanskrit in any case.

So what can we appropriately infer about Tolkien's relationship with Sanskrit? For a start, it is not helpful to frame the question in a binary fashion, as whether Tolkien 'knew' the language or not. The comment by Scull and Hammond criticized by Hooker actually reads, 'nor is there any evidence that [Tolkien] was *expert* in Sanskrit . . .' (461, emphasis mine), which seems to be perfectly correct. Hooker is certainly right that Sanskrit is an unavoidable point of reference for a comparative philologist. Tolkien would certainly have been familiar with many of the basic sound changes in Sanskrit prehistory (which are, for the most part, of a fairly straightforward sort, and it is not difficult for a philologically-minded student to learn the essentials without mastering Sanskrit as a whole). He may also have known bits of Sanskrit morphology from their use in standard philological handbooks: the common Homeric second declension genitive singular ending *-oio* (*-oio*) is, for instance, routinely illustrated with reference to the equivalent Sanskrit ending *-asya* (both from Proto-Indo-European **-osyo*). Such a general acquaintance would have been more than enough to allow Tolkien to draw on philological scholarship to cite Sanskrit forms correctly in etymologies, but it does not amount to expertise in the language. There is not the slightest shred of evidence that Tolkien ever sat down and read stretches of the *Ṛgveda* or the *Mahābhārata*, or even of the excerpts in Thumb's *Handbuch*, or that he would have been capable of doing so without considerable further study of the language.

Does this mean that we should avoid discussing Tolkien and Sanskrit altogether? Probably not, but it does imply that we should look less to the original texts in that language, and more to the presence of Sanskrit in the philological scholarship and popular imagination of Tolkien's day. There is probably a good case to be made that Tolkien's creative mind did draw on Sanskrit, both for

12 Pāli is another classical language of India. It is related to Sanskrit, but somewhat more innovative in linguistic structure. It might be described as Sanskrit's linguistic niece.

philological facts of a fairly general sort, and for inspiration from the romanticized image of Sanskrit in the European imagination around the turn of the previous century.

Hooker has already hinted at some of the philological connections by emphasizing the importance of Sanskrit's root-based grammar. This type of grammar can be illustrated with the Sanskrit root $\sqrt{bhṛ}$, which means 'to carry, bear', but is not found as such in the language (which is why this abstract form is cited with a radical symbol, perhaps more familiar to most people as standing for a mathematical, rather than a linguistic root). A root can be modified by vowel alternations and affixes in order to create a wide variety of words of various parts of speech: so from $\sqrt{bhṛ}$ Sanskrit has a common verb *bhāráti* 's/he carries', a derivative verb with a causitive sense *bhāráyati* 's/he makes someone carry', and various nouns such as *bhāráḥ* 'burden'. Tolkien's familiarity with root structures is clear, as Hooker shows, and is apparent from the most cursory glance at the *Etymologies*, the earlier *Qenya Lexicon* in *Parma Eldalamberon* 12, or the various later notes collected as *Eldarin Roots and Stems* in *Parma Eldalamberon* 17. It should be said that Tolkien's engagement with roots is not necessarily a sign of *direct* influence from Sanskrit upon him. Philologists in general had adopted a root-based approach for the analysis of Indo-European languages in general, including Greek and Germanic (where we find the cognate of $\sqrt{bhṛ}$ in such formations as Old English *beran* 'to carry', *byrðen* 'burden', and *-bora* 'carrier, bearer'). Tolkien's roots in fact bear the most direct resemblance to reconstructed Proto-Indo-European roots, the kind most frequently cited in philological scholarship. In his Elvish 'dictionaries', he often provides lists of asterisk roots, the basic meaning-elements of an unrecorded proto-language of the distant past. This is somewhat different from Sanskrit, where the root analysis is not meant to be historical, but a reflection of how the living language still formed words. Tolkien could have presented Quenya, at least, in much the same way—roots can be regarded as very much a currently active part of its grammar—but he chose instead to take a historical, philological approach. The influence of Sanskrit on any root-based grammar of any sort is strong, but in Tolkien's case it is probably mediated through the (Sanskrit-influenced) reconstruction of Proto-Indo-European.

A more direct link, though Hooker does not mention it, may be found in some of Tolkien's invented scripts, especially the various incarnations of the Alphabet of Rúmil (see *Parma Eldalamberon* 13, and Björkman 2007). The arrangement of a series of consonantal characters along a continuous line, with vowels marked by diacritics, and the ability to leave the most basic vowel *a* unexpressed, are all striking features that unite Tolkien's *Sarati* and the *devanāgarī*, the Indian script traditionally used to write Sanskrit. Tolkien needn't have been exceptionally well-acquainted with Sanskrit to be inspired by the aesthetics of the *devanāgarī* and

some of its more salient structural features.

There may well be further echoes of Sanskrit Tolkien's philological invention, linguistically as well as orthographically. It is curious that Tolkien opens his *Qenya Lexicon* with an entry for 'avesta' (self-referentially meaning 'opening, beginning, overture'), which, perhaps coincidentally, is the name for the main collection of Old Iranian¹³ literature, in a language very closely related to Sanskrit and strongly associated with it in comparative philology (29). A more secure reference comes in Tolkien's *Comparative Tables*, published in *Parma Eldalamberon* 19, where he mentions (among mostly European references) that some Avarin groups of Elvish languages (apparently specifically eastern dialects) 'seem anciently to have reduced all varieties of \check{e} , \check{a} , \check{o} > \check{a} ' (*Parma Eldalamberon* 19, p. 26). This highly striking merger of all non-high vowels as *a* is one of the most prominent and distinctive changes affecting the Indo-Iranian branch of Indo-European, of which Sanskrit is the oldest and best-known representative (also compare Tolkien's note on Sangahyanda in *Parma Eldalamberon* 17, p. 116, where he obliquely alludes to the effects of the same sound change).

On a broader cultural level it may be worth asking whether Tolkien's portrayal of the Elves in Valinor, and especially the Noldor, owes anything to Victorian and Edwardian mythologies about Sanskrit and Proto-Indo-European. The name *Sanskrit* (*samskṛtam*), for instance, means 'perfected (speech)', and it may be possible to see a resonance in this (and related ideas about the 'perfection' of Proto-Indo-European) with the conception of the Noldor refining their language during a long period of gestation in Eldamar before bursting forth upon the world. This is of course only the vaguest of suggestions, but it might be interesting to undertake a more extensive review of Victorian and Edwardian romanticizations of Sanskrit.

Really deep and fundamental echoes of Sanskrit are perhaps not likely to be forthcoming in Tolkien's works. His central preoccupations were in Europe, especially the Germanic and Celtic branches of Indo-European (along with Latin and Greek, and to a lesser extent the Baltic languages and the non-Indo-European Finnish). Sanskrit simply has not left the same impression as these language groups (and their literatures) in Tolkien's known writings, and it is unlikely that it had a comparable impact on his imagination. Anyone attempting to work with Tolkien and Sanskrit should acknowledge, before anything else, that they are moving around the edges of Tolkien's thought. But granting this, there may nonetheless be a number of things of value to find, and I do hope that we see follow-up studies, building on Hooker's beginning so as to give us a clearer view of Tolkien's relationship with Sanskrit.

13 The language of these texts is accordingly called Avestan. Hooker refers to this language twice, once by this name (93) and once by the now-outdated term *Zend* (117), without making it clear that these are the same language.

Summary

Despite its many philological problems, Hooker's book is an entertaining introduction to a subject that could potentially be explored much further. Readers, especially non-linguists who may be tempted to regard Hooker as an authority, should approach all of his philological claims with caution, and substantial portions of the book depend on highly dubious ways of approaching Tolkien's linguistic inventions. The remainder, however, gives us the beginnings of a close study of the ways that Tolkien might have engaged with Sanskrit, and suggest various ways this connection could be developed. Perhaps the most intriguing part of Hooker's work is only sketched out in his brief discussions of Tolkien as a writer of Raj literature. Recent Tolkien scholarship, such as Shippey (2000) and Fimi (2008), has increasingly highlighted the ways in which Tolkien was shaped by the literary and cultural influences of his time. Both Sanskrit philology and Raj literature played important roles in Victorian and Edwardian England, and by drawing attention to these Hooker does a service to those interested in Tolkien.

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