Elvish Practitioners of the 'Secret Vice'

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Amongst the many pages of what has been collectively called Tolkien's legendarium, there are several texts which offer historical and philological descriptions of the languages of Arda set in the transmission framework Tolkien invented to link his unique mythology and world-building to a lost English tradition. Some of these works like 'The Lhammas', 'The Etymologies' and 'Quendi and Eldar' are fairly descriptive texts about the languages. If we expand this to the vast philological treasure trove of Tolkien's papers on the languages (which are still in the process of being edited and published) we also find descriptive name lists, grammars and phonologies that are also set in Tolkien's transmission framework.

However, there is one rather under-explored document dating from the late 1940's-early 1950's [1] in which Tolkien again uses the transmission framework to focus not so much on the descriptive 'what' of his languages, but rather to explore the actual 'how' - the art, skill and craft of language invention. As this paper explores, in composing this text Tolkien seems to be mythically reflecting some of the key ideas and thoughts that he first explored in his 29 November 1931 talk to the Samuel Johnson Society of Pembroke College Oxford 'A Secret Vice'. Not surprisingly in his mythic reflection of the craft and skill of language invention, Tolkien casts his first and, as Dr. Dimitra Fimi has explored in her 2010 *Tolkien, Race and Cultural History From Fairies to Hobbits,* idealized race of the Elves in

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I am grateful to Dr. John Rateliff for pointing to me this dating based on his current work with the Tolkien manuscripts in The Tolkien Collection at Marquette University.

the role of the true and good language inventors– indeed the Elves are Tolkien's idealised practitioners of, as we will see, a not so Secret Vice.

This text is called *Dangweth Pengolod* which is Sindarin for 'The Answer of Pengolod' with the full title of the text being ' Dangweth Pengoloð: the Answer of Pengolod to Aelfwine who asked him how came it that the tongues of the Elves changed and were sundered' Tolkien composed this text in the late 1940's – early 1950's and Christopher Tolkien published it with notes in the last volume of *The History of Middle-earth* series, *The Peoples of Middle-earth*. In his introduction, Christopher gives the editorial history of this text; indicating that his father wrote two versions of this work. The first of these he describes as 'a good clear text' while the second version he describes as 'a superb illuminated manuscript' (*Peoples*, p. 397). Indeed, Christopher suggests that the importance of this work to his father is signified by his re-writing of this in a manuscript of such elegance. In a newspaper from January 1960, in which Tolkien enclosed several language related essays from this time, Tolkien wrote 'Two items from the lore of Pengoloth, and also Danbeth to question How/Why did Elvish language change?' On a cardboard folder enclosing this newspaper Tolkien also wrote 'Pengoloth items. '*Manen lambe Quendion ahyanne*' which is Quenya for 'How did the language of Elves Change?' As the title indicates this text is a report of an answer to a question by Aelfwine, Tolkien's Anglo-Saxon mariner who formed part of Tolkien's enduring transmission framework. The Sindarin word 'Dangweth' literally means 'back-report' ('Dan' = back in return, against / 'Gweth' 'report) and there is evidence in the manuscript that Tolkien thought about changing this word to 'Danbeth' meaning again 'back in return/against and 'beth' being the mutated form of 'peth' meaning 'word' (which he actually wrote on the 1960 newspaper). The specific Sindarin word *Dangweth* seems to suggest that this is more than just a simple 'word back' to an answer but a reply giving new information.

The responder to this question is the Elvish lore-master, or lambengolmor, Pengolod (or Pengoloth – Tolkien alternated his name several times in different texts. With Pengolod, Tolkien invented a character who has a tradition and pedigree that gives him the authority to answer Aelfwine's question. In the legendarium, Pengolod is said to have written or compiled several key historical and linguistic works including 'The Annals of Valinor and Beleriand', 'The Lhammas or Account of the Tongues', the work on Elvish telepathy 'Osanwe-Kenta' and 'Eldarin Hands, Fingers and Numerals'. In the Anglo-Saxon version of the 'Annals' which Aelfwine is said to have translated from the Elvish, Pengolod is known as *úþwita* which according to Boswell and Toller means 'a person distinguished for wisdom or learning in general or in a special branch, a philosopher or scribe'. When Tolkien resumed his work on the 'Silmarillion' materials after finishing *The Lord of the Rings*, he used Pengolod to tell Aelfwine the new version of *The Ainulindale* which concludes with a question and answer session about the Valar; echoing some of the earliest link texts Tolkien wrote for *The Book of Lost Tales* when Eriol asks the Elves questions and they respond with a lost tale In a late note Pengolod is called 'the greatest of the Lambengolmor before the End of the Eldar days, both by talent and opportunity, since he himself had known Quenya (Vanyarian and Noldorin) and Telerian and preserved in memory remarkable even among the Eldar the works especially on etymology of the earlier loremasters (including Fëanor); but he also had as an Exile been able to learn Sindarin in its varieties, and Nandorin and had some acquittance with Khazdul in its archaic form as used in the habitations of the Dwarves in Ered Lindon.' (VT 48, p. 6). This reputation is underscored by his name which in a note in his 'Words, Phrases and Passages in *The Lord* of *the Rings*' (published in *Parma Eldalamberon* 17) Tolkien suggests comes from the original uses of the root NGOLDO meaning 'lore-master, sage' and indicates that Pengoloth signifying 'teacher, sage, doctor, also used as title or name' (137).

So clearly Pengolod, a good alias (of many) for Tolkien in his world-building, was very qualified to answer the question that the mortal Aelfwine put to him. And indeed the first line of the response Pengolod gives to Aelfwine is very much in the mode of a how a learned lore-master, or Professor like Tolkien, would respond to such a question -

Now you question me, Aelfwine, concerning the tongues of the Elves, that you wonder much to discover that they are many, akin indeed and yet unalike, for seeing that they die not and their memories reach back into ages long past, you understand not why all the race of Quendi have not maintained the language that they had of old in common still one and the same in all their kindreds. (*Peoples*, p. 396)

Like a good Professor, Pengolod sets up the argument by restating Aelfwine's question which has within it a key problem, or crux, that Tolkien seems to be exploring through this text. The fate of the Elves in Arda was deemed that they were to live for a vast span of time only to either fade and go into the West or be killed in battle and return to the hall of Mandos and, depending on which phase of the mythology we are applying, be re-born. At 'The Council of Elrond' Frodo marvels at Elrond's memory of the events of the end of the First Age of the world when 'Thangorodrim was broken and the Elves deemed that evil was ended for ever' - when Frodo asks Elrond 'You remember' Elrond responds 'But my memory reaches back even to the Elder Days. Earendil was my sire, who was born in Gondolin before the fall'. Elvish longevity though posed a bit of a conceptual problem for Tolkien when it came to language – if Elves lived such a long time what happens to the language that is spoken in the course of their life? Given the Elves span of time in the world would it be reasonable to expect that the Elvish language that Elrond spoke as a youth at the Havens of Sirion late in the First Age to be the exact same Elvish language he spoke at The Council of Elrond in the Third Age of Middle-earth? Could a language sustain such a long period of time and remain the same in morphology, phonology and grammar – what

Pengolod in his response characterises as 'the language that they had of old in common still one and the same in all their kindreds'.

Of course, Aelfwine is asking this question from his mortal perspective. Given the short time men spend in Arda before going beyond the circles of the world where, as Aragorn says, 'there is more than memory', Men clearly perceive the Elves as living forever. But Pengolod quickly corrects Aelfwine by stating that all things in Eä (the world that is) change for they are subject to time. Even the Valar – those Ainur who chose to enter into Eä – are subject to time since they entered into Eä of their own free will. So clearly language, like everything else, changes as it is bound to time in Arda. In the next part of the response Tolkien, through Pengolod, explores how the Elvish languages actually do change and here he starts to build his associations with the Elves as the true, indeed idealised, practitioners of the art and skill of language invention which he had characterised in 1931 as his 'Secret Vice'.

In Pengolod's response, he does this by differentiating this process of language change among Men and Elves. For Men it is said 'their elders teach their children their speech and then soon depart'. This results in the children having only 'cloudy memories' of the past language and results in language change among men being 'swift and unrestrained'. This concept can be seen in embryo in a passage from *The Book of Lost Tales* when that other Elf lore-master, Rumil, describes the tongues of men as 'I have worried at whiles even over the tongues of Men, but Melko take them! They shift and change, change and shift' (LT1, 47). In his response Pengolod says 'For men change their old words for new, and their former manner of speaking for another manner, in their own lifetimes. Men's language change as part of the changefulness of Eä – from the nature of speech.'

But according to Pengolod, the Elves take a much more active part than Men in shaping the change of their languages.   Indeed it is the Elves' treatment of language as an artifice or craft that encourages them 'by will and design' to change the language themselves and not wait or be subject to the changefulness of time. Pengolod states that the Elves are more aware than Men of language itself. This perception is compared to a silversmith who is more aware of the tools and vessels he uses daily or a weaver regarding the texture of his garments. This awareness motivates a focus on language and change in language among the Elves for they are skilled and eager in art and ready to make things new, both for delight to look on, or to hear, or to feel, for daily use – 'be it in vessels or raiment or in speech.' For the Elves language is an art and the making of language is a craft and a skill. In a note to his linguistically focused essay 'The Shibboleth of Feanor' Tolkien characterised the Elvish languages as 'in a sense all Eldarin languages were 'invented' languages, art-forms, not only inherited but also material engaging the active interest of their users and challenging awarely their own taste and inventiveness.' At the start of his 'A Secret Vice' Tolkien states that he might have called his paper a plea for a New Art and later characterizes language invention as a higher art. This awareness leading to change can be seen in 'The Lhammas' or 'The Account of the Tongues' where the Elves are said to have learnt the speech of the Valar and immediately set about changing it – they 'softened the sounds and added many words to it of their own liking and devices from the beginning. For the Elves love the making of words and this has ever been the chief causes of the change and variety of their tongues.' In another text 'Of Dwarves and Men' Tolkien wrote that the Tongue of the Eldar change mostly by design (*Peoples*, p. 305). Pengolod put this simply in the 'Dangweth' as 'For to the Eldar the making of speech is the oldest of arts and the most beloved.'

And the Elves are not only language inventors – they are idealised language inventors possessing a vast and impressive knowledge of their language.

Pengolod states that the Eldar know their tongue, not word by word only, but as a whole; they know even as they speak not only of what sounds is that woven which they are uttering, but of what sound and sound-patterns is their whole speech at one time composed. The Elves also follow a process of word invention that is clearly in line with Tolkien's thoughts on creating a language; reflecting his thoughts on phono-aesthetics, structure and the coherence and consistency of invented word forms. The Elves are literally, and not surprisingly, true philologists (lovers of language). As Tolkien stated in 'A Secret Vice' 'Few philologists even are devoid of the making instinct.' Pengolod characterises the specific phonetic element in the Eldar's changing of their language as altering the sounds of their speech at whiles to other sound that seemed to them more pleasant and adds in a note that the Eldar being skilled in craft are not wasteful nor prodigal to small purpose, admiring in a tongue rather the skilled and harmonious use of a few well balanced sounds than profusion ill-ordered.'   In 'A Secret Vice' Tolkien extolled the pleasure in contemplating the relationship between sound and notion….. 'a question of taste; a satisfaction of personal pleasure, a private sense of fitness.' (SV, p. 7)

Moreover, the changes the Elves make are not 'at haphazard' (a term Tolkien uses to describe change of language among Men) but as Pengolod relates part of a philological process.

therefore none among the Eldar would change the sounds of some one word alone, but would rather change some one sound throughout the structure of his speech; nor would he bring into one word only some sound or union of sounds that had not before been present, but would replace some former sound by the new sound in all words that contained it – or if not in all, then in a number selected according to their shapes and other elements, as he is guided by some new pattern that he has in mind. (*Peoples*, p. 400)

Here Pengolod reflects Tolkien's own thoughts on sound-symbolism and the importance of invented languages having sound laws that create an aesthetic sound system. Also the craft and skill of language invention is again emphasised by comparing this act to how 'a weaver might change a thread from red to blue, either throughout his web, or in such parts thereof as were suitable to the new pattern, but not randomly here and there nor only in one corner.' Tolkien here is emphasising the importance of coherence and consistency in language invention. This was a point he made in the often quoted 1937 letter Tolkien wrote to his publishers in response to an external reviewer, Edward Crankshaw's, comment that his Silmarillion materials contained 'eye-splitting Celtic names' to which Tolkien replied that his nomenclature 'were coherent and consistent and made upon two related linguistic formula so that they achieve a reality not achieved to my feeling by other name inventors (Swift and Dunsany!) (*Letters*, p. 26).

But perhaps most interesting is Pengolod's comments on how the Elves develop their language which he contrasts with the practice of Men.

A Man may indeed change his spoon or his cup at will, and need ask none to advise him or to follow his choice. It is other indeed with words or the modes and devices of speech. Let him bethink him of a new word, be it to his heart howsoever fresh and fair; it will avail him little in converse, until other men are of like mind of will receive his invention (399-400)

However, invention and development among the Elves appears to be a more communal activity.

among the Eldar there are many quick ears and subtle minds to hear and appraise such inventions. Such inventions he states may prove only pleasing to a few, or possibly one alone, but many others are welcomed and pass swiftly from mouth to mouth, with laughter or delight or with solemn thought.

Pengolod here is indicating that the Elves engage in a social form of language invention as a community and not as a private or 'secret' practice. There are several places in 'A Secret Vice' where Tolkien laments the fact that there is not a more open or communal aspect to language invention. In one place, he states that language inventors are 'all so shy and ashamed (crossed out) bashful that they hardly ever show their works to one another, so none of them know who are the geniuses at the game and who are the splendid 'primitives''. In another part of his paper Tolkien states 'For though I have made much of the secrecy of the practice of this art, it is an inessential, and an accidental product of circumstances. Individualistic are the makers, seeking a personal expression and satisfaction, they are artists and incomplete without an audience. Though like this or any other society of philologists they may be aware that their goods have not a wide popular appeal or a market, they would not be averse to a (sympathetic) competent and unbiased hearing in camera.' (*SV*, p. 11) And later in 'A Secret Vice' before unveiling his own specimens of Elvish poetry to an audience Tolkien states 'I can sympathize with the shrinking of other language-makers, as I experience the pain of giving away myself' (*SV.* p. 27) The Elves moulding or shaping of their language in a community also harkens back to some of Tolkien's earliest experience with language invention when he helped invent Nevbosh 'the new nonsense' language with his cousin in 1906-7. Tolkien characterised Nevbosh as 'it was intended in theory for speaking and writing, between one person and another. It was shared, each element had to be accepted by more than one to become current, to become part of Nevbosh at all.' (*SV*, p. 18) Of Nevbosh, Tolkien also states - 'Only the handing on to a wider group, going on during a long time could have produced in it some of these effects of partially achieved and overlaid symmetries which mark all the traditional human tongues.' (18) In one of the manuscript notes to 'A Secret Vice' Tolkien wrote 'individuals are more ingenious than the 'folk' - they could invent a better language. But the folk wins on wider experience' (97) In his primary world 'A Secret Vice' Tolkien wished

that there was a hierarchy of hidden craftsmen who invented languages and in his own secondary world he mythically fulfilled this wish by creating such a community of learned lovers of language who worked together 'by will and design' to invent and develop their own Elvish languages.

Therefore, in the *Dangweth* of Pengolod Tolkien is using his narrative framework to mythically reflect what an idealised environment for language invention would be. Given the fate of the world, language must change and be sundered and indeed both these elements of language were of great importance and interest to Tolkien; in many ways they were the motor for the invention and development of his nexus of languages. Tolkien created a race of beings, the Elves, who are both completely knowledgable and, perhaps even more importantly, eager to engage and actively invent, shape and mould 'by will and design' their language which they consider an art, craft and skill. Tolkien's Elves suggests what the Athenian philosopher Hermogenes states in one of the earliest dialogues on language and language invention - the 5th century B.C.E. Socratic dialogue of Plato's *Cratylus* - when he says that giving of names can be no such light manner or the work of light or chance persons.

And the Elves do this in a community, a fellowship if you will, of language inventors that Tolkien hoped was out there among the many shy or bashful practitioners of his own passionate hobby so that these works could be evaluated and develop in a community. And finally there might be one other element of wish fulfilment at work here. In 'A Secret Vice' Tolkien characterised language invention as 'an art for which life is not long enough' (11). Perhaps by giving the Elves a much longer life than us mere mortals he was also giving them the time needed to invent a language, or nexus of languages, that would surpass 'one real masterpiece, plus at most a few brilliant sketches' - perhaps a perfect art-language that that the Eldar developed together and would use at the end of time in the

Second Music of the Ainur when, as Tolkien wrote, every participant will fully understand their intent and be in harmony with the others – true language inventors all.

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