

2023

Epistolary Glossopoesis Tolkien's Letter Writing and Language Invention

Andrew Higgins

Independent Scholar, asthiggins@me.com

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholar.valpo.edu/journaloftolkienresearch>



Part of the [Other English Language and Literature Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Higgins, Andrew (2023) "Epistolary Glossopoesis Tolkien's Letter Writing and Language Invention," *Journal of Tolkien Research*: Vol. 18: Iss. 2, Article 6.

Available at: <https://scholar.valpo.edu/journaloftolkienresearch/vol18/iss2/6>

This Conference Paper is brought to you for free and open access by ValpoScholar. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of Tolkien Research by an authorized administrator of ValpoScholar. For more information, please contact a ValpoScholar staff member at scholar@valpo.edu.

This paper was given when I was the Guest Speaker at The Annual Meeting of the UK Tolkien Society on 13 April 2024.

Please note all references *Letters* is from *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien Revised and Expanded Edition* (HarperCollins 2023)

***Epistolary Glossopoesis*
Tolkien's Letter Writing and Language Invention**

Dr. Andrew Higgins (asthiggins@me.com)

It is an incredible honour to be the 2024 Annual Dinner Guest Speaker tonight. I realise that I give this talk on the shoulders of some incredible Tolkien legends and scholars including Rayner Unwin, both Priscilla and Michael Tolkien, Tom Shippey, Brian Sibley and my Phd Advisor and Co-Editor on *A Secret Vice* Professor Dimitra Fimi to name but a few of the illustrious scholars who I will try to follow!

My talk tonight is based on research I started doing in 2022 and was going to give at the Tolkien at Leeds International Medieval Conference until the black shadow of Co-Vid struck me down and I had to withdraw from the conference. However turning lemons into lemonade (as we like to say in my profession) I continued work on it and when the recent revised and expanded edition of *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien* edited by Humphrey Carpenter with the Assistance of Christopher Tolkien was published it gave me more material to examine.

For this talk is grounded in exploring two key activities that Tolkien very actively engaged in - language invention and letter writing. What I hope to show is how Tolkien used letter writing as a creative channel to both explain, explore and indeed add to the invention of his nexus of art-languages which were inextricably bound up with his world-building of Arda. As Professor Fimi explored in her brilliant keynote talk at the Inaugural Annual Tolkien Lecture at the University of Birmingham - 'I Hold The Key - J.R.R. Tolkien Through Interviews and Reminiscences' Tolkien very much felt that he held the key to his myth-making and language invention and especially with his language invention this was not a fixed but fluid process of creation which as can be seen in the responses to some of these letter exemplifies Tolkien still in the process of developing and "figuring out" his nexus of languages.

In examining the body of published letters that relate to his language invention I would suggest that we can see Tolkien moving from just brief mentions of his 'secret vice' to more in-depth explanations as he realised that a group of readers

were actually very interested in his language invention and wanted not only explanations but more examples of it. Tolkien kept up many of these correspondences from the publishing of *The Hobbit* in 1937 and *The Lord of the Rings* in 1954-55 to the last years of his life. Therefore, these letters - even more so with the extended version - represent an invaluable resource to explore Tolkien's creative process of language invention and readers reception and active role in encouraging Tolkien to produce more of it.

In the early letters that are published there are just passing references to this act that Tolkien was of course very much engaged with. In the letter 2 March 1916 Tolkien writes to Edith

'I have done some touches to my nonsense fairy language - to its improvement. I often long to work at it and don't let myself 'cause though I love it so it does seem such a mad hobby.' (Letters, p.4)

We know now that this work was the invention of the earliest version of his Elvish language - Qenya - outlined in a series of now published works collectively called *The Qenyaqetsa* (The Qenya Lexicon and Phonology).

In a letter from 16 December 1937 to his publisher, Stanley Unwin - Tolkien responds to a reader's reaction to his Silmarillion materials of the time containing 'eye splitting Celtic names' (a response he apparently did not forget!) with -

I am sorry the names split his eyes - personally I believe (and here believe I am a good judge) they are good, and a large part of the effect. They are coherent and consistent and made upon two related linguistic formulae, so that they achieve a reality not fully achieved to my feeling by other name-inventors (say Swift and Dunsany!). (Letters, p. 35)

In 1938 in his response to the a letter in the Observer signed by 'Habit' asking more about the names in *The Hobbit* Tolkien responded that some of the names are '*of the Ancient and Elvish world, and have not been modernised.*' (Letters, p. 41)

Perhaps one of the more intriguing mentions of the act of language invention comes in a letter Tolkien wrote to Christopher in December 1944 which Christopher was stationed in South Africa and Tolkien was sending him chapters of *The Ring* - towards the end of the letter he asks Christopher

'Are you still inventing names for the nameless flowers you meet? If so, remember that the old names are not always descriptive, but often mysterious. My best

inventions (in elvish of the Gnomish dialect) were elanor and nifredil; though I like A-S symbelmyne or evermind found on the Great Mount of Rohan' (Letters, p. 151)

Indicating Tolkien may have passed on his love of language invention to his (although Christopher seemed to have been more interested in mapping Middle-earth than inventing languages for it.

With the publishing of *The Hobbit* in 1937 we start to move from just mentions of language invention to explanations to early readers.

According to the published letters, one of the earliest correspondents of Tolkien's who he engaged with around his languages was **Hugh Brogan**. In 7th April 1948 Brogan then a schoolboy wrote to Tolkien praising *The Hobbit* and asking for more information about the world it described. Tolkien responded to Brogan

*'What you really require is The Silmarillion which is virtually a history of the Eldalië from their rise to the Last Alliance, and the first temporary overthrow of Sauron (the Necromancer) that would bring you nearly down to the period of The Hobbit. Also desirable would be some maps, chronological tables, **and some elementary information about the Eldarin (or Elvish) languages.** I have got all those things, of course, and they are known in a small circle which includes my sons... ' (Letters, p. 184)*

Tolkien would keep up a correspondence with Brogan throughout his life (including commiserating with Brogan when his voice changed due to puberty! For Christmas 1948 he sent Brogan greetings written in both the invented alphabets of Angerthas (dwarf-runes) and Elvish Fëanorian Script (Letters, p. 187)

In terms of explanation, in his 1951 'sell' letter to the potential publisher of *The Silmarillion* and *The Lord of the Rings*, Milton Waldman, of Collins Tolkien mentioned the paracosmic origin of his language invention.

*'Many children make up or begin to make up, imaginary languages. I have been at it since I could write. But I have never stopped, and of course, as a professional philologist (especially interested in linguistic aesthetics) I have changed in taste, improved in theory and probably in craft. **Behind my stories is now a nexus of languages (most only structurally sketched).** (Letters, p. 202)*

In the now extended edition of *Letters* we have the items that Tolkien intended for Collins to publish as the one work of The Jewels and Rings which include:

Lambion Ontale (Descent of Tongues) - Short account of the relation of Eldarin (Elvish Languages) to one another, and to language of Western Men.

The Languages of the Third Age and The Alphabets (Letters, p. 232)

Arguably one of the earliest readers of the proofs for the first two volumes of *The Lord of the Rings* was the Scottish Novelist and Poet **Naomi Mitchison** (1897-1999) - born Naomi Margaret Mary Haldane. Mitchison was educated at Oxford and like Tolkien contributed poetry for the volume Oxford Poetry 1915-16. Tolkien contributed his early fairy poem "Goblin Feet" and Mitchison her classically themed "The Awakening of the Bacchae". She became a writer and came to know Tolkien. The first published letter we have from Tolkien to her is from 18 December 1949 responding to her praise for *Farmer Giles of Ham*. Later in 1954, she served as proof-reader for the publisher Allan and Unwin and was sent advanced proofs for *Fellowship* and *Two Towers*. It was from reading these proofs that Mitchison wrote to Tolkien asking specific questions about *Lord of the Rings* - including questions about the nomenclature and the Elvish languages mentioned. Tolkien responded:

Two of the Elvish tongues appear in this book. They have some sort of existence, since I have composed them in some completeness, as well as their history and account of their relationship. They are intended (a) to be definitely of a European kind in style and structure (not in detail); and (b) to be specially pleasant.... (Letters, p. 263)

Tolkien then elaborates on the High Elven Quenya language -

The archaic language of lore is meant to be a kind of 'Elven-latin', and by transcribing it into a spelling closely resembling that of Latin...Actually it might be said to be composed on a Latin basis with two other (main) ingredients that happen to give me 'phono-aesthetic' pleasure: Finnish and Greek. (Letters, p. 263)

Mitchison also asked Tolkien about the Black Speech of Mordor and some of the words in the volumes associated with this language which Tolkien says was 'never used willingly' even in naming of places associated with Mordor.

The Black Speech was only used in Mordor; it only occurs in the Ring inscription, and a sentence uttered by the Ores of Barad-dûr (Vol. II p. 48)1 and in the word Nazgûl (cf. nazg in the Ring inscription). It was never used willingly by any other people, and consequently even the names of places in Mordor are in English (for the C.S.) or Elvish. Morannon is just the Elvish for Black Gate; cf. Mordor

Black Land, Mor-ia Black Chasm, Mor-thond Black-root (river-name). (Letters, p. 267)

Another early reader who wrote to Tolkien was **Richard Jeffrey** who was a copy editor living near Oxford. Jeffrey wrote Tolkien a letter which he responded to in September 1955 after returning from Venice (which Tolkien refers to in the letter as “Gondor”). Jeffrey seems to have asked questions about the opening words of one of Treebeard's songs in Book 3 Chapter 4

*O Orofarne, Lassemista, Carnimirie!
O Rowan fair, upon your hair how white the blossom lay! (LR, 483)*

To which Tolkien responded giving the meaning of the three untranslated names in the text to Jeffrey

Orofarne, lassemista, carnimirie is High-elven (the language preferred by Ents) for 'mountain-dwelling, leaf-grey, with adornment of red jewels'. (Letters, p. 326)

Jeffrey also asked Tolkien for an explanation of several names, including “Onodrim” the Sindarin name for the Ents and Tolkien used this opportunity to also give Jeffrey a lesson in Elvish grammar and also offers an alternative to how the plural was formed in the Elvish spoken specifically in Gondor (which may have been on his mind having just returned from Venice which Tolkien equated with Gondor) - although in writing this he seems to remember that this Gondorian dialect word was also used to signify “middle, centre” in Tolkien's nomenclature - possibly showing the fluid nature of his language invention.

The 'correct' plural of onod was enyd, or general plural onodrim; though ened might be a form used in Gondor.

But en, ened = middle, centre as in Endor, Endore Middle-earth (S. ennorath); and enedwaith = middle-people/ or region, as Forodwaith = north-region,

Tolkien would continue to correspond with Jeffrey up to 1972 when he responded for the last time to a series of linguistic questions from him (Letter 347) -including this interesting remark:

'I have not bothered to explain S.lenitions in the Appendices, already overloaded, because I am afraid they would have been passed over, or have been felt unintelligible and tiresome, by practically all readers, since that is the normal attitude of the English to the Welsh.' (Letters, p. 597)

And perhaps a hint at Tolkien's growing concern about the quick passing of time and reader interest in his language invention.....

'I am afraid it is unfair on linguistically minded readers not to provide them with more material. I should like to. But though I may leave behind me sufficiently ordered matter, at 81 I have no time- not if I am ever to produce any more 'legends'. (597)

In 1956 after the publishing of *The Return of the King*, Tolkien responded to a letter from **Captain H. Cotton Minchin (1894-1966)** who, like Tolkien, had fought in the First World War and gained the rank of Major in the Cameronians and Royal Flying Corps. He was the editor of several literary books including *The Legion Book* which was a collection of literature, cartoons, essays and poetry whose contributors include Rebecca West and Walter de la Mare. This volume was published in 1929 in aid of The British Legion due to the personal interest of H.R.H. The Prince of Wales, at whose invitation the contributors were pleased to come forward. Tolkien seemed very pleased to receive Captain Minchin's letter as he indicated at the start of it

There is no need to apologise to an author for writing to him, at least not in your generous terms. I now discover the great pleasure that this gives (Letters, p. 354)

We can discern from Tolkien's response that Minchin suggested Tolkien publish a special para-textual volume for "specialists" and that one area he wanted more information on was the Elvish languages. In his response Tolkien laments that time he has to do this citing that his professional colleagues and critics are "turning up the heat as I believe they said in Mordor" thinking he is wasting his time with this "literature" and he should get back to do some "real work." Tolkien mentions to Minchin that he had started planning a specialist volume which was largely linguistic and he had started an index of names

The major item was to have been an index of names with reference and with explanations and etymologies that would have incidentally have provided quite a large Elvish vocabulary. I worked at it for weeks, and indexed Vols I and most of ii - it was the chief cause of Vol III. But it eventually became plain that the size and cost would sink the boat; so it had to be postponed. (Letters, p. 355)

Much of the work Tolkien did on this was subsequently published in 2017 in the *Parma Eldalamberon* volume 17 - *Words, Phrases and Passages in The Lord of the Rings* which is a must for anyone studying Tolkien's languages. This connection between Tolkien's language invention and letter writing is also described by Christopher Gilson the editor of this volume. He mentions that

among the drafts of these papers for this linguistic volume there is a draft letter to Mr David Masson who was a sub-librarian in charge of the Bretherton Collection at Leeds University - from 1955 which dealt with and explained several key Elvish words and this interesting comment by Tolkien

The languages have, of course, changed quite as much as the world and its stories to which they belong, and are now almost an **Entish** record of my own linguistic-aesthetic history, hardening at last with age. But you are quite right in your perceptions. **Quenya** still retains the traces of the impact upon me of Finnish. **Sindarin** was deliberately composed to resemble (with a difference) Welsh, by working similar sound-changes on the simple basic **Eldarin** structure to those exhibited by Brythonic, especially Welsh. (PE17, p. ii)

The Minchin letter also includes an interesting aside that also starts to show a trend that will grow in these letters of Tolkien becoming frustrated by the way readers were using and applying his invented languages - in this case not knowing how to form the plural of the Sindarin Mallorn in the naming of a house.

*Botanists desire more accurate description of the mallorn (and then in a footnote he writes - I am informed that a new house for away has been **called "The Mallorns" - regrettable the plural is mellyrn*** (This footnote does not appear in the published letter but it is clearly on the original - see here - [https://tolkiengateway.net/wiki/Letter_to_H._Cotton_Minchin_\(16_April_1956\)#/media/File:H._Cotton_Minchin_16_April_1956_\(2\).jpg](https://tolkiengateway.net/wiki/Letter_to_H._Cotton_Minchin_(16_April_1956)#/media/File:H._Cotton_Minchin_16_April_1956_(2).jpg))

An equal sense of frustration regarding how readers were “using” his language is evident in this letter from Tolkien to Rayner Unwin in 1964 when Tolkien was informed that an Aquastroll Hydrofoil making a trial crossing from Calais to Dover had been called “Shadowfax” - which shows the care Tolkien felt he took in constructing his nomenclature (which he calls ‘difficult’) which now was being used to name things.

*I wish that ‘Copyright’ could protect names, as well as extracts. **It is a form of invention that I take a great deal of trouble over, and pleasure in; and really it is quite as difficult (often more so) as, say, lines of verse.*** I must say I was piqued by the ‘christening’ of that monstrous ‘hydrofoil’ Shadowfax – without so much as ‘by your leave–’ to which several correspondents drew my attention (some with indignation). **I am getting used to Rivendells, Lóriens, Imladris etc. as house-names – though maybe they are more frequent than the letters which say ‘by your leave’.** (Letters, p. 489)

Tolkien's frustration around readers trying to ‘figure out’ his language invention is apparent in a draft of letter to a certain Mr Rang on which Tolkien wrote ‘Some

reflections in preparing an answer to a letter from one Mr. Rang about investigations into my nomenclature' to which Tolkien added the date August 1967 - see Letters, pp. 535-544).

The English author and scholar **Rhona Beare** (1935-2018) also wrote to Tolkien while she was at Exeter University asking him specific questions she could pass on to a meeting of fellow enthusiasts for The Lord of the Rings (an early version of this very society). Here we may see a mixing of explaining and also some forms of new invention -

Tolkien responded to her first letter of 14 October 1958. His response was to several questions Beare asked about Elvish words and phrases including giving a translation of Frodo's evocation of the light of Elendil in Shelob's lair - Aiya Ancalima.....

Ancalima = 'exceedingly bright'. Element kal the usual stem for words referring to light; kālīma, 'shining brilliant'; an- superlative or intensive prefix. (Letters, p. 397)

Beare must have also asked about the root EL when forms words for both Elves and Stars.

*El. Difficult to distinguish 'star' and 'elf', since they are derivatives of the same basic element EL 'star'; as the first element in compounds el- may mean (or at least symbolize) either. As a separate word 'star' was **ēlĕn**, plural ***elenī** in **primitive Elvish**. (Letters, p. 398)*

*The Grey-elven (Sindarin) forms should have been **êl**, pl. **elin**; and **eledh** (pl. **elidh**). But the latter term passed out of use among the Grey-elves (Sindar) who did not go over Sea; though it remained in some proper-names as **Eledhwen**, 'Elven-fair'. (398)*

The inextricable link with Tolkien's Elvish language invention and his myth-making is evident in this explanation Tolkien gives Beare of several names from his mythology. For example, Beare must have also asked about the origin of the name Elrond for which Tolkien provided this explanation of the root for his name and some of the backstory Tolkien had invented for him which appears in the 1930 Quenta

**rondō was a prim[itive] Elvish word for 'cavern'. Cf. Nargothrond (fortified cavern by the R. Narog), Aglarond, etc. *rossē meant 'dew, spray (of fall or*

*fountain)'. Elrond and Elros, children of Eärendil (sea-lover) and Elwing (Elf-foam), were so called, because they were carried off by the sons of Fëanor, in the last act of the feud between the high-elven houses of the Noldorin princes concerning the Silmarils; the Silmaril rescued from Morgoth by Beren and Lúthien, and given to King Thingol Lúthien's father, had descended to Elwing daughter of Dior, son of Lúthien. **The infants were not slain, but left like 'babes in the wood', in a cave with a fall of water over the entrance. There they were found: Elrond within the cave, and Elros dabbling in the water.** (Letters, p. 402)*

In a later letter from 1961, Beare asked Tolkien about the song of Treebeard which she seemed to think was Entish but was actually "ancient Elvish" (Quenya) mixed up and run together in Entish fashion.

*Treebeard was not using Entish sounds on this occasion, but using ancient Elvish words **mixed up and run together in Entish fashion.** The elements are laurë, gold, **not the metal but the colour**, what we should call golden light; ndor, nor, land, country; lin, lind-, a musical sound; malina, yellow; orne, tree; lor, dream; nan, nand-, valley. So that roughly he means: **'The valley where the trees in a golden light sing musically, a land of music and dreams; there are yellow trees there, it is a tree-yellow land.'***

Another series of correspondence which show Tolkien using letter writing to both explain and invent his languages are those to the Thain of the Tolkien Society in America Richard (Dick) Plotz (who I vaguely remember meeting when I was very young as my Dad was in the American Tolkien Society and who sadly recently passed away). The first letter we have to Plotz is from from 12 September 1965 in which Tolkien responded with interest to the formation of the 'Tolkien Society' and was very grateful for the compliment although turned down membership and agreed to be associated with it. In the new extended edition of Letters we now have a segment of a additional letter from 12 January 1966 which seems to be Tolkien responding to an inquiry of Plotz's on how to say a statement in the High Elvish language of Quenya

'Nai silmarilli oie siluvar tielyanna' is, I think, a translation of the words, 'May the silmarilli ever light on your path'. One would not ever say this, but only one in the ship of Earendil, the morning star. The other two were lost, one in the depths of the sea, the other under the earth, until the end of the world.' (Letters, p. 512)

Tolkien here is not only giving a new sentence in a form of Third Age Quenya (as in Galadriel's Namarië poem) but also a link to the ultimate fate of the Silmarills from his then unpublished Silmarillion materials.

Also included in the Extended version of *Letters* is probably one of the most important letters when it comes to Tolkien's language invention. Plotz had interviewed Tolkien in November 1966 for the magazine *Seventeen* and much of the discussion had about his invented languages. At the end of this interview Tolkien promised he would send **"a conjugation of a regular verb and the declension of a noun in Elvish."** Tolkien did respond via letter roughly a year later with the noun declension - unfortunately the verb conjugation was never received. This letter has been published in several Tolkien publications (*Beyond Bree*, *Vinyar Tengwar*, etc) but now is fully available in the extended *Letters* (*Letters*, p 522). The declensions Tolkien outlined for the first time (again explanation or on the spot invention?) have become known as 'The Plotz Declensions' and gave a great deal of information about the structure and use of the Quenya languages in the Third Age of Middle-earth.

In a letter to friend **Amy Ronald** from 1969, Tolkien appears to be responding to her question of whether he has a name in Elvish. To which Tolkien responds -

*As for an 'Elvish' name: I could of course invent one. **But I do not really belong inside my invented history; and do not wish to!*** (*Letters*, p. 559)

This is an interesting response given the evidence we have from some of Tolkien's earliest Elvish myth making and language invention which shows Tolkien incorporating himself (as well as Edith and his brother Hillary) into the mythology through the characters of Lirillo (the Vala of Song) and Salamar the Harper. The older Tolkien now feels he clearly does not belong in his "invented history" nor wishes to.

There is also a couple of letters from different readers who wrote to Tolkien asking how you express "Merry Christmas" in Elvish.

On 18 December 1963, Tolkien wrote a letter to Jonathan Hepworth and his father which contained a previously unknown phrase in Quenya: **nai lye hiruva airea amanar!**, translated by Tolkien as "may thee find a blessed Amanar", referring to "the Yule and the beginning of the Sun's return" and representing an "ancient Elvish" equivalent to "merry Christmas" - (<https://www.tolkienguide.com/guide/letters/519>)

In October 1968 a cousin of J.R.R. Tolkien - Dorothy Grace Wood - sent Tolkien a letter asking him how to say "Merry Christmas" in Elvish; Tolkien replied that the Elves did not celebrate Christmas but they had a generic wish: **Meri[n] sa haryalye alasse "I hope that you have happiness" (adding in a case of a mortal: nó vanyalye Ambarello "before you pass from the world")**. (https://tolkiengateway.net/wiki/Letter_to_Dorothy)

Finally a year before his passing - On 9 November 1972 we have an one of the last acts of Tolkien's language invention in a letter to a Mrs Meriel Thurston who wrote to Tolkien asking if she could use the name of Rivendell as "a herd prefix". Tolkien wrote that he was fine with this though he did not think the valley of Rivendell would have been suitable for herd breeding (*Letters*, p. 591). He express interested to hear what names she chooses for her bulls and then volunteers that **"The Elvish word for bull doesn't appear in any published work; it was MUNDO' (information or invention on the spot?)** Tolkien had used a similar form in a 1968 letter as an element in an Elvish name for Oxford "Mondosar" with the 'mond' signifying the Ox part of the name. The word seems to derive from the late 1930's Etymologies with the root MBUD from which comes the Quenya word "mundo" meaning the snout or nose of an animal (LR, 372).

Tolkien wrote again to Mrs Thurston at the end of November and clearly he had been thinking about the Elvish word MUNDO and the naming of Mrs. Thurston's heard - here we can see the language inventor and name crafter towards the end of his life in action

I recently **played with notion of using the word for bull I gave you**, which introduced in the form - *mund* gives a fairly familiar sound (as in Edmund, Sigismund, etc) and adding a few Elvish prefixes, producing names like Aramund ("Kingly Bull"), Tarmund ("Noble Bull"), Rasmund ("Horned Bull"). Turcomund ("Chief of Bulls"), etc. I wonder what you think of these? (*Letters*, p. 593).

Conclusion

Therefore the body of published Tolkien letters we have (now added to with this Extended edition) represents an important source for scholars and students to study in terms of exploring both Tolkien's world-building of which language invention is an integral and intertwined part and the early reader response to his work which through the channel of letter-writing, Tolkien was able to comment, elaborate and invent elements of his world-building.

While we wait (patiently!) for more of the Elvish language materials to be published and perhaps more Letters (and who knows what next year Poems volumes will bring this autumn) - this volume gives us a lot to mine, discuss and I have not only read through the Extended Letters but I have also had the joy of listening Tolkien come to life in the Audible version with the excellent British Actor Samuel West (who is by the way amazing in Amazon's series *Slow Horses*) - which I highly recommend. For me as a student and scholar of Tolkien's languages they add another piece to the puzzle of Tolkien's life-long practice of his 'secret vice' which I look forward to continuing to explore in our academic journey and continuing conversation on the works of J.R.R. Tolkien which this esteemed Society since its founding in 1969 continues to support and champion -
Nai silmarilli oie siluvar tielyalwa

Thank you!