

What is a Warlock?

by: Lil Bow Wow

I know that this thread has wound down considerably, but in the interest of linguistics, I just wanted to add some potentially useful information on the use of the term “warlock.”

First of note is that the Modern English definition of the term has nothing to do with traitors or such, and at least according to the Webster’s Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary is defined:

1 : a man practicing the black arts: sorcerer;

2 : conjurer.

Whatever its hypothetical etymology, it is nowadays not used to indicate a traitor. And any who choose to self-identify as a warlock are saying nothing at all about their ability to keep oath. Also, it has long irked me that compilers of Modern English dictionaries seem so very ignorant of the role the Scandinavian languages played in the development of English in England and Scotland. Allow me to illustrate with the word warlock. If, as is posited in many Modern English dictionaries, the word “warlock” comes from a ME “warloghe” from OE “waerloga”, then the Modern form we should expect to see would be something like warlow, or werlow, since the tendency to move from ‘gh’ to ‘w’ is strong in English, and from ‘gh’ to ‘ck’ unknown. This is a trait it shares with Danish, and to provide an example, the Old Swedish “lagh” (meaning “law”) is spelled in Modern Danish “lag” but pronounced “law” and in English, orthography and pronunciation are again in sync, with the form “law.” That “gh” in the Middle English form “warl oghe” indicates a uvular fricative, that is a g that is pronounced as if one were gargling (as in Dutch “gulder”). That aspirated “g” is what, in English, is usually exchanged for a “w”. Other examples in English: “through”, “drought”, etc. When one also considers the semantic shift, i.e., from “traitor, oathbreaker” to “sorcerer, conjurer”, this all begins to introduce an element of doubt as to the actual etymology. Now, when I find corroboration for this hypothesis in dictionaries of Old Norse (Cleasby, Vigfusson and Craigie), I must, as a trained linguist, seek another more satisfying etymology. Here, then, is an alternative etymology for “warlock”, one which I find both satisfying as a linguist and as a magic user.

In the Old Norse tale, Eriks saga Raudha (The Saga of Erik the Red, mid 14th century), the term “vardhlokkur” appears in the context of a prophecy session at a farm in Greenland. It is used to mean a song of conjuring. When the two constituent terms are split, we see “vardh” which had by that time the sense of a spirit, and “lokkur” or a song of luring or attracting. In Modern Swedish, the term “lock” is used for the pastoral songs that are sung to call the cows home from the meadow — “kolock”. In just this same way, the song to attract or call the “vardh” or spirit, was the “vardhlokkur”. Gradually, with time, the term for the song and for the singer became interchangeable, i.e., the same term was used for both. Semantically, we can interpret the term as “enchanter, conjurer.” Now, is all of this linguistically feasible? Yes, and here’s why: The term vardhlokkur is a compound noun. The consonantal combination “rdhl” could never occur otherwise. As it is, this consonantal cluster is very difficult, even in Norse, so the tendency is to simplify. Since in Old Norse, the rolled “r” followed by the liquid “l” would have organically produced the medial “dh”, this consonant is the most likely candidate for deletion. Also, word initial “v” was commonly anglicized into word initial “w” in English. Examples: vOErð = ward, vurm = worm, vatten = water, ved = wood, etc. And finally (and in my mind, most convincingly) the geminate “k” at the end of the Norse is reflected in the “ck” of the English. Orthographic tendencies in English tend to reflect “kk” as “ck”.

Lastly, the nominative “ur” ending in Old Norse is superfluous in English, as we had abandoned case endings long before. And the fact that the Scottish and East Anglian coasts had been battered by Scandinavian raiders for quite some time prior to the word’s first attestation in English adds historical probability to linguistic possibility. Now, even if my etymology back to the Scandinavian form for enchanter is unconvincing to you, at least remember that the Modern English term has nothing to do with traitors. If some of us choose to reclaim the term warlock for our magical identity, it does not indicate that we are in any way magical poseurs.