



NIN O CHITHA EGLIR LASTO BETH DAER; RIMMO NIN BRUINEN DAN IN ULAERI: THE CELTIC ELEMENTS IN THE LORD OF THE RINGS

Noelia Ramos
Universidade de Vigo

The *Lord of the Rings* (1954-55) world has been subject to numerous studies and comparisons that have sought to establish a link with all those cultural elements that may have influenced its creation. While Norse mythology has been commonly accepted as one of the main references in the creation of Tolkien's fictional world, the role of cultural and mythological elements of Celtic origin has aroused some controversy. The aim of this study is to highlight those elements of *The Lord of the Rings* that are closely related to the Celtic world and to highlight their connection, whether intentional or unintentional, and how some of the artistic design aspects of Peter Jackson's trilogy have brought out or reinterpreted aspects of the original work in a Celtic key. The methodology is based on the traditional empirical scientific method through the detailed study of the film pieces that make up the *Lord of the Rings* and the three books. It is evident, therefore, that, despite Tolkien's irrational dislike of Celtic, there are several concepts and features of the cultures that cohabit in Middle-Earth where numerous echoes of that culture resonate. For the most part, these are unconscious and unintentional choices, and they underline the persistence of Celtic culture even in the last two centuries.

Keywords: The Lord of the Rings; J.R.R. Tolkien; Celtic culture; English literature; Celticism

1. Introduction

Tolkien's dislike for 'Celtic things', expressed in his 1937 letter to Stanley Unwin "is well known and could be taken as a definitive discouragement to research in Tolkien's Celtic sources" (Fimi 2007, 1) stating that "Needless to say they are not Celtic!" (*Letters* 26). Nevertheless, among the years scholars have identified whether Tolkien's statements were truly real. Over his trajectory, as J.S. Lyman-Thomas (2014, 272) claims in his article *Celtic: "Celtic Things" and "Things Celtic" —Identity, Language, and Mythology* that Tolkien's fascination with Welsh commenced at early stage with his personal Celtic library even "referring to himself as a "Celtophile" as early as 1929". Thomas (2014, 272) also considers that both his letters and literary works "reflect a consistent interest in and affection for 'things Celtic, particularly Welsh." Dimitra Fimi, in "*Mad" Elves and "Elusive Beauty"*" (2006, 3) states that in his letter to Naomi Mitchison in 1954 (*Letters* 144¹) Tolkien "was far from ignorant about 'things Celtic' and he later described his stories of the Grey Elves as being of a 'Celtic type'." The same author (2007, 2) claims that Tolkien wanted to create a mythology for England and that *The Book of Lost Tales* (1983) was "the earliest version of Tolkien's early nationalistic project for a "mythology for England", including Celtic elements. In his letter to Milton Waldman (*Letters* 131), Tolkien expressed his desire to craft an own mythology to have "the fair elusive beauty that some call Celtic" (Carpenter 1891, 144). Among *The Book of Lost Tales* (1983), Ælfwine's voyage is associated with the Celtic Irish tradition of the *Imrama*, concretely to St. Brendan's voyage to the West. The same can be applied to the Celtic otherworld where he would later establish a parallel in his poem *The Nameless Land* (1927) and, that would also suppose in a certain way a kind of inspiration when

¹ Cited following the guidelines from *Journal of Tolkien Studies*.

crafting some lands from Middle-earth like Lothlórien and Rivendell. Tolkien's attempt for his mythology for England also went hand in hand with that Arthurian influence even his perspective "on the Arthurian legend did not qualify as 'English' mythology as expressed in his 1951 letter to Milton Waldman" (Fimi 2007, 4).

2. The Otherworld in Middle-Earth: Bridges to the Beyond

According to Dimitra Fimi (2007, 14), in the LotR "are some impressively descriptive places in Celtic texts involving wonderful colourful scenes, often associated with the otherworld or with supernatural characters and events". When we conceive a depiction of the 'otherworld' some common aspects come to our mind, especially death and magic. Steve Blamires, *Magic of the Celtic Otherworld: Irish History, Lore & Rituals*, defines 'otherworld' as a word used for "describing a world beyond death or even for some mortals as a present reality" (2005, 10). Other scholars like Marjorie Burns (2005, 25) consider that the Celts "conceived an otherworld to house their otherworld beings, a spirit world shared and magically juxtaposed with the primary and everyday world." Tolkien himself included in LotR's Middle-earth a primary world represented by mortal races (men, dwarves, and hobbits) and a "secondary world", as Tolkien himself stated, that could be tied to the elvish lands of Lothlórien and Rivendell. Consequently, the author uses different ways to introduce the readers the transition between both worlds, by using bridges, doors, tunnels, archways, and gateways. As Lyman-Thomas (2014, 282) states Marjorie Burn's "insightful analysis from her chapter *Bridges, Gates and Doors* is representative", pointing out that Tolkien's Rivendell and Lothlórien assimilate to the Celtic otherworld and associating those Welsh and Irish elements with his Elves among that mystical and colorful settings.

As Robin Markus Auer describes in his paper *Sundering Seas and Watchers in the Water: Water as a Subversive Element in Middle-earth* as part of the book *Sub-creating Arda: World Rebuilding in J.R.R. Tolkien's work* edited by Dimitra Fimi and Thomas Honegger, "Middle-earth is incredibly physical and the elements of nature (mainly fire, water, earth and air) work to

highlight this physicality (Markus 2019, 238)”. At the same time, the same author (2019, 241) considers that “some of landscapes in Middle-earth are strongly connected to the own ‘watery’ element, mainly lakes and rivers and therefore, to a concrete type of physicality making of that spaces unique cognitive spaces”, especially for foreigners. For this reason, watery elements such as lakes and wells also define Tolkien’s elvish landscape. To reach Rivendell, the Hobbits and Aragorn must cross a river, which also happens to be a symbol of the entrance to the Celtic otherworld. In Lothlórien, when the fellowship are arriving and must cross the Nimrodel, Legolas feels compelled to wash saying “I will bathe my feet for it is said that the water is healing to the weary” (*FR*, II, vi, 339), implying to what extent water is not only a path between two worlds but a sacred element for those not cohabiting in the land.

Rivendell and Lothlórien are elven cities surrounded by water, not only because water is a sacred element but also because, as its etymology indicates, it provides protection from evil. This can be seen in Peter Jackson’s *The Fellowship of the Ring* (2001), when Arwen takes Frodo with her to Rivendell to heal the wound the Witch-king inflicted him in Amon Sûl. When the Nazgûl approach the edge of the river, the spectres stop at the border. While the Nazgûl are shown to be neither living nor dead, they are beings that cannot be exposed to light or water:

They themselves do not see the world of light as we do, but our shapes cast shadows in their minds, which only the noon sun destroys; and in the dark they perceive many signs and forms that are hidden from us: then they are most to be feared. (*FR*, I, xi, 189).

As seen, water in the LotR plays a ‘cognitive space’ that enables the hobbits to avoid the evil, as seen in the ford of the river Bruinen. Markus (2019, 248) states that Frodo is saved from the Nazgûl as they try to cross the Bruinen and are dragged by the downstream, once again their fear of water and alluding to banshees. In Celtic Irish mythology, banshees are emissaries from the otherworld who foresee the death and are usually found near rivers, dressed in dark robes with cloaks and tend to have pale hair and skin: “There were five tall figures: two standing on the lip of the dell, three advancing.

In their white faces burned keen and merciless eyes; under their mantles were long grey robes” (*FR*, I, xi, 255). The Nazgûl cannot cross the water because, like banshees, have been condemned to wander in darkness. Therefore, both come from the afterlife and are associated with death and their screams and cries can be heard from farther distances.

J.R.R. Tolkien mentions the passing of time through depictions of entrance and departure, depictions which are closely connected to these lands. John Carey in his study on *Time, Space and the Otherworld* (1987, 8) shows that time in the otherworld “is not only out of alignment with mortal time, but that it is fundamentally different in kind”. Time in the otherworld can function differently: it can continue in the middle of the present or return to a distant past. This is seen in some Celtic Irish stories as Carey (1987, 2-4) analyses how the Irish tale *Tucait Baile Mongáin* where the Prince of the Cruthin attends to an assembly at Uinsech and a storm forces him to look for shelter. Eventually, he faints. When the prince awakes, he feels as if a full year had passed even though it was just a single night. Frodo awakes in Elrond’s House, in Rivendell, asking Gandalf the Grey about the place and the time:

Elrond has cured you: he has tended you for days since you were brought in. Days? -said Frodo. Well, four nights, and three days, to be exact. The Elves brought you from the Ford on the night of the twentieth, and that is where you lost count. (*FR*, II, i, 285)

In *The Fellowship of the Ring*, when the fellowship arrives at Rivendell and Frodo catches up with Bilbo, he talks about how time feels there: “Oh, I don’t know. I can’t count days in Rivendell,” (*FR*, II, iii, 385). The same can be applied to Lothlórien, especially when the fellowship departs, “awakening” from the dreamy feeling that Lothlórien spreads and being conscious about how time felt during their stay:

After their morning meal, The Company said farewell to the lawn by the fountain. Their hearts were heavy; for it was a farewell to Lothlórien, a fair place and it had become like home to them, though they could not count the days and nights that they had passed there. (*FR*, II, viii, 370)

3. The Forging of a King: The Reflection of Aragorn and Gandalf in the Arthurian Cycle

Tolkien gained an interest for the Arthurian world at an early age with *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, which he later edited, and that “must have enhanced Tolkien’s interest in Celtic studies (Fimi 2007, 4). To Tolkien, Anglo-Saxons “were the true ancestors of the English and he was as much opposed to the cultural heritage of the Celts as to that of the Normans” (Fimi 2007, 7). That would explain why Tolkien considered that the Arthurian myth did not comply with the standards for this English mythology. However, it is clear how Tolkien “adapted and used things Arthurian in his characteristically nuanced way” (Thomas 2014, 283). Also, in the letter he wrote to Milton Waldman in 1952 (*Letters* 131), Tolkien confirms an Arthurian influence in his work: “Of course, there was and is all the Arthurian world, but powerful as it is, it is imperfectly naturalised, associated with the soil of Britain but not with the English” (Carpenter 1981, 167).

A good example of this Arthurian influence are the parallelisms established between Frodo, Aragorn, and Arthur. Nozick (2010, 2) claims that King Arthur is “embodied primarily within Aragorn, son of Arathorn.” Even though Peter Jackson’s films do not show Aragorn’s desire for claiming the throne, the books show the opposite. The predisposition in Aragorn’s will is more visible there and showcases a cavalry temper of fidelity, sovereignty, and leadership over his people, even before being crowned as King of Gondor and men. Besides, in Roman de Brut’s version, when Arthur is born, he is entrusted to be raised by the faeries, stating that they enchanted the child with strong magic and granted him good virtues. Aragorn is raised in similar circumstances, being nurtured by the elves in Rivendell and living with Elrond as a foster father, after Arathorn, his father, is killed by orcs. At the same time, the legendary swords they carry and use to proof their power, ‘Narsil’ and ‘Excalibur’, also exemplify this parallelism between Aragorn and Arthur. Both swords serve as a strong artefact and, most importantly, are essential to claim their

respective legitimacy and prophesize the symbolization of the King and his return.

While on the subject, the prophetic symbolism which carries the sword in a message also matters in the study. In Malory's *Le Morte D'Arthur* (1485) a prophecy of Excalibur is written in gold on the base of the plinth where the sword is impaled: "Whoso pullet out this sword of this stone and anvil, is rightwise king born of all England" (Mallory 1485, 38). In Narsil, a prophecy is also provided in the book *The Fellowship of the Ring* (1954) in the Council of Elrond stating:

All that is gold does not glitter, not all those who wander are lost; the old that is strong does not wither, deep roots are not reached by the frost. From the ashes a fire shall be woken, a light from the shadows shall spring; renewed shall be the blade that was broken, the crownless again shall be king. (*FR*, II, ii, 247)

To add, Frodo's metaphorical departure to Aman by ship assimilates to that one from King Arthur's to the land of Avalon. As Flieger (2005, 42) states this departure confronts "a deliberate echo of the departure of the wounded Arthur", meaning that J.R.R. Tolkien does not only suggest this Celtic influence in his work but also reinforces it by establishing this parallelism of the two wounded Frodo and Arthur submitted into a 'final' voyage to this 'Celtic' otherworld.

4. Galadriel: "Stronger than the Foundations of the Earth! All Shall Love me, and Despair!"

The term 'faerie' has been generally taggled to define supernatural beings "which can be benevolent or evil, which can destroy or help and live in subterranean places" (Haase 2008, 321). Other scholars like Miller (2014, 35-36) claim that fairies are "natural faeries, guardians of natural spaces such as streams, lakes or forests". Laura Gálvez (2022, 148) considers that Galadriel is probably "one of the most powerful female characters in Tolkien's work." Galadriel is a proud, jealous, and vengeful character, attributions that match with some prominent figures from Celtic paganism such as the Morrigan, the goddess of death, and Morgan Le Fay. Burns (2005, 134)

describes Galadriel as a fairy queen to which “those who have never met her tend to consider her perilous or worse.”

In the movies, Galadriel’s gaze is full of mystery and fear, a gaze to which mortal beings such as Boromir or Frodo feel (and are) tamed. Even so, Tolkien goes further and confirms Galadriel’s demonic side in the *Fellowship of the Ring*, when Frodo offers the ring to her:

Beautiful and terrible as the morning and the night! Fair as the Sea and the Sun and the Snow upon the mountain! Dreadful as the Storm and the Lightning! Stronger than the foundations of the earth. All shall love me and despair! (*FR*, II, vii, 366)

Galadriel’s mother gives her the name of Nerwen, which is strongly associated with the mind, will and strength of the body, features shared with Morrigan as well. At the same time, Galadriel dreams of dominions to control, something related to her pride and strong vision which clearly connects to this goddess. Nonetheless, the Morrigan is also connected to foreseeing and shapeshifting, a common practice in Celtic gods or demigods, and versatility. Like Morrigan, Galadriel owns her own garden in the lands of Lothlórien, hidden from mortal eyes and surrounded by sacred elements such as water, trees, and wells. Besides, Galadriel is also associated with water because of Ninya, the ring of waters and the power of water she inflects when using it to achieve her commitments. At the same time, Morrigan derives primarily “from an ancient Celtic divinity of the waters, an element strongly associated with fertility” (Burns 2005, 122).

Galadriel “echoes the figure of the fairy queen resembling to those from Arthurian literature, Morgan Le Fay” (Burns 2008, 94). Lucy Allen Paton in her book *Studies in the Fairy Mythology of Arthurian Romance* (1970) describes the term ‘fairy queen’: “a supernatural woman, always more beautiful than the imagination can possibly fancy her, untouched by time, unhampered by lack of resources for the accomplishment of her pleasure, superior to human blemish, contingency, or necessity, in short, altogether unlimited in her power” (Allen 1903, 25). In the books, Galadriel is depicted as the ‘Mistress of Magic’ as also is Morgan Le Fay described as a

sorceress, with “a great clerk of necromancy” (Malory 2000, 4). The first parallel remains in their fear towards mankind. Both Morgan Le Fey and Galadriel “are especially feared because of their power and wisdom, which may be seen as a threat” (Gálvez 2022, 149). As seen in *The Fellowship of the Ring*, Gimli feels disturbed when entering in the woods of Lórien warning his companions about the ‘witch’ living there: “but I almost should have said that she was tempting us and offering what she pretended to have the power to give” (*FR*, II, viii, 349). At the same time, both enchantresses share healing skills. As Clarke (1973, 101) claims Morgan Le Fay echoes as a healer who “has learned the uses of all plants in curing the ills of the body.” Morgan is the one to set up her brother’s departure to Avalon, where he will be healed from his wounds caused in battle. In the case of Galadriel, she heals Gandalf in Dol Guldur when facing Sauron using her powers portrayed in her ring, Nenya.

5. Conclusion

Tolkien’s dislike for ‘Celtic things’ as expressed in his 1937 letter to Stanley Unwin marked the beginning of ‘Celticism’ in Tolkien’s work *The Lord of the Rings* (1954-55). His Celtic library from early 1929 as well as his definition as a “Celtophile” made scholars to consider Tolkien’s inspiration from Irish and Welsh mythology and folklore. Tolkien’s longing for an own mythology for England was clearly reported when crafting his first steps in *The Book of Lost Tales* (1983) and later in the LotR. It is clear that J.R.R. Tolkien was influenced by Celtic Irish and Welsh folklore, emphasizing the importance of water in some spaces of his Middle-earth as Lothlórien and Rivendell. Tolkien considered the elvish lands as a secondary world surrounded by rivers and waterfalls that also reinforce the idea of ‘cognitive spaces’ between the two worlds. Besides, the watery element also aims at protecting from evil beings such as the Nazgûl, that somehow remind of the Celtic Irish banshees.

Besides, Tolkien professed a great interest on the Arthurian Cycle at an early age with *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* as well as all the Arthurian myth, and that was clearly portrayed when trying

to consider the Arthurian myth as part of mythology for England. It has been seen that even though Tolkien's standards for the Arthurian myth were not appropriate to be included in his work, it is evident that some of that traits were introduced in the LotR in Aragorn, Arthur, and Frodo through the return of the king, prophecies, and departures. At the same time, Tolkien might have taken Morgan Le Fay and embodied her in Galadriel, the fairy queen beautiful, tamed, great mistress of magic and well-skilled in healing. Of course, Galadriel can also embody the goddess Morrigan due to their fertile functionality, watery power, and foreseeing.

As a general implication, this study can provide a further shove on the analysis on Celtic studies in J.R.R. Tolkien's LotR especially towards the elvish landscapes in Middle-earth and their relevance in this mystical conception that assimilates to the Celtic Irish otherworld. Besides, future possibilities on this study can be carried out towards the defense of 'things Celtic' in Tolkien's work as part of his mythological legacy.

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