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Letters

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Mythcon 51: The Mythic, the Fantastic, and the Alien

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Additional Keywords

Edith Crowe; Gerry Holmes



Johan Schimanski

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I am writing in reaction to Nancy C. Hanger's letter in *Mythlore* 34. While I may agree with her in that Nicholas Grimes' review in *Mythlore* 32 was lacking in certain respects, I must say I feel even more "concern, shock, and utter horror" (along with a little wry amusement) at her gross misrepresentation of Arthur (historical or legendary).

For example, I must admit that Mr. Grimes seems to have got the wrong end of the stick concerning the film *Excalibur's* relation to "the original sources of the King Arthur legend." But we read further: "Arthur is not, and never has been portrayed as a Celtic leader in any reliable source of legend!" What, may one ask, does Ms. Hanger mean with a "reliable source of legend?" It seems to me that her letter is certainly not one of these. While, on the other hand, the *Mabinogion* seems pretty genuine. Arthur is most certainly a Celtic leader in that work. Perhaps she should try to develop a more conscious attitude to the concepts of legend, myth and history. Does she mean a "reliable source of history?"

However, what I react most against is her claim that Arthur "is quite definitely Roman of origin." May I remind her that this is only a theory, and moreover a theory which has lost much of its currency among historians during the last twenty years? Arthur is one of those figures who it is quite impossible to be "definite" about, but current thought leans more to the idea of him being a Celtic war-leader, perhaps inspired by Roman methods but also using effective Celtic models as a warrior.

Firstly, Nennius was translating old Welsh material into (rather bad) Latin, so it would have been more surprising if he had used some Welsh title instead of "dux bellorum." Ms. Hanger also implies that "dux bellorum" was a recognised Roman title, which it wasn't. And even if Arthur used a Roman title, I don't really see why this makes him a Roman.

Concerning Arthur's "use of cavalry tactics" I should like to point out that nobody actually knows if he used horses or not - it is just a theory to explain his success against the English, who, to quote Tom Shippey, regarded horses as "large, smelly creatures with, you know, hooves on each foot!" However, it seems a rather plausible idea; the Celts were using horses as an established part of warfare at Catraeth (according to Aneirin's *Gododdin*) not much more than fifty years after Arthur ("much later"??). But whether this was inspired by the Romans or not is a matter of debate. Stilicho mentions cavalry in his account of the second rescue of Britain by the Romans in 418, but otherwise we have no definite accounts of Roman cavalry in Britain. And Arthur's cavalry was more likely to have been of the nature of, to use Robert Graves' phrase, "mounted commandos," a primitive guerrilla force, than of Roman cavalry.

Arguments against Arthur having been the Last of the Romans are perhaps a little vague, but there is certainly no basis for making him a Roman. Stable Roman rule in Britain ended with the revolt of Maximus in 383, and Britain was largely independent by about 425. During the period after this there was a revival of Celtic tradition followed by a brief Roman revival under Ambrosius in the 460's - though the effects of this had probably worn off by the time of Arthur's life around 480 to 540 (beyond the fact that the name Arthur is based on a Roman name). We also have the evidence of the archaeological excavations at South Cadbury Castle - which indicate a major renovation of a pre-Roman hillfort during the Arthurian period which could only have been undertaken by Arthur or someone so like him that it would make little difference. Cadbury hillfort was not renovated on a Roman model; excavations of the wall make this clear. Lastly, I believe a Celtic army would rather follow a Celt than a Roman, and that a Roman army would have had little success against the English.

The idea that Arthur had united feudal Britain is of course absurd; feudalism did not exist at that time in Britain. I found Ms. Hanger's view on *Excalibur's* morality more disquieting. What she considers as morality is irrelevant - there are many different types of morality. At least, I find that the moralities of Christianity, Gandhi, the Declaration of Human Rights and Boorman's Arthurian Britain are all different, without being less moral for that. I disagree with her view that *Excalibur* has been adapted greatly to the public taste: adultery is something which has occupied people at least since...Malory (i.e. it is not something specific to modern American taste); and the gory special effects are probably more to do with boyish enthusiasm than adaptation to public taste. A friend of mine commented on the film: "It reminds me of a film I and some other people made in high school." And adultery and the horror of Medieval warfare are ultimately not things to be ironic about.

I should also like to point out that the speakers of Old English and German dialects on the one hand, and the Celtic languages (what's "Celt," by the way?) on the other, probably had no more difficulties in talking among themselves at that time than modern Norwegians have in talking to modern Swedes.

Lastly I would like to complain about the trend among the more whimsical of making mythological creatures like Dragons and Unicorns into archetypes which have to be the same for everybody. Ms. Hanger may have "a Dragon;" I don't. When this trend gets to the point when we can't even wear a Unicorn on our T-shirt without being told off, I think things are going a bit too far.

Diana Waggoner

Los Angeles, CA

I would like to correct Nancy Hanger's statement, in her letter in the Winter 1983 issue, that "only an act

of birth can concur (sic; "confer?") the title of Lord upon a gentleman." On the contrary, all British peerages are granted by the Crown. Those who are now "born" into the peerage are the descendants of those created peers in the past. This information is readily available in Burke's or Debrett's books on the peerage.

In the last century or so, many new peerages have been created, including both hereditary peerages which can be passed on and life peerages which die with the holder. A few well-known peers of recent vintage include such figures as Baron Tweedsmuir (previously John Buchan), Baron Alanbrooke (General Sir Alan Brooke), the Earl of Snowdon (Antony Armstrong-Jones), and Baron Olivier. I am astonished that Ms. Hanger was not aware of the worldwide publicity when Olivier, the first actor ever so honored, was created a peer.

In addition, there is not such thing as the title of "Lord;" although all of the gentlemen I've listed are addressed or referred to thus, their titles vary. The titles of the British peerage range from Baron/Baroness upwards through Viscount/Viscountess, Earl/Countess, Marquis (or "Marquess")/Marchioness, and Duke/Duchess.

It is true, however, that only birth can confer the right to be called "Lord" or "Lady" with the given name. The younger sons of Dukes and Marquises, and the daughters of Dukes, Marquises, and Earls, receive, at birth, the appropriate courtesy title. "Courtesy" is because they are not peers, but commoners. Only the holder of a title is a peer. The eldest son of a Duke, Marquis, or Earl also receives a courtesy title, based on one of his father's lesser titles. The example most likely to be known to Ms. Hanger is that of the Wimsey family. The Duke of Denver had two sons, Gerald and Peter, and a daughter, Mary. During the Duke's lifetime his son Gerald was known as Lord St. George, from one of the Wimsey family's earlier titles; his younger son Peter was Lord Peter, and his daughter was Lady Mary. When the Duke died, Gerald became Duke of Denver and entered the House of Lords, and his son, Lord Peter's nephew, became known as Lord St. George. Peter remained Lord Peter, and Mary remained Lady Mary even after her marriage to plain Mr. Parker. She was called Lady Mary Parker. Peter's wife Harriet became Lady Peter Wimsey (not Lady Harriet) on her marriage.



Sandra Miesel

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Since Joe Christopher cites an article of mine in his discussion of The Shores of Middle-earth, I feel obliged to expand upon the notion of Goths in the cold,



cold ground. I saw a possible connection between Tolkien's Dead Marshes and an incident from The Origin and Deeds of the Goths by Jordanes as described in the medieval history textbook I used in graduate school An Introduction to Medieval Europe by James Westfall Thompson and Edgar Nathaniel Johnson, Norton: New York, 1937). This description, p. 78, is worth quoting in full:

Jordanes tells how once a great number of the Goths were caught in a treacherous marsh and sucked down to death; and how, hundreds of years later the peasants of that region, in the moonlight beaming through the mist hanging heavy over the swamps, could see the forms of struggling men and women and horses and cattle, and hear the wailing of the women, the crying of the children, the lowing of the frightened cattle.

Subsequently, Ian Slater told me that the above distorts the account as given in the original. The intrepid may wish to search for themselves, the standard translation being by C.C. Mierow, Princeton, 1908.

Although Tolkien's professional work was in medieval literature rather than history, surely he had some grounding in the latter, too. Any standard curriculum in the Dark Ages mentions Jordanes because he's the major primary source on Gothic history. He's also a source for the historical background Volsunga Saga and Das Niebelungenlied, topics of definite interest to Tolkien. A few names of Gothic derivation have been found in LotR and it is tempting to see some small resemblance between the Battle of Chalons as described by Jordanes and LotR's Battle before the walls of Gondor.

Some of your readers may have seen the discussion of Shores of Middle-earth in Niekas #27 and Giddins' obnoxious reaction in #28. A man who can't understand a simple statement in a fanzine loc isn't qualified to tackle LotR! What exegetical principles undergird his assertions I am unable to discern. Finding parallels does not prove origin. It is possible to "explain" anything in terms of anything if you push hard enough the classic example being Lester Del Rey's proof that the puzzling story "Common Time" is "really" about a man eating a ham sandwich.

My own fifteen years' experience looking at sources and motifs in speculative fiction have made me very wary of claiming cause and effect relationships in these things. Parallels are better cited to enhance and enrich appreciation. Let me give a few examples, drawn from discussions with my subjects (who, unlike Tolkien are conveniently alive). Sometimes I spy an historical model but the author either denies copying any model or claims a different one (amusing when mine was a better parallel than what he actually used for inspiration). When I received the ms. of Fred Saberhagen's First Book of Swords (now out from Tor Books), the poem it contained about the twelve magic swords immediately suggested a pantheon, so I easily matched them with twelve Greco-Roman gods as a feature of my afterword to the book. But Fred (who has excellent mythological instincts but no great store of mythic data) denied any deliberate matching of swords and gods. He insisted he'd just dashed off the poem without much planning. (I trust no one would accuse this sober and reputable man of lying about his working methods!)

Or to give another example more comparable to

Giddings' methods: I've written more than 40,000 words of criticism about Gordon R. Dickson's *Childe Cycle*, spinning webs of mythological allusion complete with name-derivations of the most esoteric sort. The majority of these were in no way consciously intended by the author--no, not even the obscure Hindu ritual he appears to reproduce in *Tactics of Mistake*, complete with identical structure, purpose and language. The world is filled with more originality, coincidence, and separate development from ancient archetypes than Giddings seems to realize. (I understand the word for "ten" is the same in French and Hottentot....) But let's not leave him in his ignorance. Let's take up a collection to buy him a copy of The Hero with a Thousand Faces.

Giddings isn't the only commentator who has cited my *Riverside Quarterly* articles on *LotR*. I'm a little wistful that the much better monograph that followed these, Myth, Symbol, and Religion in LotR (Baltimore, 1973) is much less known. It's long out of print and copies are impossible to come by now. If any reader would care to part with one, I'm anxious to have more for my files.



Brooks H. Rohde

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....I went to see *The Dark Crystal* and the fantasy appealed to me very strongly. On TV I heard that Brian Froud was given the task of conceptual design because the creatures he created are like "creatures that could really live" (Jim Hensen). As a biochemist/physiologist, I did indeed find every detail correct. I forgot they were Muppets and accepted them as living beings. Brian Froud modeled the hero on the Fair Folk as perceived in the Middle Ages, and the evil Skeksis race on the larger coelosaurids recently discovered. But I felt a rare feeling too as I watched: horror. There is violence, directed always against the hero and his allies. He meets a woman of his race who is just darling, a little girl walking barefoot in the woods with her "friendly monster" (a Muppet lapdog) who can sing and communicate with the animals. And after following them and learning more about them we see them abused and at the climax her little monster is thrown down a deep shaft with fire below and she is stabbed. Things who try to kill little dogs and little women are not good for small children to see. They survived and I breathed easier, but they showed the unthinkable. I was reminded of the scene in *MacBeth* where McDuff's family is massacred. And they weren't a quarter as sweet as Kira.

I bought the novel, written from the script primarily for older children and was taken aback. One of the evil Skeksis is a Scientist, (as is one of the benevolent characters) and though this did not show in the movie he is engaged in random mutilation of all kinds of small animals. He tries to use the power of the Crystal (here the border of science and fantasy became blurred for me) to paralyze the mind and tap the life fluids of the heorine. And he has mutilated himself to study himself (like parasitologist who happily swallow the worms they are studying). I worry that this is how people will see scientists in the future or see them so now. I have worked with mutilated rats and done some of that myself. I have laid the ground work for studies with quadreplegic or periplegic dogs with transected spinal cords. My colleagues use cats but I stop short of that for sentimental reasons. I have had cats of my own, and they have had me. It was a bemusing and unsettling cause for introspection.



As far as that is concerned, the world of the evil Skeksis seems to be a parody or a microcosm of the evils at large in the world today. You may hear more of them, and whatever the film critics say, *Mythlore* may have to deal with this film and its fallout. If you have not seen it and were going to, forgive me if I gave away any of the story.

It is interesting to note that the letters usually tend to comment on previous letters, and secondarily on reviews. It is hoped that all the contents: articles, editorials, columns, reviews, poetry, and letters will be seen as open to discussion. No area is meant to be beyond comment. --G.G.

Mythopoeic Core Reading List

Mythlore frequently publishes articles that presuppose the reader is already familiar with the works they discuss. This is natural, given the special nature of *Mythlore*. In order to assist some readers, the following is what might be considered a "core" mythopoeic reading list, containing the most well known and discussed works. Due to the many editions printed, only the title and original date of publication are given. Good reading!

J.R.R. TOLKIEN

The Hobbit (1937); "Leaf by Niggle" (1945); "On Fairy-Stories" (1945); The Lord of the Rings: Vol. I, The Fellowship of the Ring (1954); Vol. II, The Two Towers (1954); Vol. III, The Return of the King (1955); The Silmarillion (1977); Unfinished Tales (1980).

C.S. LEWIS

Out of the Silent Planet (1938); Perelandra (1943); That Hideous Strength (1945); The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe (1950); Prince Caspian (1951); The Voyage of the Dawn Treader (1952); The Silver Chair (1953); The Horse and His Boy (1954); The Magician's Nephew (1955); The Last Battle (1956); Till We Have Faces (1956).

CHARLES WILLIAMS

War in Heaven (1930); Many Dimensions (1931); The Place of the Lion (1931); The Greater Trumps (1932); Shadows of Ecstasy (1933); Descent into Hell (1937); All Hallow's Eve (1945); Taliessin through Logres (1938); and The Region of the Summer Stars (1944) (printed together in 1954).