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Abstract

Compares aspects of *The Silmarillion* and *The Lord of the Rings* to *The Mythological Cycle* of Irish literature, specifically the *Book of Invasions*. Claims the history of the Eldar shows “a similarity to Irish sources much closer and more extensive than any critic has heretofore remarked.”

Additional Keywords

Celtic mythology—Influence on J.R.R. Tolkien; Irish literature—Influence on J.R.R. Tolkien; Tolkien, J.R.R.—Characters—Elves—Sources

The Irish Mythological Cycle and Tolkien's Eldar

Gerald V. Gillespie

Fair Lady, will you travel
To the marvellous land of stars?
Early Irish poem¹

Critics have seen in the creatures of Tolkien's Middle Earth a sort of mythological League of Nations, or in the case of the "free peoples" a pan-Northern European alliance. The Hobbits are idealised English rural dwellers. The Dwarves (sic) come from Nordic sources; in many cases their names are drawn directly from the pages of the *Elder Edda*. The Rohirrim, Tolkien's horsemen of the plains, are overwhelmingly Teutonic/Anglo-Saxon in their language, social structure, and, even, physical appearance. And many feel that the sources of the Eldar, Tolkien's Elves, are Celtic, more specifically Irish. A close study of the Eldar and their "history" will show a similarity to Irish sources much closer and more extensive than any critic has heretofore rendered.

Tolkien certainly had some knowledge of Celtic language and literature. He remarks in his O'Donnell lecture that his early enthusiasm for languages was excited by the Welsh placenames he would observe on passing trains.² Indeed, one of his Eldarin languages, Sindarin, is modelled on Welsh.³ Parker claims that the Elves are Celtic, and that the men nearest the Elves, the Numenoreans, are "Celt-like".⁴ Commenting on Tolkien's poem "Imram" (the Irish word for voyage), Kocher remarks that the Undying Lands' "closest counterpart in literature is in those early medieval Celtic tales known as *Immrama*." The comparisons between the matter of Tolkien's Eldar and early Irish literature, however, seem to go deeper than a few allusions. The whole created history and nature of the Eldar echo the history and tales of the Tuatha De Danaan in Irish literature and folklore.

Pagan Irish literature was passed down orally by generations of *filid* (combination priests and poets) and finally written down by Christian clerics. It has been divided into four main cycles: the Mythological, Ulster, Fenian and Historical Cycles. The Mythological Cycle concerns the several different waves of mythological beings who invaded and inhabited Ireland before the arrival of the Milesians, eponymous ancestors of the modern, mortal Irish. The Ulster Cycle contains the tales of the Ulster warriors, their king Conchobor, and their main hero, the Irish Achilles, CuChulainn. The Fenian Cycle relates the exploits of Finn McCool and his wandering band of warriors, the Fiana. The Historical Cycle recounts the histories and genealogies, mainly invented, of early Irish kings.⁶ In all these tales, to varying degrees, there is Celtic magic and traffic with the otherworld. The Mythological Cycle, however, is of primary interest in any study of Tolkien.

The Mythological Cycle lends itself to division into two parts - the *Book of Invasions*, and some assorted later tales. The *Book of Invasions* was compiled by early Irish clerics attempting to do for Ireland what Nennius had done for Britain with his *Historia Brittanorum*, to relate the history of Ireland to that of the Biblical and classical world. They drew heavily from native Irish sources, and the result, until this century, has been considered a mainly accurate, if somewhat garbled, history of early Ireland. Celtic scholars now view this material not as history, but as the remnants of an early Celtic cosmogeny and theogeny. In distorted form, the *Book of Invasions* gives a description of the physical formation of Ireland, and an account of an early Celtic pantheon, the Tuatha De Danaan.⁷

The framework of the *Book of Invasions* is the account of different waves of invaders of Ireland.⁸ The first two invasions are by the peoples of Cessair and Partholon. Both of these groups are eliminated by flood and famine, except for one member who survives to tell their tale. Next came Nemed and his followers, who like the earlier invaders tra-

vel across the sea from the east. This reminds us of Tolkien's Elves and the men in the *Silmarillion*, who originate in the east of Middle Earth and slowly move westward. Arriving in Ireland, the Nemedians encounter the Fomorians, representatives of night and chaos, the demons of Irish mythology. The Fomorians are described as one-armed, one-legged, and one-eyed. They are vanquished by the Nemedians, with the aid of a helper from across the sea, who infiltrates the Fomorians' tower and causes its collapse. Again the story is reminiscent of Tolkien - here of Gandalf and his infiltration of Dol Guldor. Exhausted by this struggle, the followers of Nemed divide into two main groups and leave Ireland for the while. One group, consisting mainly of the Fir Bolg, goes off to Greece. The other group voyages across the sea, westward and northward to magic isles, where they learn magical knowledge and wizardry. These are the Tuatha De Danaan. The Eldar in the *Silmarillion* also originate in the east, move westward, and voyage across the sea to Valinor to learn magical skills and crafts.

Eventually, the Fir Bolg return to Ireland and assume its rulership, to be followed soon after by the Tuatha, flying in clouds. The clerical interpretation of this flying entrance in the *Book of the Invasions* is that the Tuatha burned their ships behind them so that no one would be tempted to return to the islands from which they came, thus causing great clouds of smoke. So the Eldar burned their ships on returning to the Middle Earth, so that no one would be tempted to retreat.⁹ In the First Battle of Moytura, the Fir Bolg fight with the tuatha for the rulership of Ireland. The Fir Bolg are shown consistently as being concerned with war and rulership, while the Tuatha, like Tolkien's Elves, are people of skills and power over, or rapport with, nature. And it is through these attributes that the Tuatha defeat the Fir Bolg, or at least fight them to a standstill.¹⁰

After the battle, the Tuatha assume rulership of Ireland, and, for some reason, make Bres, a half-Fomorian, their king. He is a terrible king, suffering from that most unIrish failing, cheapness. One could visit him, as the tale goes, and get neither grease upon one's knife, nor, what's worse, ale down one's throat. He enslaves the Tuatha, exploiting their skills for his own gains. The Tuatha finally unseat him, and he goes off to the islands to gather an army of his relatives. On the eve of the *Second Battle of Moytura*, the Tuatha are gathered in their hall, when they are visited by Lugh, another half-Fomorian, who has come from across the sea to assist them. He possesses many skills, and Nuadu, the Tuatha king, temporarily cedes his kingship to him. We have a parallel here to the situation in the *Lord of the Rings* where all the leaders of the West temporarily cede their leadership to Gandalf, another helper from across the sea.

In the battle which follows, Tuatha witches and wizards again employ their power over nature. The main contest of the day, however, is between Lugh and Balor, the Fomorian champion. Balor has only one eye, but its glance is baleful and will destroy anyone upon whom it rests. (Sauron is always represented in the *Lord of the Rings* as a red, burning eye.) As Balor's eye is about to open in battle, Lugh hits it with a stone so that it turns upon the Fomorians, who are completely and finally routed. So too is Sauron destroyed by the loss of his own ring, his own weapon.

After this triumph, the Morrigan, a Tuatha war goddess, announces the victory to the hills and estuaries of Ireland. The Macha, another Tuatha figure, recites a poem about the end of the world. This seems rather gloomy for such a joyous occasion, unless one understands that the Mythological Cycle deals with endings and transitions. They are not always happy ones, as when the Milesians arrive in Ireland and defeat the Tuatha at the Battle of Tailtiu.

The Book of Invasions contains a cosmogeny and theogony, for Ireland, as does the Silmarillion for Tolkien's created world. It deals with the origins and youth of the Tuatha De Danaan, as the Silmarillion deals with the origin and youth of the Eldar. And both in their youths are lusty and powerful. The Book of Invasions, however, is also about the ends of ages and the passings of peoples. With its last invasion, that of the Milesians, the passing away of the Tuatha begins. They begin to wane, as the ancestors of mortal man begin to grow in power. The Tuatha withdraw into their fairy mounds, and slowly disappear.

Parker is of the opinion that the Lord of the Rings is too about the "end of an age", and not so much about the "endless struggle of good and evil".¹¹ In the trilogy, the Third Age of Middle Earth draws to an end, the Eldar return overseas or dwindle, and men assume rulership over Middle Earth.

In the Lord of the Rings, the Eldar are shadows of their former mighty, warlike selves as they are portrayed in the Silmarillion. They have started to withdraw from Middle Earth, and they long for the solace of the Undying Lands. In the trilogy, their role is mainly an advisory one. With a few exceptions, such as Legolas, they have lost their warrior's ardor. And even Legolas becomes consumed with longing for the sea, and for what lies beyond it, after his fateful voyage with Aragorn.¹² Early in the trilogy, Gildor, an Elf, says to Frodo, "We are exiles, and most of our kindred have long ago departed and we too are only tarrying here for a while, ere we return over the Great Sea."¹³ Galadriel, talking of the prospects for her people if Frodo's quests succeeds, says, "We must depart into the West, or dwindle to a rustic folk of dell and cave."¹⁴ With the final defeat of Sauron, the Eldar leave Middle Earth, surrendering, half gladly, and half sorrowfully, their sovereignty to mortal men. It is the beginning of the Fourth Age, the age of man, our age.

There is a type of mythological time present in many folklores. It is a time when animals speak, and miracles are a matter of course. It is sometimes referred to as "in illo tempore", and always just precedes real time, or history. The Irish Mythological Cycle follows a progression from magical time to mortal history, however inaccurate that history may be. The later tales of the cycle chart the waning of the Tuatha. The haunting, nostalgic beauty of these tales of the Celtic Twilight is very like the bittersweet endings in the Lord of the Rings. Two of the later tales of this cycle are of special relevance here - The Tale of the House of the Two Medars and The Fate of Children of Lir.

In the first of these two tales, the action begins in a fairy mound where the defeated Tuatha have gathered after the Battle of Tailtiu to pick a new king. Overseeing the discussion is Manannan Mac Lir, the Celtic god of the sea. Myles Dillon points out that, in this tale, while Manannan is an overlord of the Tuatha, he is not one of them. "He dwells outside of Ireland...and belongs to the nobles of the Land of Promise."¹⁵ His people seem to be of a higher order of supernatural being than the Tuatha,¹⁶ though inferior in their turn to the one true Christian God. This situation is somewhat akin to the hierarchy in Tolkien's created world, where the Eldar rank below the Valar of the Undying Lands, who in turn are subordinates of Eru, the one true God.

The plot of this tale, however, is mainly concerned with the Tuatha maiden, Ethne, who becomes mortal after an insulting comment is passed about her, and loses her ability to see her former kinspeople. She becomes a disciple of the mortal Saint Patrick, and after a battle for her, which the Tuatha lose, she becomes fully mortal and dies. Having now a soul, unlike the soulless Tuatha, she supposedly goes to Heaven. In Ethne's fate, her sundering from her immortal kinfolk, her assumption of mortality and a soul, and her gift of a mortal's afterlife, one can perhaps see a model for Arwen Evenstar and her fate in the Lord of the Rings. She is an immortal elven maiden who also assumes mortality, in her case in order to marry Aragorn. She loses contact with her immortal kin when they desert this world. And she too, it is intimated by Tolkien, gains with her mortality a soul which entitles her to a mortal's afterlife.¹⁷

The fate of Arwen echoes even more strongly The Fate of the Children of Lir. In this tale, four of the Tuatha De Danaan, three males and one female, Fionnula, return to Ireland after a magically imposed exile, only to discover it empty of the Tuatha, and inhabited by mortals. They return to the fairy mounds and find them covered with thorn and weed. They wander disconsolate searching for their kinfolk. So too did Arwen, after the death of Aragorn, wander the deserted groves of Lorien. "And she went out from the city of Minas Tirith and passed away to the land of Lorien, and dwelt there alone under the fading trees..."¹⁸

In both Tolkien's saga and the Irish Mythological Cycle, an immortal, gifted folk have learned magical skills overseas, and have returned to mortal lands to contest sovereignty with demonic figures. In both tales they were figures of power and determination. And in both tales they lose their power to mortals and wane, finally disappearing from mortal ken, to remain in the memory as figures of great beauty and nostalgia.

We go back to Elvenhome,
where the white tree is growing
and the star shines upon the foam
on the last shore flowing.¹⁹

NOTES:

1. "The Wooing of Etain." in The Book of Irish Verse (New York: Macmillan, 1976), stanza 1, lines 1-2.
2. Humphrey Carpenter, Tolkien: A Biography. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1977), pp. 56-57.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 94.
4. Douglass Parker, "Hwaet We Holbytlá...", The Hudson Review IX (Winter 1956-1957) : 606.
5. Paul H. Kocher, Master of Middle Earth. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1972), p. 12.
6. Alwyn Rees and Brinley Rees, Celtic Heritage. (London: Thames and Hudson, 1961), p. 26.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 104.
8. Proinsias MacCana, Celtic Mythology. (New York: Hamlyn, 1970), pp. 57-64.
9. J.R.R. Tolkien, The Silmarillion. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1977), p. 90.
10. Rees, Celtic Heritage, pp. 29-30.
11. Parker, "Hwaet We Holbytlá...", p. 603.
12. J.R.R. Tolkien, The Return of the King. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1966), p. 149.
13. J.R.R. Tolkien, The Fellowship of the Ring. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1966), p. 89.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 381.
15. Myles Dillon, Early Irish Literature. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1948), p. 67.
16. This is a later development of the figure of Manannan, as the Rees brothers point out (Celtic Heritage, p. 39), and reflects possibly the coming journey of some Tuatha across the sea.
17. Tolkien, Return of the King, p. 344.
18. *Ibid.*, p. 344.
19. J.R.R. Tolkien, "The Last Ship." in The Tolkien Reader. (New York: Ballantine Books, 1966), stanza 8, lines 5-8.

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Motif of the Garden, continued from page 6

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be taken from this edition; page numbers will be indicated in parenthesis.

³Ursula LeGuin, "Fantasy, Like Poetry, Speaks the Language of the Night," The Language of the Night, Ed. Susan Wood (New York: G. P. Putnam, 1979), p. 11.

⁴Gaston Bachelard, The Poetics of Space, Trans. Maria Jolas (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969), p. 15. Subsequent quotations will be taken from this edition; page numbers will be indicated in parenthesis.

⁵Mervyn Peake, Titus Groan (New York: Ballantine, 1976), p. 77.

⁶C. N. Manlove, Modern Fantasy (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1975), p. 256.

PARMA ELDALAMBERON

The Council of Stewards regrets to announce that Parma Eldalamberon, the Mythopoeic Society's Elvish language journal, must be officially discontinued. It has been three years since Parma 5 appeared, and a long series of letters and personal approaches to the Parma staff has failed to bring another issue demonstrably nearer to publication.

While the Mythopoeic Linguistic Fellowship, a special activity group, has always undertaken production of the magazine, the Society as a whole owns Parma. is financially responsible for it, and is legally obligated to fulfill subscriptions. The Stewards have acted unanimously in the light of these responsibilities.

Though the magazine may someday be reconstituted - indeed, the entire Council hopes that this will be the case - we are setting the books in order by addressing an offer of settlement to current Parma subscribers. Any revival will be announced.

Meanwhile our readers and members are asked not to send Parma subscription money to the Society. Back issues remain available. Articles on Mythopoeic languages will be welcome in Mythlore.

Lee Speth, 1981 Chairman, for The Council of Stewards

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