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Letters

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

Albuquerque, New Mexico • Postponed to: July 30 – August 2, 2021



Authors

Todd W. Jensen, John Laurent, Darrell Schweitzer, Rhona Beare, Kathryn Lindskoog, and Melanie Rawls



LETTERS

Readers' Letters are an important form of feedback and exchange, an opportunity to comment on past issues and to raise questions for others' comments. Each letter that is printed extends the writer's subscription by an additional issue. Letters by disk are most preferred (see elsewhere in the issue in the Submissions announcement for formatting information), but typewritten and handwritten letters are also welcome. **Please send your letters directly to the Editor:** Glen GoodKnight, 742 South Garfield Avenue, Monterey Park, CA 91754 USA

Todd W. Jensen

St. Louis, MO

I was very interested to read Anne Burn's letter [in the last issue] bringing up Marion Zimmer Bradley's *The Mists of Avalon*. In particular, Burn's comment that Bradley had done some erring on historical accuracy shot straight home, for it echoed sentiments of mine.

Bradley's "Goddess-religion" struck me as even more historically inaccurate than her view of Christianity. In the first place, it seems doubtful that Christianity had any serious competitors in Celtic Britain around A.D. 500 (short of the Saxon gods, of course). The monk Gildas, who wrote *De Excidio Britanniae* around 540, our chief source for this period in British history, denounces his contemporaries for injustice, corruption, bribery, violence, and so on, but not for idolatry; it seems that they were "Christians," as far as religious worship was concerned (though certainly not following its dictates in their private lives). This makes it quite unlikely that there was a serious revival of the worship of the old Celtic gods in "Arthurian" times.

Secondly, Bradley's description of pre-Christian Celtic worship does not evoke what little we know of it from history. The religious leaders in pre-Christian Britain were Druids, who seem to have been primarily male, and their pantheon contained male divinities as well as female ones, both in prominence. Julius Caesar's description of the Druids certainly does not suggest Goddess-worshippers; neither, for that matter, do those of other classical Greek and Roman writers on Celtic beliefs. In fact, Bradley openly admits in her introduction that she got all of her information from modern-day neo-pagan groups, rather than pre-Christian Britain. The matriarchal religion that she depicts does not sound like something that would have been around in the Iron Age; indeed, all of it sounds like something more appropriate to paleolithic times. At any rate, it certainly doesn't sound like what ever Druidic Celts in Britain seem to have believed, from what we know of them. I don't think that the Celts were really a very matriarchal people — women seem to have played a more

prominent role in their society than in classical ones, but it sounds closer to a rough form of "equal opportunity" than outright feminism. Alongside Boudicca and Cartimandua, there were also Cassivellanus, Cunobelin, and Caratacus.

Another error of Bradley's was having pre-Christian Celtic religion believe in reincarnation. A few classical writers mistakenly believe that Druidism taught this, but they seem to have gotten the facts wrong. The Druidic Celts rather seem to have believed in a regular afterlife in an "Isles of the Blessed"-type place. (And I believe that Avalon, properly speaking, was not Glastonbury, not even an "alternate Glastonbury," but a mythical island out in the Atlantic. Tolkien had it right when he located it — as *Avallonnë* — in the Undying Lands.

Bradley got a few other historical facts wrong, for that matter. In one part of the book, she refers to the Moorish invasions of Spain. In fact, these took place in the early 8th century (A.D. 711, to be exact); in the time of the historical Arthur (late 5th/early 6th century — and Bradley follows this), Islam did not even exist as yet. And while Bradley portrays the Saxons as being converted to Christianity in Arthur's lifetime, this didn't start until the closing years of the 6th century, when King Ethelbert of Kent (anachronistically portrayed as coming to Arthur's court in the latter part of the book) received St. Augustine of Canterbury in A.D. 597. (And he was not king of Anglia, as Bradley incorrectly claimed).

It seems to me that what we have in Bradley is a writer who skimmed on her research and really produced her own mythology of the past, about as accurate as the popular "cavemen riding dinosaurs" syndrome. This should be a warning to all of us who want to write "historical fantasies": really study the period!

Many thanks for continuing to bring out *Mythlore*.

John Laurent

Griffith Univ., Australia

I noticed this item in the paper, *The Australian*, 27-8 March 1993, recently and thought it might interest you as a possible contribution to the letters column in terms of being, perhaps, a remarkable affirmation of C.S. Lewis' prescience in imagining a sea-covered Venus in *Perelandra*:

Probe suggests past life on Venus

Fresh evidence that Venus may have supported life billions of years ago has come from satellite images taken by the Pioneer 12 orbiter.

Scientists studying data beamed back before the space craft burnt up in the Venusian atmosphere last October

claim to have found powerful evidence that shallow seas once carpeted the planet's surface.

The information, which has been analyzed by researchers at the National Aeronautics and Space Administration's Ames center and the University of Michigan, indicate there was once enough water to fill oceans 8 m to 48 m deep. They believe the oceans would have been in existence long enough for life to have developed.

Astronomers and planetary scientists have long been fascinated with Venus's past. The planet is most like Earth and is closest to it. Researchers have speculated that about 3 billion years ago a runaway greenhouse effect eventually vaporized any water.

Temperatures on modern Venus, a dry hot planet, reach as high as 480C. The researchers claim they may once have been as low as 21C.

The deuterium levels, produced by evaporation, indicate that up to 300 times as much water was once on Venus.

Darrell Schweitzer

Stratford, PA

Well, Paul Edwin Zimmer certainly managed to descend on Melanie Rawls like a ton of (metrical) bricks. What I do think needs to be emphasized in this discussion is that most of the poems in question are *part of The Lord of the Rings*. Therefore they are not so much the work of Tolkien, but of his *characters*, and as such must be appropriate to those characters. If the elves had sung rap (or, more of the era, Talking Blues) or Theoden's dirge had been a pastiche of *The Waste Land*, this would have broken the spell of the story by dint of sheer absurdity. No, a funeral dirge for a heroic king in a heroic, mock-medieval world is more appropriate in something resembling the old Saxon style. The folksongs of this world are better resembling real folksongs than, say, the *Cantos* of Ezra Pound. The verse which serves *The Lord of the Rings* is as much a part of the book as any prose passage and so style and subject matter must match.

As for "modern" (by which we really mean twentieth century) verse, well, the decline in English language poetry may be summed up by the following challenge. Ask someone who reads, but doesn't particularly study contemporary poetry to name a famous poem written in the past twenty years. They can't. There aren't any. Probably the last famous poem in English was Ginzberg's "Howl," and that was more for its legal problems than for its content. But three or four generations back, any literate person could have named (or even recited) many famous poems.

Rhona Beare

Univ. of Newcastle, Australia

I was amused by "Where did the Dwarves Come From?" by William Sarjeant [in Issue 71]. Why not look up Tolkien's later account in *Unfinished Tales*, p. 335? Gandalf there says Thorin reached Bag End after Balin because Thorin "hung back at the last." Gandalf wanted to prevent Bilbo from hearing in advance news of "a large party of Dwarves," p. 335, so presumably instructed the dwarves to scatter on entering the Shire and find their ways by

different routes to Bag End. Balin and Gloin, p. 332, are with Thorin in Ered Luin: apparently all the dwarves spent as much time there as Thorin himself.

I admire the Center Spread by Patrick Wynne, but regret the absence of commentary. The "little book with elvish letters" (I quote p. 22) does *not* say "Remember Taum Santoski." It seems to say "Taum Santoski enalen" which makes no sense to me. The figure at the top left is Melkor; to his right is Sauron, facing Arien the Lady of the Sun; at the top right is Tilion (the Moon). I did not recognize Melkor and Sauron, I had to first transliterate their names, but now see that Melkor holds his famous mace Grond.

The following was meant for the previous issue of tributes. We regret it was not included then.

Kathryn Lindskoog

Orange, CA

When I think of the special personal friends who have entered my life through the Mythopoeic Society, I am overwhelmed with pleasure. I vividly remember meeting Glen GoodKnight, Bonnie Bergstrom [Callahan], and Gracia Fay Ellwood at the historic Narnia picnic. Since then, many dreams have come true: some of us have reared children all the way from babyhood to adulthood, published books or artwork, collected books or artwork, travelled to wonderful places, and met famous people we first admired from afar.

Through it, our years have been measured by Mythopoeic Conferences, and the seasons of our lives graced by *Mythlore*.

Melanie Rawls

Tallahassee, FL

Response to Paul Edwin Zimmer:

But you must not take me more seriously than I take myself! My article grew of my initial response to the early verse which appeared in *The Book of Lost Tales* and *The Lays of Beleriand*. I said to myself, "Hey! Tolkien's verse really improved over the years! How interesting!" So I started thinking about it and reading what other people had to say on the subject and eventually I set my impressions, opinions, and speculations down on paper. I expected readers to peruse the article and murmur to themselves, "I agree... I disagree... She's got a point... Oooohh... Hhmmmm... On the other hand..." etc. Where did all this setting myself up as some kind of authority or arrogantly granting people permission to enjoy Tolkien's poetry come from? Not from me.

I do regret that my enthusiasm for Tolkien's verse does not seem to have come through. The tone of restrained praise, which you seem to interpret as irony, presumption, damning with faint praise, *et cetera*, actually is an attempt not to burble. If my apartment were on fire, Tolkien's prose and poetry would go out the door in the first armload ("Tinfang Warble" and all) and T.S. Eliot would just have to wait. As far as I am concerned, Professor Tolkien would never have had to apologize for anything. He knew what he was doing, as his letter to Pauline Baynes indicates, and we're all the richer for it.

CELTIC

Mythopoeic Stationery

by Patrick Wynne

This stationery features four designs, all found in *Mythlore* 35: The Celtic circles portray themes from J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, and Charles Williams. Each circle is at the top right of the page and is 3.6" in diameter, with a lined border around the page. The fourth design is of the four corners found on the mailing envelope your *Mythlore* is sent in, but much larger in size. The set includes 4 sheets of each design, making 16 printed sheets, 12 blank sheets, and 16 envelopes. The paper is neutral but beautifully antique parchment. Each set makes fine personal stationery for both men and women, and is excellent for that special mythopoeic gift. \$5 per set. Send your order to: *Mythlore* Orders Dept., 1008 N. Monterey, Alhambra, CA 91801.

What I'm going to do is black out all your unflattering inferences and speculations about my taste in poetry and my attitude toward Tolkien and his works, inferences and speculations which were, for the most part, w-a-a-a-y off the mark (and irrelevant as well, to the issue). Then I'm settling down to some serious study of your fascinating assessment of the metrical intricacies of Tolkien's verse. If only an article of such expertise had been available when I first started trying to get beyond the "I like this poem; I like this one better" stage of critical assessment! (If there are such articles available, I could not unearth one. Rats!) Heck, I still think "Tinfang Warble" is a dreadful little poem, especially in comparison with others that Tolkien wrote, but I now understand better what Tolkien was doing metrically in this verse, and I thank you for the explication. I learned long ago that learning is a better companion than ego, and you were (or seemed to me to be) dead-on in several places where you pointed out weaknesses and inconsistencies in my presentation. And if I hadn't submitted the article, you wouldn't have been provoked into responding, and I might have never had a chance to correct some misconceptions or pursue some of the avenues you mention.

As soon as I stop seeing stars (you punch mighty hard), I'll get right to it.

ARTISTS' COMMENTS

Front Cover: "Dorothy L. Sayers" by Nancy-Lou Patterson

In my cover drawing in honor of the Centenary of Dorothy L. Sayers (1893-1957), I have based her portrait upon the sketch by John Gilroy RA mad in 1930. It shows her in a triumphant mood, when, having already published her twelve famous and still-popular detective novels, she was invited to write *The Zeal of Thy House*, a play performed in Canterbury Cathedral. That cathedral is on her right (the view's left), reminding us that she was a lifelong Anglican, while an angel from the ceiling of Fenchurch St. Paul, the setting of her detectival masterpiece, the *Nine Tailors*, along with her matchless detective, Lord Peter Wimsey, depicted as acted by Edward Petherbridge, are on her left (the viewer's right). The portraitist sketched her as she approached the pivot of her career, which began in 1916 with the publication of *Op. 1*, her first book of poetry, and ended when she died in the midst of translating the third and final part of Dante's *Divine Comedy*. As poet, novelist, essayist, playwright, and scholar, she shared with her fellow Christian writers C.S. Lewis, Charles Williams, and T.S. Eliot, a profound sense of the spiritual dimensions of reality.

Back Cover: "Searching Upward" by Sarah Beach, from Dorothy L. Sayers' *The Nine Tailors*

At the end of *The Nine Tailors*, when the missing emeralds have been found and when the mystery body has been identified, there remained a question as to how the man had died. A flood is washing over the fens of the area, and Wimsey climbs the church's bell tower to look out over the region. As he climbs through the bell chamber, the bells are rung in alarm, and Lord Peter is given a demonstration of what it was that killed the mystery man — nine hours of being tied up in the bell chamber during a marathon peal.

When I came to do this picture, I decided to go for a more stylized appearance. Lord Peter's search at this point is objectively simple, to see the extent of the flood. But subjectively he's still in the dark, he still seeks an answer to the mystery of the dead man — an existential question, if you will. So he searches upward through the bells, and finds his answer.

BENEFACTORS

Benefactors support the improvement and outreach of *Mythlore* by making donations of \$25 or more beyond the cost of membership/subscription. For this much-appreciated support they are listed for four issues. You are encouraged to become a Benefactor and show your support.

Bonnie Callahan
Patrick Wynne
Robert Hall, Jr.

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