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"The world has changed. I see it in the water, I feel it in the Earth, I smell it in the air": The Celtic Otherworld in *The Lord of the Rings* (1954-1955)[1]

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Abstract:

The world of Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* has been a matter of study of numerous comparisons that have contributed to establish a relationship with mythological and cultural aspects that may have influenced its creation. While Norse mythology has been accepted even by Tolkien as one of the main references in the creation of his world, the functionality and symbology of Celtic culture have been disdained. This study aims to analyze those elements in *The Lord of the Rings* that are closely related to the Celtic Irish and Welsh otherworld and their connection to the elvish lands of Rivendell and Lothlórien. Among these supernatural phenomena are the temporal perception within elven territories, the efficacy and symbolic significance of water as a ward against malevolent forces, and the intricacies associated with navigating narrow passages, rivers, and bridges. The methodology used is the traditional scientific empirical method through the study of *The Fellowship of the Ring* (1954), *The Letters of J. R. R. Tolkien* (1981) and Peter Jackson's *The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring* (2001). The work of Thomas Lyman, "Celtic: Celtic Things and Things Celtic," has been utilized as a source to discuss whether Celtic elements appear in Tolkien's writing. Lyman pointed out several aspects of Tolkien's work that seem similar to Celtic themes, with the afterlife being one of the most noticeable. It is evident, therefore, that despite Tolkien's

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'distaste' for Celtic things, and the uncertainty about the concept of "afterlives" in his work there are several aspects that, unconsciously or unintentionally, have been created and modeled as a possible explanation to the beyond.

Keywords: Celtic culture, Celtic Otherworld, English literature, Celtic mythology, J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings*.

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 1) stating that "Needless to say they are not Celtic!" (Tolkien 26). Nevertheless, some scholars have questioned whether Tolkien's statements were truly real. As J.S. Lyman-Thomas claims in his article "Celtic: Celtic Things and Things Celtic —Identity, Language, and Mythology", Tolkien's fascination with Welsh commenced at an early stage with his personal Celtic library even "referring to himself as a "Celtophile" as early as 1929" (272). Thomas also considers that both his letters and literary works "reflect a consistent interest in and affection for 'things Celtic', particularly Welsh" (272). Dimitra Fimi, in "Mad Elves and Elusive Beauty: Some Celtic Strands of Tolkien's Mythology" states that in his letter to Naomi Mitchison in 1954, Tolkien "was far from ignorant about 'things Celtic' and he later described his stories of the Grey Elves as being of a 'Celtic type'" (3). The same author 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" (Fimi, 2), including Celtic elements.

In his letter to Milton Waldman, Tolkien expressed his desire to craft an own mythology to have "the fair elusive beauty that some call Celtic" (Carpenter and Tolkien 2014, 144). In *The Book of Lost Tales* (1983), Ælfwine's voyage[3] is associated with the

[3] Ælfwine was the first human in many millennia to discover the Straight Road and reach Tol Eressëa. Originally conceived by Tolkien to serve as a "Narrator" for his works, the character of Ælfwine evolved significantly throughout the development of the legendarium. Ælfwine was fascinated by maritime tales, particularly the Irish legends of Maelduin and Saint Brendan, who embarked on sea voyages encountering a series of marvelous islands. He also learned of a great western land that had been destroyed.

Celtic Irish tradition of the *Immrama*,[4] "a sea-voyage tale in which a hero, accompanied by a few companions, wanders about from island to island, meets Otherworld wonders everywhere, and finally returns to his native land" (Swank 5). The same can be applied to the book *Roverandom* (1920) where the puppy Rover "is sent away to the moon and the Deep Blue Sea after he bites an irritable wizard" (Swank 8) and, obviously, to his later poem *The Nameless Land* (1927) that would also suppose a kind of inspiration when crafting lands from Middle-earth like Lothlórien and Rivendell.

Definition of the Otherworld in Tolkien's Work

The term "Otherworld" is used to denote a realm postulated to exist beyond mortal existence. Marjorie Burns asserts that the Celts conceptualized an Otherworld as an "spirit world shared and magically juxtaposed with the primary and everyday world" (56). Steve Blamires in *Magic of the Celtic Otherworld: Irish History, Lore & Rituals* (2005), defines Otherworld as a word used for "describing a world beyond death or even for some mortals as a present reality" (10). Within Celtic belief systems, the Otherworld is construed as a domain of perpetual existence, coexisting alongside the tangible world, and perceived as a familiar yet enigmatic dimension. Although its own conception, the otherworld's separation from our physical world, marked by the inaccessibility and its supernatural nature "coexists with its immediacy, hidden within, or identified with, the landmarks of each locale" (Carey 2). Verlyn Flieger and Anderson note that Tolkien gives clear indications for the term "faerie" and consequently "otherworld" by stating that Tolkien "used it to mean the Otherworld beyond the five senses—a parallel reality tangential in time and space to the ordinary world" (85).

The Watery Element

In *Perilous Realms: Celtic and Norse in Tolkien's Middle-earth* (2005), Marjorie Burns explores Tolkien's thematic alignment between the Celtic Otherworld and the elvish

[4] *Immram* or *Immrama*, literally means "rowing about". A poetic composition authored by J.R.R. Tolkien, which debuted in *Time and Tide* on December 3, 1955. The title denotes "voyage," and draws upon the Celtic literary tradition of *Immrama*. These narratives chronicle the expeditions of Irish adventurers as they pursue the elusive Land of Promise across the Atlantic.

realms of Rivendell and Lothlórien, particularly in the chapter "Bridges, Gates and Doors". Burns contends that Tolkien's narrative settings are characterized by features such as water crossings and natural arches formed by bending branches and trees, or by a descent into secluded valleys (90). Robert Schurer, in his study of Tolkien's shape of water, claims that water is "ubiquitous" in Tolkien's work since "throughout the novel, we encounter water in flowing and standing bodies of all shapes and sizes" (2). Other scholars such as Dickerson, in "Water, Ecology, and Healing in *The Lord of the Rings*", argue that even though Tolkien's watery depiction can be negative, "water actually plays a positive symbolic role in Middle-earth" (28).

Robin Markus Auer, in his contribution to the volume *Sub-creating Arda: World Rebuilding in J. R. R. Tolkien's Work* (2019), edited by Dimitra Fimi and Thomas Honegger, delves into the significance of physicality within Middle-earth, asserting that the narrative intricately intertwines with natural elements, notably fire, water, earth, and air, to accentuate the tangible aspects of the world (238). Markus further contends that certain landscapes in Middle-earth exhibit a pronounced association with water bodies, such as lakes and rivers, which imbue these spaces with a distinct form of materiality, thereby shaping unique cognitive landscapes, particularly for outsiders (241). Consequently, watery features, including lakes and wells, play a defining role in delineating Tolkien's portrayal of elvish terrain. The journey to Rivendell implies the crossing of a river by the Hobbits and Aragorn, symbolizing both a physical obstacle and, in parallel, the threshold to the Celtic Otherworld. Likewise, in Lothlórien, as the fellowship approaches and prepares to traverse the Nimrodel river,[5] Legolas's inclination to cleanse himself underscores the transcendent significance attributed to water. His statement, "I will bathe my feet for it is said that the water is healing to the weary" (Tolkien 339), not only underscores water's role as a conduit between realms

[5] Nimrodel, a petite waterway originating from the eastern slopes of the Misty Mountains, flowed eastward before joining with the Celebrant at the western periphery of Lothlórien. While its physical attributes and geographical significance are notable, Nimrodel is imbued with a symbolic resonance tied to themes of restoration and rejuvenation. In Tolkien's legendarium, water often symbolizes purity, renewal, and healing, and Nimrodel's association with Lothlórien, a realm known for its ethereal beauty and mystical qualities, further amplifies its healing symbolism.

but also its sacred and rejuvenating properties for those venturing into unfamiliar territories.

Ringwraiths and Banshees

Rivendell and Lothlórien, both elven settlements, are characterized by their proximity to bodies of water, a feature attributed not only to the sacred and healing properties of water but also to its conceptual purity, which affords protection against malevolent forces. This notion is exemplified in Peter Jackson's *The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring* (2001), particularly when Arwen Undómiel[6] rides to Rivendell to aid Frodo, who is afflicted by a wound inflicted by one of the Nazgûl's[7] blade. As the Nazgûl approach the river's edge, they are compelled to halt their advance, constrained by the inherent laws governing the dichotomy of good and evil. Despite this limitation, the Nazgûl attempt to traverse the river, breaching the boundary separating Rivendell's territory. In response, Arwen harnesses the power of the water, invoking an enchantment that ensnares and subdues the Nazgûl, compelling them to succumb to the river's current. This evokes parallels with banshees, as both the Nazgûl and banshees exhibit relentless pursuit of their targets, demonstrating an eerie persistence reminiscent of spectral entities. While the Nazgûl are depicted as entities neither wholly living nor dead, as articulated by Aragorn in the source material, they are characterized by an aversion to light, indicative of their malevolent nature:

> They themselves do not see the world of light as we do: our forms cast shadows on the minds of the Riders, shadows that only the midday sun can destroy, and they perceive in the darkness signs and shapes that escape us and are then most terrible. (Tolkien 162)

[6] She, often called Arwen Evenstar, is the daughter of Elrond and Celebrían.
[7] Commonly referred to as the *Ringwraiths*, they were mortal men who underwent a transformation into wraith-like entities because of their association with the Rings of Power. Their longevity was extended unnaturally, rendering their existence seemingly endless; however, this prolonged life eventually became intolerable to them. Gradually succumbing to the influence of the rings and the dominion of the One Ring, their physical forms diminished until they were permanently invisible, ultimately manifesting as wraiths.

In *The Lord of the Rings* water serves as a pivotal "cognitive space", providing the hobbits with the means to evade the forces of evil, exemplified by the ford of the river Bruinen.[8] According to Auer, Frodo's deliverance from the Nazgûl occurs as they attempt to ford the Bruinen and are swept away by the current, underscoring their aversion to water and drawing parallels to banshees (248). As depicted by Tolkien, the Nazgûl exhibit an aversion to light, rendering them vulnerable in its presence and incapable of entering sanctified places such as Rivendell and Lothlórien, where light prevails over darkness. This thematic resonance aligns with Celtic mythology, wherein banshees function as spectral messengers foretelling impending death. Banshees, traditionally associated with rivers, are portrayed as tall figures with pallid complexions and piercing, remorseless eyes, clad in dark robes: "They were five tall figures, in white faces burned with piercing, pitiless eyes; under their cloaks they wore long, grey robes" (Tolkien 167). Despite their gender distinction, both the Nazgûl and banshees share common traits, notably their inability to traverse water, symbolizing a state of eternal anguish and condemnation to wander in darkness.

Wells and Divination

Wells serve as portals to alternate realms, a concept exemplified by Galadriel's utilization of a well in Lothlórien as a means of divination, harnessing the energies pervading the land to access and convey knowledge to mortals. Similarly, Galadriel's mirror is imbued with mystical properties, intricately linked to the surrounding water sources of Lothlórien. As seen in *The Fellowship of the Ring* (1954), the water in the mirror comes from "a silver stream that issued from the fountain on the hill" (Tolkien 361). While the precise mechanism underlying the mirror's functionality remains ambiguous, Tolkien imbues it with profound symbolic significance, particularly regarding its association with water derived from a silver stream atop a nearby mountain. The act of pouring water into the mirror is depicted as an act of invoking mysterious forces,

[8] Bruinen, also known as "Loudwater," constituted a river located in the eastern region of Eriador. The name "Bruinen" derives from Sindarin, with *brui* signifying "noisy" and *nen* translating to "water" in the same language.

prompting Galadriel to caution Frodo and Sam against physical contact due to its enigmatic, potentially hazardous nature.

Galadriel's ritualistic action of breathing upon the water surface, coupled with her explicit instruction for Frodo, Sam, and herself to refrain from physical contact with it, underscores a palpable sense of mystique surrounding the functioning of the Mirror. Galadriel herself acknowledges the enigmatic nature of the mirror's operation, attributing it to what she terms in the book as "this is what your folk would call magic" (Tolkien 362), a designation that defies conventional elucidation. The delineation of this phenomenon remains ambiguous, prompting speculation as to its underlying mechanisms. Whether the efficacy of the mirror resides in the properties of the water, Galadriel's breath, the basin itself, or potentially the influence of Nenya, the water-associated Ring of Adamant revealed later in the episode, remains subject to interpretation. This ambiguity is consistent with the essence of the mystical, wherein phenomena evade rational explication. In the well, Frodo and Sam are granted visions of the future; Sam glimpses the devastation of the Shire, while Frodo foresees Gandalf's return, transformed into Gandalf the White. Despite its prophetic nature, Galadriel asserts that the mirror is accessible only to her, signifying her exclusive authority and mastery over the magical energies permeating Lothlórien.

At the same time, water also serves as a symbolic conduit between worlds and a gateway to the afterlife, echoing broader mythological motifs. The convergence of past, present, and future within the afterlife is a recurring theme in various cultural narratives, and Lothlórien mirrors this concept through the mirror's revelations, which not only foreshadow impending events but also offer glimpses into the nature of the realm itself. For instance, Frodo's vision of Gandalf's transformation into Gandalf the White parallels events depicted in *The Two Towers* (1954), underscoring the mirror's ability to transcend temporal boundaries and illuminate the interconnectedness of past, present, and future within the mythic landscape of Lothlórien.

Conception of Time and Otherworldly Energies

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In Juan Eduardo Cirlot's seminal work, *Dictionary of Symbols* (2013), rivers are elucidated as bearing multifaceted meanings, notably encapsulating the concept of time and its passage (270). This thematic underpinning finds resonance in J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*, particularly when the fellowship traverses two bridges over water upon arriving in Lothlórien. These crossings symbolize the transition between realms, emblematic of temporal shifts from one world to another. Other prominent scholars such as John Carey have expounded upon the temporal disparities inherent in otherworldly settings, positing that time therein diverges fundamentally from mortal reckonings (15). Instances such as Frodo's awakening in Rivendell and his subsequent inquiries regarding temporal nuances to Bilbo underscore this notion. Moreover, the fellowship's departure from Lothlórien and their attendant emotional responses further accentuate the thematic import of time within the narrative. In Peter Jackson's *The Fellowship of the Ring* (2001), Galadriel's mirror serves as a conduit for temporal revelation. Her invocation of "things that were, things that are, and things that yet may be" (Jackson 02:19:14) elucidates a temporal continuum wherein the present interlaces with potential futures.

While the mirror possesses magical properties, its portrayal underscores Lothlórien as an otherworldly realm wherein temporal dynamics extend beyond the immediate present, affording glimpses into both past and prospective events. Thus, through an academic lens, Galadriel's mirrors exemplify the narrative's exploration of temporality within Lothlórien, depicting it as a realm wherein time unfolds in a manner both distinct from and intertwined with mortal perceptions. The thematic exploration of temporal distortion within otherworldly contexts, as depicted in J. R. R. Tolkien's works, finds antecedents in Celtic Irish narratives. These narratives, typified by tales such as *Tucait Baili Mongáin*[9], exhibit protagonists experiencing temporal displacement during dreamlike adventures. In this tale, the Irish Prince Mongán[10] finds himself submerged in an alternate reality after seeking refuge from a storm, wherein he

[9] The third of four tales concerning Mongán mac Fiachnai inside of the manuscript *Lebor na hUidre* and composed in the eighth century.
[10] This refers to the Irish prince of the Cruthin. Appears in the "Cycles of the Kings" and the *Lebor na hUidre.*

perceives the passage of what feels like a year within the span of a single night. This narrative archetype, epitomized by the sensation of time elapsing differently within the otherworld, resonates with Frodo's awakening in Rivendell following his harrowing journey.

Tolkien, in *The Fellowship of the Ring*, portrays Frodo's disorientation upon regaining consciousness in Elrond's House, reminiscent of Mongán's experience. Frodo's query regarding the passage of time underscores the temporal disjunction inherent in such otherworldly realms, as elucidated by Elrond's response detailing the duration of Frodo's convalescence:

> Elrond has cured you: he has tended you for days, ever since you were brought in. Days? -said Frodo. Well, four nights, and three days, to be exact. The Elves brought you from the Ford of the night of the twentieth, and that is where you lost count. (Tolkien 288)

Frodo's reflection upon the indeterminacy of time within Rivendell reinforces this thematic motif, as he articulates the challenge of quantifying temporal intervals within the confines of the elven sanctuary: "I can't count days in Rivendell" (Tolkien 288). Similarly, the departure from Lothlórien marks a significant juncture wherein the Fellowship transitions from the dreamlike ambiance of the elven realm to the exigencies of their quest. Tolkien captures the fellowship's reluctance to bid farewell to Lothlórien, portraying it as a place where temporal boundaries blur, rendering the passage of time immeasurable. This departure symbolizes a departure from the ephemeral tranquility of the otherworld into the temporal exigencies of mortal reality. Thus, through a comparative analysis of Tolkien's narrative constructs and Celtic Irish folklore, it becomes apparent that the theme of temporal distortion within otherworldly settings serves as a recurring motif, emblematic of the liminality between mortal and ethereal realms.

Galadriel and the Celtic Swan

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As the fellowship prepares to depart from Lothlórien, Galadriel aids them by providing a boat in the form of a majestic swan, a symbol rich in Celtic mythological associations. Described as a swan of great size, with "its beak shone like burnished gold, and its eyes glinted like jet set in yellow stones; its huge white wings were half lifted" (Tolkien 485) the swan is reminiscent of Celtic deities associated with healing waters and the sun. Galadriel is often compared to Celtic water goddesses in scholarly discourse, further reinforcing the symbolic resonance of the swan motif. In Celtic lore, swans are linked to themes of music, love, and purity, qualities embodied by Galadriel as a daughter of the Valar.[11] The image of Galadriel on the boat, adorned with a circlet of golden flowers and holding a harp as she sings, evokes parallels with the depiction of Otherworldly swans adorned with golden and silver chains around their necks, reinforcing the connection between Galadriel and mythical swan symbolism. The departure of the fellowship from Lothlórien in *The Lord of the Rings* is marked by a significant gesture: the provision of elvish gifts to each member by Celeborn. As stated:

> The elves next unwrapped and gave to each of the Company the clothes they had brought. For each they had provided a hood and a cloak, made according to his size, of the light but warm silken stuff that the Galadhrim[12] wove. It was hard to say of what colour they were: grey with the hue of twilight under the trees they seemed to be; and yet if they were moved, or set in another light, they were green as shadowed leaves, or brown as fallow fields by night, dusk silver as water under the stars. (Tolkien 479)

In many Irish tales, departing for the Otherworld is associated with receiving gifts or blessings from the inhabitants of that realm. These gifts serve various purposes, such as providing protection, guidance, or enhancing the recipient's abilities. Fairies are

[11] The Valar are divine beings in Tolkien's mythology, created by Eru Ilúvatar to govern the world of Arda. Residing in the land of Aman, they shape the world and combat the dark influence of Melkor. Each Vala reigns over a specific aspect of nature or governance.
[12] The Galadhrim, Elven inhabitants of Lothlórien ruled by Lord Celeborn and Lady Galadriel, are skilled warriors and artisans with a deep connection to nature. They aided the fellowship in their destruction of the One Ring.

known to bestow gifts upon travelers embarking on journeys to the Otherworld. These gifts can range from magical objects or artifacts to enchanted garments or tokens of luck. For instance, fairies might provide travelers with a cloak that renders them invisible, a magical sword, or a charm that grants safe passage through perilous lands. The act of receiving gifts from the fairies before departure often symbolizes a form of initiation or acceptance into the Otherworldly realm. It signifies the traveler's readiness to embark on a journey of spiritual or personal growth, guided and protected by the benevolent forces of the Otherworld.

Conclusion

Tolkien's aversion to "Celtic things", as articulated in his 1937 correspondence with Stanley Unwin, marked the genesis of what scholars have termed "Celticism" within Tolkien's literary corpus, particularly evident in his magnum opus, *The Lord of the Rings* (1954-55). Scholars have drawn attention to Tolkien's early collection of Celtic literature dating back to 1929, as well as his self-identification as a "Celtophile", as indicative of his engagement with Irish and Welsh mythology and folklore. Tolkien's desire to forge a distinct mythology for England is evident in his early writings, notably in *The Book of Lost Tales* (1983) and later in *The Lord of the Rings*. It is apparent that Celtic Irish and Welsh folklore exerted a significant influence on Tolkien's creative endeavors. This influence is particularly notable in his treatment of water as a prominent thematic element in key locations within Middle-earth, such as Lothlórien and Rivendell. Tolkien conceptualized the elvish realms as secondary worlds characterized by their proximity to bodies of water, including rivers and waterfalls. These aquatic features serve to underscore the notion of "cognitive spaces" bridging the realms of Middle-earth, suggesting a symbolic and metaphysical connection between the mortal world and the Otherworld.

Tolkien's Rivendell and Lothlórien are characterized by their secluded, magical environments, surrounded by watery elements, and infused with Otherworldly energies. The perilous transition experienced by mortal beings entering these realms echoes themes found in Celtic mythology surrounding journeys to the Otherworld, where the landscape is often depicted as a realm of eternal beauty and joy. The

emphasis on sensory experiences and emotional states during the passage to and from Rivendell and Lothlórien mirrors descriptions found in Celtic tales of mortals journeying to the Irish Otherworld. While Tolkien may have refrained from overtly labeling his work with specific cultural influences, the deliberate crafting of these landscapes suggests a nuanced engagement with themes and motifs from Celtic tradition. Thus, Rivendell and Lothlórien can be seen as evocative manifestations of the Celtic Otherworld within Tolkien's legendarium, enriching the depth and complexity of his fictional universe.

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