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Chaoskampf, Salvation, and Dragons: Archetypes in Tolkien's Earendel

Abstract

Study of world-wide mythical archetypes in relation to Tolkien's Eärendil. Lays out a broad array of evidence attesting to a complex of characteristics associated with a mythical morning-star character, chief among them an association with water, horses, boats, constellations, being a messenger or herald, and monster-slaying, particularly of monsters associated with chaos.

Additional Keywords

Anglo-Saxon mythology; Blickling homily; Cynewulf. Christ; Dragons in mythology; Indo-European mythology; Norse mythology; Tolkien, J.R.R.—Characters—Eärendil—Sources; Wade (mythical character)



CHAOSKAMPF, SALVATION, AND DRAGONS: ARCHETYPES IN TOLKIEN'S EÄRENDIL

TIBOR TARCSAY

TOLKIEN'S RECREATION OF MYTHOLOGY, "which [he] could dedicate simply to: to England, to [his] country" (*Letters* 144), involved much reuse of older myths, both from Europe and elsewhere. Prominent among these were, doubtless, Germanic stories, but Númenor is clearly inspired by the Atlantis myth (213), and Túrin is explicitly stated by Tolkien to have been moulded on Kullervo and Oedipus (171).

Some reuses of ancient myths by Tolkien, however, are more oblique, and apart from various hints strewn across two millennia of Germanic literature, hard to discern. We know that Tolkien continuously discarded, transformed, used and reused even *his* own concepts: a good example would be Ælfwine, who eventually ended up foreshadowing Isildur, Eärendil, and vaguely even Frodo Baggins. It is safe to say that some characters became archetypes *within* Tolkien's own mythology—Beren prefigures Frodo, Morgoth Sauron, and Glorfindel Gandalf (to some extent). However, it is also worthy of scrutiny how the characters incorporated from real-world mythologies might have influenced their own re-modelling by Tolkien. Investigation of the origins of these characters, the archetypes they embody, and their development in real-world mythologies can also deepen our perception and understanding of the Professor's mythopoeia. Tolkien is often accused of creating a decidedly one-sided mythology reflecting solely medieval European beliefs, even to the point of being racist¹; and although there is obvious evidence to the contrary, actually showing how Tolkien's fantasy world fits into a larger, universal mythological context deepens one's perception of the universalist² (in the sense

¹ A quick Internet search with the keywords 'Tolkien' and 'racist' results in a bewildering number of articles, blog posts, etc., asseverating Tolkien's chauvinism, often confusing the books with the films. The most notorious example perhaps is John Yatt's "Wraiths and race" (2002).

² As an etymologist, Tolkien would have been, and probably was, aware of the fact that 'catholic' is simply Greek for 'universal'—that is, his *Catholic* mythology was aimed to address the common *condition humaine*.

that it draws on many sources and targets all people) and particularist (based on English traditions and offered to England) aspects of his 20th century mythology.

A character through whom Tolkien reuses and re-creates English, Indo-European, and universal myths is Eärendil. Tolkien made the Anglo-Saxon inspiration of Eärendil known very early: in his *Letters*, there are several references to the character's inspirations and sources: "His name is in actual origin Anglo-Saxon: *earendel* 'ray of light' applied sometimes to the morning-star, a name of ramified mythological connexions (now largely obscure)" (150n), and

I was struck by the great beauty of this word (or name), entirely coherent with the normal style of A-S, but euphonic to a peculiar degree in that pleasing but not 'delectable' language. Also its form strongly suggests that it is in origin a proper name and not a common noun. [...] To my mind the A-S uses seem plainly to indicate that it was a star presaging the dawn (at any rate in English tradition): that is what we now call *Venus*: the morning-star as it may be seen shining brilliantly in the dawn, before the actual rising of the Sun. That is at any rate how I took it. Before 1914 I wrote a 'poem' upon Earendel who launched his ship like a bright spark from the havens of the Sun. I adopted him into my mythology [...]. (385)

Tolkien, in "The Notion Club Papers," writes (as Lowdham) concerning the origins of the character: "When I came across that citation in the dictionary I felt a curious thrill, as if something had stirred in me, half wakened from sleep. There was something very remote and strange and beautiful behind those words, if I could grasp it, far beyond ancient English" (236). This is, unfortunately, the point where discussion of Eärendil usually stops, although there are "vast backcloths" (*Letters* 144) to explore, going far beyond Old English. In order to trace the antecedents of the Anglo-Saxon *earendel*, first let us look at its two occurrences.

Earendel (alternatively *eorendel*) appears in Cynewulf's *Crist*, l.104, and in Blickling Homily XIV.³ In the Old English *Crist* he is likened to a star:

³ Cynewulf is most commonly accepted to have been a ninth century West Mercian poet (Gradon 23), the signed author of four poems. The Blickling Homilies are a collection of a number of homiletic texts collected in a MS written around 971 AD, and housed in Blickling Hall, Norfolk (Morris v-vi).

*Éalā Éarendel, engla beorhtast
ofer middangeard monnum sended,
ond sōðfæsta sunnan lēoma
torht ofer tunglas, — þū tīda gehwane
of sylfum þē symle inlihtes. (104–08)⁴*

In the Blickling homily, it is Saint John the Baptist who is asserted to have been “*se niwa eorendel*”⁵ (163). The function of the word—noun or proper name—cannot be conclusively determined in the latter case; but as Tolkien himself writes, it seems to be a name in *Crist* (*Letters* 414). Furthermore, the word has no lack of cognates in other Germanic languages, where, again, they are all proper names: there is the Horwendillus of Saxo Grammaticus’s *Gesta Danorum* (books three and four), the legend of Orendel in Middle High German, and most importantly, Aurvandill in *Skáldskaparmál*, chapter 25.

Although in all of the three stories different feats and events are attributed to Eorendel (which name I will use henceforth to signify the real-world common Germanic hero), the one core property that all of these aspects share is their close affinity with water. In the *Gesta Danorum*, Horwendillus’ story is related as “*at [...] triennio tyrannide gesta, per summam rerum gloriam piraticae incubuerat; cum rex Norvagiae Collerus operum eius ac famae magnitudinem aemulatus decorum sibi fore existimavit, si tam late patentem piratae fulgorem superior armis obscurare quivisset*” (3.6.1).⁶ Orendel sojourns on strange seas in order to win the hand of a prospective bride and is once shipwrecked and washed up on alien shores, which later turn out to be the Holy Land (455–74), later on even leading a navy. Aurvandill, according to Snorri Sturluson, was carried by Thor in a basket while crossing the Élivága river.⁷ Thor tells to Gróa,

⁴ “Hail, Éarendel, brightest of angels, sent to men over middle-earth; and true sun’s light, high over the stars, you at all times illuminate yourself continually” (translation mine).

⁵ “the new *eorendel*” (translation mine).

⁶ “having held rule for three years, to reach the summit of glory, busied himself with piracy; with Coller, king of Norway emulating his deeds and fame, and also considering it more decorous if he could obscure by his superiority in arms the broad fame of the pirate” (translation mine).

⁷ “Þórr fór heim til Þrúðvanga, ok stóð heinin í höfði honum. Þá kom til vólva sú, er Gróa hét, kona Aurvandils ins frækna. Hon gól galdra sína yfir Þór, til þess er heinin losnaði. En er Þórr fann þat ok þótti þá ván, at braut myndi ná heininni, þá vildi hann launa Gró lækninguna ok gera hana fegna, sagði henni þau tíðendi, at hann hafði vaðit norðan yfir Élivága ok hafði borit í meis á baki sér Aurvandil norðan ór Jötunheimum, ok þat til jartegna, at ein tá hans hafði staðit ór meisinum, ok var sú frerin, svá at Þórr braut af ok kastaði upp á himin ok gerði af stjörnu þá, er heitir Aurvandilstá. Þórr sagði, at eigi myndi langt til, at Aurvandill myndi heim koma, en Gróa varð svá fegin, at hon mundi enga galdra, ok varð heinin eigi lausari ok stendr enn í höfði Þór, ok er þat boðit til

Aurvandill's wife, that as a sure sign of this occurrence she can search for the star called Aurvandilstá (i.e., Aurvandill's toe) on the heavens, as that celestial object is no other than the frozen toe of Aurvandill, which Thor broke off and cast upon the sky.

Both Eorendel and Eärendil are closely connected to the sea in their respective legends. It can even be argued that the *niwa eorendel* Saint John the Baptist (*Blickling Homilies* 163) has an affinity with water: he was, after all, the Baptist.

Eorendel is not only a star associated with water but also a herald: Earendel in *Crist* is called an angel, sent to men as harbinger of Christ; St John the Baptist, again, is a herald of the Savior. Horwendillus in later versions of the story (*Hamlet*, for example⁸) becomes the herald of his own death; and Aurvandill's toe is set upon the sky as a sign against his return to Gróa. Eärendil is "a sign [...] called [...] Gil-Estel, the Star of High Hope" (*Silmarillion* 301), and an emissary of Elves and Men to the Valar, and *vice versa*.

Eärendil's ship, furthermore, is named (with many alternative spellings) Vingilot (*Silmarillion* 295). This name is not unknown in Germanic tradition, either. Many sources mention it, the foremost being Geoffrey Chaucer. In *The Merchant's Tale*, l.1424ff, we read:

And eek thise olde wydwes, God it woot
They konne so muchel craft on Wades boot,
So muchel broken harm, whan that hem leste,
That with hem sholde I nevere lyve in reste.⁹

varnana at kasta hein of gólf þvert, því at þá hrærist heinin í höfði Þór." (*Skáldskaparmál*, ch. 25) "Þórr went home to Þrúðvang, and the hone still stood in his head. Then came to him a prophetess, called Gróa, wife of Aurvandil the brave. She began singing her songs over Thor, until the stone loosened. Then Thor sensed this, and began to hope that the hone will come all the way out, and wanted to reward Gróa for her leeching, and told her news: that as he, coming from north, waded over Élivága, he had in a basket carried, on his back, Aurvandil from Jötunheim. And to prove it, (he also said) that one of his toes stood out from the basket, and it was frozen, so that Thor broke it off and cast it up to heavens, where it became a star, called Aurvandil's toe. Thor said that it should not take long for Aurvandil to come home to his wife. Gróa was so happy that she forgot all her singing, and thus the hone was not loosened, and still stands in Thor's head. And since then it is forbidden to throw hones over the floor, for the one in Thor's head stirs" (translation mine).

⁸ For a further discussion of the connection between Saxo and Shakespeare, see <http://www.pitt.edu/~dash/amlenth.html>

⁹ "And furthermore these old widows, God knows, / they knew so many tricks on Wade's boat, / So much harm to do when it pleased them, / that with them I should never live in rest" (translation mine).

and in *Troilus and Criseyde*, book iii, l.614:

He song; she pleyde; he tolde tale of Wade.¹⁰

Thomas Speght, the famous editor of Chaucer in 1598 commented on these lines thus: "Concerning Wade and his bote called Guingelot, as also his strange exploits in the same, because the matter is long and fabulous, I passe it ouer" (quoted in *The Complete Works* 818–19). Unfortunately, due to the inexcusable carelessness of Speght, an important source of old Germanic mythology is lost, and it is unlikely that Wade's stories can ever be recovered. The name of his ship, however, appears in many other accounts: in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* it is Gawain's horse which is called Gryngolet (l.597), and in various German and Welsh texts the name of the animal resurfaces as Gringuljetan and Keinkalad, respectively (Gollancz 105). Via the name of the ship/horse, therefore, Gawain and Wade also are connected, if subtly, to Eärendil's character. Thus far, Eorendel can be reconstructed as possessing close connection with water, and being a herald and/or star. He also has tentative relations with Wade, the Germanic hero of many stories. Let us turn to the latter.

The earliest accounts involving Wade are *Widsith*¹¹ (l.22 *Wada [weold] Haelsingum*), *Thidrekssaga af Bern*¹² and *Kudrun*¹³ (Chambers 95). He is also mentioned by Walter Map in the *De nugis curialium*¹⁴ (81–82), by Malory in the *Morte Darthur* (193), and most importantly, in *Bevis of Hampton*¹⁵ (l. 2605). Chambers in his introduction to *Widsith* helpfully collects all of the stories known in one place, and summarizes the properties of Wade:

¹⁰ "He sang; she played; he told a tale of Wade" (translation mine).

¹¹ *Widsith* is a mnemonic catalogue-poem of a great number of biblical, legendary, and historical characters in Germanic stories. The text is to be found in the Exeter Book, and derives its title from the name of the scop whose story is also included in the poem.

¹² *Thidrekssaga af Bern* is a collection of stories about Theoderic the Great (454–526) in Old Icelandic and Old Swedish, dating from the 13th and 15th centuries.

¹³ The Old High German *Kudrun* is a legendary story of the same circle as *Thidrekssaga*. It is preserved in the Vienna Nationbibliotheke.

¹⁴ Walter Map is a Latin-writing English author in the twelfth century. His only attributed work is the *De nugis curialium*, "Trifles of the Courtiers," a collection of diverse stories, rumors, etc. from his contemporaries.

¹⁵ *Bevis of Hampton* is one of the central characters of the Matter of England, and stories of his exploits can be found as far as Romania. The Middle English romance was composed c. 1320, and is preserved in six MSS, the primary one being the Auchinleck one ("Bevis of Hampton: Introduction" § "The text").

Putting together, then, the accounts of Wate and Vathe, of Wade and of Gado, we find these common characteristics, which we may assume belonged to their ancient prototype, Wada of the Hælsingas:

[1] Power over the sea.

[2] Extraordinary strength—often typified by superhuman stature.

[3] The use of these powers to help those whom Wade favours.

(100)

Thus Eorendel and Wade share their intimate connection to water. As we can see, nearly all of the characteristics of Tolkien's Eärendel are in place. The Germanic sources exhausted, let us turn to Indo-European legends and mythic archetypes. The constellation of water, boat/horse, herald/star is not an uncommon one. The dawn or the Dawnstar (its harbinger) is frequently depicted as having horses: for example, the Ashvins of Ushas and Surya (the herald-steeds of the goddess of dawn and her solar deity husband) in the Vedas (*Dictionary* 77, 444), Asva (Dawn) herself (486), the steeds of the chariot of Apollo/Phaëton (62, 380), Astarte (75) or those of Sol (436). Gawain can also be included in this list—he possesses a famous horse, and in the stories about him his strength consistently waxes and wanes as that of the Sun does (Moorman and Moorman 56)¹⁶; this, and the etymology of his name (*gwallt-advwyn*, 'fair hair' [Coghlan 97]) hint at his original rôle as solar deity (98).

The rising Sun, distinct in many mythologies from the noon and evening suns as harbinger of the new day, too, is frequently and more universally depicted as travelling with a boat: Ra (*Dictionary* 396), and Venus-Aphrodite, goddess of dawn has a boat of scallop shell (61).

Eorendel as the Dawnstar can be theorized to have the sea as his birth-place, as this is a virtually universal feature of dawn-associated deities: Venus/Aphrodite was born from the sea; the Vedic goddess Ushas is likened in Rig-Veda to the "waves of waters" (*Hymns* 6.64.1–2) and rises from the seas; Ra's solar barque surfaces in the east from the Ocean; and Aurvandill's toe freezes when he is carried across a river by Thor. This means that Wade and Eorendel are demonstrably related: association with sea and the Dawnstar's horse/boat likely make them two manifestations of the same archetype. Eorendel perhaps originally also was in possession of a boat or a horse, and it is simply due to the lack of written sources that we have no knowledge of this (however, this remains a hypothesis).

¹⁶ This feature can be found even as late as Malory; see book 20, chapter 21: "Then had sir Gawaine such a grace and gift that an holy man had given him, that every day in the year, from underne till high noon, his might increased those three hours as much as thrice his strength, and that caused sir Gawaine to win great honour" (Malory 778).

Even more remarkable and universal is the association of the Dawnstar (and thus of the Germanic Earendel) with monsters and monster-slayers. For example, Aurvandill was befriended by Thor, precisely as the god was travelling home from a duel with giants; Aphrodite was the result of the castration of Uranus¹⁷; and Ushas were released after the slaying of a dragon by Indra. Wade, too, is a dragon-slayer: in *Bevis of Hampton*, the following is told of him:

After Josian is cristing
Beves dede a gret fighting,
Swich bataile dede never non
Cristene man of flesch ne bon,
Of a dragoun ther be side,
That Beves slough ther in that tide,
Save Sire Launcelet de Lake,
He faught with a fur drake
And Wade dede also,
And never knightes bouthe thai to,
And Gy a Warwik, ich understonde,
Slough a dragoun in NorthHomberlonde. (ll. 2597-2608)¹⁸

The *Chaoskampf*¹⁹, as well as the recovery of the missing Sun, often involves the slaying of a monster, most often a dragon: Marduk and Tiamat, Zeus and Typhon, Hercules and the Hydra, Thor and Jörmungandr, but also

¹⁷ Uranus is traditionally viewed as "simply" a god, but his monstrous behaviour (torment of his children and wife) is described as "evil" ("κακῶ δ' ἐπετέρεπετο ἔργω Οὐρανός", ll. 157-8), and "sinful" ("πατρός κε κακὴν τισαίμεθα λώβην ὕμετέρου", ll. 165-6), and he was the first to think of "doing evil things" ("πρότερος γὰρ ἀεικέα μῆσατο ἔργα", l. 173). Unlawful, immoral and antisocial behaviour are often associated with monstrosity (see Neville 112-122).

¹⁸ "After Josian's christening / Beve did a great fighting, / Such a battle no-one ever did / Christian man of flesh or bone, / With a great dragon there nearby, / That Beves slew at that time, / Save Sir Launcelot of the Lake, / Who fought with a fire drake / And Wade did this as well / And no other knights but these two, / And Guy of Warwick, I understand, / Slew a dragon in Northumberland" (translation mine).

¹⁹ This is a technical term for the gods (often their second generation), representing order (specifically the order in which humans already exist) battling against monsters who personify Chaos, and who often are the first beings in the universe. This is the case, for example, with Uranos and Tiamat. The monster could also have no known origin, like the Vrtra-Vala dragon or Jörmungandr, which signifies that they come from outside of the world, from Chaos itself. The stake of the fight is bringing the world under the gods' rule once more, restoring its integrity and establishing a new, blessed age. The *Chaoskampf* is thus the mythic equivalent of a rite of passage.

Yahweh and the Leviathan. Notably, all of these dragons inhabit the ur-ocean, or the seas circumscribing the universe.

The most interesting of all these myths in view of Eärendil's character is perhaps that of Indra's battle against the Vrtra-Vala dragon. The story can be reconstructed from Hymn 01.32 of the Rig-Veda (*Hymns*). Vrtra collects all the waters of the earth behind a mountain range, along with Dawn and the Sun in the form of cows. Indra challenges the "emasculate" (l. 7) serpent²⁰, and kills it. Then he destroys the cave/enclosure wherein the waters are contained, thus releasing the Seven Rivers and the kine (symbolizing Ushas [*Dictionary* 486]), restoring fertility to the earth and natural order.

The story of Indra's *Chaoskampf* is remarkably similar to Tolkien's Eärendil-myth, which at the same time epitomizes all of the features we have seen so far. In the War of Wrath, Eärendil descends from the sky

[S]hining with white flame, and about Vingilot were gathered all the great birds of heaven [...] and there was battle in the air all the day and through a dark night of doubt. *Before the rising of the sun* Eärendil slew Ancalagon the Black, the mightiest of the dragon-host, and cast him from the sky; and *he fell upon the towers of Thangorodrim, and they were broken in his ruin*. Then the sun rose [...]. (*Silmarillion* 302–03, emphasis added)

Furthermore, even a cataclysm similar to the release of the Seven Rivers in the Indra-myth ensues:

[The world] was changed. For so great was the fury of those adversaries that the northern regions of the western world were rent asunder, *and the sea roared in through many chasms*, and there was confusion and great noise [...]. (*Silmarillion* 303, emphasis added)

It is apparent that the character of Eärendil is wholly in line with his Indo-European antecedents. He is an emissary, sent by Elves and Men to the Valar (*Silmarillion* 295); the Valar send him back in the form of a star as a harbinger of their immediate assault on Morgoth (300); he is a dragon-slayer (302), he is one of the foremost warriors in a battle which leads to the release of waters and destruction of mountains (303); and he delivers the Sun (303) and the light of the Silmarilli (300 and 303). Participating in the War of Wrath, he brings about a new, perhaps better, world, even as a true hero should.

²⁰ The dragon's attribute as emasculate is especially interesting in light of Uranus's castration and the commonly female (e.g., Tiamat), or neutral (Jörmungandr, Hydra) gender of the drakes.

This sequence of deeds is deeply archetypal, as it is reflected in the most ancient myths. Even the Psalmist felt the pull of this harmony: Psalm 73/74 gives the account of Yahweh's fight against the Leviathan thus:

Yet God my King is from of old,
working salvation in the midst of the earth.
You divided the sea by your might;
you broke the heads of the sea monsters on the waters.
You crushed the heads of Leviathan;
you gave him as food for the creatures of the wilderness.
You split open springs and brooks;
you dried up ever-flowing streams.
Yours is the day, yours also the night;
you have established the heavenly lights and the sun. (vv. 12-16).

Tolkien certainly was partly conscious of just how archetypal his character is—he was, after all, an expert philologist, who consciously re-used and re-created myths and literary topoi. I am, however, not sure whether he was aware of the fact that Eärendil, at least partially, is on par with a host of pagan dragon-slaying divinities—but also with the Old Testament God, Yahweh. As Tolkien writes in *The Silmarillion*, the divine Valar would actually have been vanquished by Morgoth, had not Eärendil joined battle: “and out of the pits of Angband there issued winged dragons, that had not before been seen; and so sudden and ruinous was the onset of that dreadful fleet that the host of the Valar was driven back [...] but Eärendil came” (302). The might and deeds of Eärendil at a deeper analysis are thus far greater than usually appreciated, and as a *Chaoskämpfer* he can certainly be ranked among the great dragon-slayers of our world.

Was Tolkien, then, conscious of the full archetypal nature of Eärendil? Although we might never know this, we can be certain that the typological nature of his work would have been to his liking, illustrating

[T]he view that this element does not rise or fall, but is there, in the Cauldron of Story, waiting for the great figures of Myth and History, and for the yet nameless He or She, waiting for the moment when they are cast into the simmering stew, one by one or all together, without consideration of rank or precedence. (“On Fairy-Stories” 127)

Furthermore, Tolkien was, as is well-known, profoundly Catholic, and the strong connection between the depictions of Eärendil and Yahweh might even have delighted him. The dramatic and unexpected reversal of tragic ill-fortune

to happy ending at the conclusion of both stories, which Tolkien termed as *eucatastrophe*, gives

[A] brief vision [...] a far-off gleam or echo of the *evangelium* in the real world [...] It looks forward (or backward: the direction in this regard is unimportant) to the Great Eucatastrophe. The Christian joy, the *Gloria*, is of the same kind; but it is pre-eminently (infinitely, if our capacity were not finite) high and joyous. Because this story [the Gospel] is supreme; and it is true. Art has been verified. God is the Lord, of angels, and of men—and of elves. Legend and History have met and fused. (Tolkien, "On Fairy-Stories" 155–56)

As it is apparent from the preceding discussion, the antecedents of Eärendil's character go much further back (but also forward) than apparent at first glance, perhaps even into directions Tolkien himself had not foreseen. The characters of Eorndel and Wade, the two most direct antecedents of Eärendil share key attributes, and it is not unreasonable to suppose that they might have been the same mythic hero, or at least two aspects of it. They can also be associated with monster-killing. On the basis of this connection, and with respect to archetypal traditions about monster-slaying, Eärendil can be seen to be a *Chaoskämpfer* in the truest sense of the word. His actions re-enact the pattern set by dragon-slayer heroes and gods. Whether Eärendil was consciously or unconsciously created by Tolkien to fit this mould, it is certainly worthy of note how the character, apart from being the typological equivalent of universal dragon-slaying gods, also bears in himself a mote of Christian doctrine, both literally and allegorically. Eärendil's antecedents thus already imply that he was, or is, destined to become a hero who is "working salvation in the midst of the earth" (Psalm 73 [74]:12).



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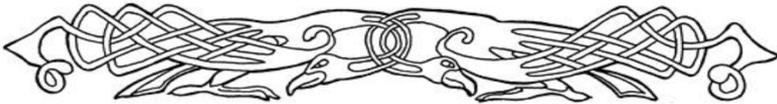
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