

10-15-2009

The Noldor and the Tuatha Dé Danaan: J.R.R. Tolkien's Irish Influences

Annie Kinniburgh
University of Mary Washington, VA

Follow this and additional works at: <https://dc.swosu.edu/mythlore>



Part of the [Children's and Young Adult Literature Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Kinniburgh, Annie (2009) "The Noldor and the Tuatha Dé Danaan: J.R.R. Tolkien's Irish Influences," *Mythlore: A Journal of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature*: Vol. 28: No. 1, Article 3.

Available at: <https://dc.swosu.edu/mythlore/vol28/iss1/3>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Mythopoeic Society at SWOSU Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Mythlore: A Journal of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature by an authorized editor of SWOSU Digital Commons. An ADA compliant document is available upon request. For more information, please contact phillip.fitzsimmons@swosu.edu.

To join the Mythopoeic Society go to:
<http://www.mythsoc.org/join.htm>



Online MidSummer Seminar 2025

More Perilous and Fair: Women and Gender in Mythopoeic Fantasy

August 2-5, 2024

Via Zoom and Discord

<https://www.mythsoc.org/oms/oms-04.htm>



The Noldor and the Tuatha Dé Danaan: J.R.R. Tolkien's Irish Influences

Abstract

Shows what use Tolkien made of some elements of Celtic folklore by tracing similarities between Tolkien's Noldor and the Irish Tuatha de Danaan, demonstrating that his Elves owe at least as much to this heritage as to the Norse *álfar*.

Additional Keywords

Celtic mythology—Influence on J.R.R. Tolkien; Norse mythology—Influence on J.R.R. Tolkien; Tolkien, J.R.R.—Characters—Elves; Tuatha Dé Danaan

Creative Commons License



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-No Derivative Works 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/).



THE NOLDOR AND THE TUATHA DÉ DANÁAN: J.R.R. TOLKIEN'S IRISH INFLUENCES

ANNIE KINNIBURGH

IN HIS 1936 LECTURE “*Beowulf: the MONSTERS AND the CRITICS*,” J.R.R. Tolkien chastised the literary and academic community for dissecting the Beowulf legend historically, anthropologically, and linguistically, and thereby reducing the power of the myth as a whole. He preferred to respect the integrity of what he referred to as the “secondary world,” in which the myth possessed its own logic and cohesive structure, and felt that modern scholarship relied too heavily on names, dates, and facts in its interpretation of early mythologies. That said, he was very open about the influences that had led to the creation of his own mythology, chronicled primarily in *The Silmarillion* and *The Lord of the Rings*. His Elven languages, Quenya and Sindarin, owe much to Finnish and Welsh; the feudal societies of Rohan and Gondor echo the Anglo-Saxon “mead-hall” culture; the horse-lords of the Rohirrim strongly resemble early Viking warlords. About one aspect of his mythology, however, Tolkien was strangely silent.

The Elves are the most complex of Tolkien’s races; much of *The Silmarillion* is dedicated to their history, and the creation of the Elven-tongues was the impetus for the entire greater mythology of Middle-earth. Aside from their importance to his linguistic work, Tolkien also saw them as highly symbolic; although fallible themselves, the Elves were Men as Men ought to have been. Put in terms of his Catholic faith, Elves were Men before the Fall, “with greatly enhanced aesthetic and creative faculties, greater beauty and longer life, and nobility” (Tolkien, *Letters* 176). Yet this incredibly integral species is rarely addressed outside of the context of Tolkien’s own world. In his *Letters*, he states that his Elves are “very little akin to the Elves and Fairies of Europe,” yet never elaborates further on the cultural or mythological sources that might have influenced the creation of his Elven races, and indeed says that they are not “consciously based” on any other work (*Letters* 176). Tracing the history of the Elf as a mythological construct only takes the reader so far; although there are several important parallels between the original Scandinavian *álfar* and Tolkien’s Elves, the *álfar* are a generalized species who only figure marginally in greater Norse mythology. The link then grows even thinner: from Scandinavia, the elves entered Scottish, Irish, and Welsh mythology, where they resemble Tolkien’s

Elves only in name. In fact, the people that most resemble Tolkien's Elves are not elves at all, but the Irish demigods known as the Tuatha Dé Danaan, and the Celtic mythology from which they come is one whose influence Tolkien vehemently denied.

It would be irresponsible, however, to ignore the strong parallels between the *álfar*, who represent the first recorded elven species, and Tolkien's Elves. These parallels are most noticeable in early Elvish history. Although the Quendi, the first group of Elves, were born in Middle-earth, they were menaced by Melkor, a mighty Vala turned from benevolence to tyranny, and so the Valar brought them to Valinor to escape this threat. "[The Valar] were filled moreover with the love of the beauty of the Elves and desired their Fellowship" (Tolkien, *The Silmarillion* [*Silm.*] 52). However, not all the Quendi wished to take up residence in Valinor. And though the Valar went to war against Melkor to protect the Quendi (casting him into the Halls of Mandos for three ages), their strength and fearsomeness in battle only increased the apprehensions of the Quendi, and when the call to enter Valinor came, not all answered. Those Elves that stayed were called the Anvari, the Unwilling, and were sundered from those that went—the Eldar—for many ages. The Eldar were also separated, being divided into three hosts: the Vanyar, the Noldor, and the Teleri. In Valinor, they became the friends and companions of the Valar. Tolkien wrote in a 1951 letter to Milton Waldman that, "Since also they are something wholly 'other' to the gods [...] they are the object of the special desire and love of the gods" (*Letters* 147). Although their presence in Norse mythology is minimal, the Scandinavian *álfar* appear to experience a similar close-knit relationship with the gods. Alfheim, realm of the *álfar*, is often referred to in conjunction with Asgard, home of the *Æsir*. "The spatial relationships between the various worlds are never clearly defined" (Battles 323), but "elves and gods are conventionally paired" and often "shown feasting together" (328). However, elves are mentioned only as a species, most often in lists or in compounds, and no specific elf is mentioned in the *Poetic Edda*, the earliest known collection of Norse myths. This generalization contrasts sharply with the detailed history given in *The Silmarillion*.

In the *Prose Edda*, written in the thirteenth century, Icelandic historian Snorri Sturluson complicates matters when he divides the *álfar* into two branches: the *ljósálfar*, or Light-Elves, and the *dökkálfar*, or Dark-Elves. The *Gylfaginning* differentiates between them: "The Light-Elves are brighter than the sun in appearance, but the Dark-Elves are blacker than pitch" (Sturluson 31). While the latter branch demonstrates a closer connection to Tolkienian dwarves, the *ljósálfar* are of an elevated stature much like the Eldar who journeyed to Valinor (renamed the Calaquendi). Critics have described the *ljósálfar* in similar fashions, emphasizing their near-divinity; Brunsdale calls them "impressive, powerful beings with a special power of healing," while Shippey says they are

"very like angels" and Battles comments on their "pronounced angelic quality" (Brunsedale 49, Shippey 4, Battles 328).

Tolkien's passion for Norse mythology undoubtedly drew his attention to the *álfar*, and his *Calaquendi* occupy a similar position in the mythical hierarchy: that of a higher, nobler race residing with or near the divine beings. However, Tolkien's Elves are not misty abstractions but detailed complexities, and as such do not remain static. In only two generations, a portion of the *Calaquendi*—once treasured as the First Children of Ilúvatar, beloved companions of the gods—become self-exiled wanderers, oathbound and doomed because of it. These are the Noldor, to whose history Tolkien devotes most of *The Silmarillion*. Of the Three Kindreds of the Eldar, the Noldor are depicted as being the most intelligent and creative. While in Valinor, "[g]reat became their knowledge and their skill; yet even greater was their thirst for more knowledge, and in many things they soon surpassed their teachers" (*Silm.* 60). Greatest of all the Noldor was their prince, Fëanor, who was called "Spirit of Fire" and "became of all the Noldor, then or after, the most subtle in mind and the most skilled in hand" (63). His two greatest accomplishments were creating the Noldor's system of letters and discovering how "gems greater and brighter than those of the Earth might be made with skill" (64). The greatest of these gems, however, proved disastrous. They were the *Silmarils*, and contained the light of the Trees of Valinor, which burned within them long after the Trees themselves were destroyed. But after the theft of the *Silmarils* by Melkor, Fëanor led his people from the paradise of Valinor, bound to recover the lost *Silmarils*—thus ensuring the piteous fate of the Noldor. In their fall from paradise (or, in Tolkien's mind, their Fall), the Noldor both transcend the Norse *álfar* and sink below them; the Elves are now dynamic, and therefore imperfect. For Tolkien, then, the *Eddas* served as important but limited source material.

If Tolkien's work was, as he stated, intended to serve as a substitute for the missing English mythology, one might logically infer that he would incorporate the English perception of the elf into his own views. Anglo-Saxon England owed much to Scandinavian and Germanic influence, especially regarding its legends; therefore, the earliest incarnation of the Anglo-Saxon elf is predictably *álfar*-esque in appearance and nature. According to Robert Kirk, in his seminal study of English folklore, *The Secret Commonwealth of Elves, Fauns, and Fairies*, elves are "said to be of a middle nature betwixt man and angel [...] of intelligent studious spirits" (Kirk 5). However, by the sixteenth century, an immense shift in cultural attitude towards elves had occurred; potions and wards against elven enchantments and diseases occur throughout Anglo-Saxon medical texts, for the formerly godlike beings had acquired a distinctly malignant connotation. The introduction of Christianity into English culture only reinforced this perception of the elves as a dangerous pagan influence, inhuman at best and

demonic at worst. Of elvish society, Kirk says that “they have aristocratical rulers and laws, but no discernible religion, love or devotion towards God, the Blessed Maker of All” (13). By this point, if the English elves resembled any incarnation of elf-kind, it was the *dökkálfar*, or the Norse Dark-Elves.

By Shakespeare’s time, however, the English elves had undergone a final evolution: from foreign they had become malignant, and now from malignant they became ridiculous. Relegated to folklore, elves dwindled in size and power to become synonymous with fairies, brownies, and pixies; far from their imposing ancestors, these elves took up residence in underground realms where years passed in an instant and where they amused themselves by meddling with mortals (changelings were an especially popular elvish prank).

As evidenced above, the elf as a mythological figure devolves with the passage of time, becoming diminutive and mischievous, a loss Tolkien corrected by having the Noldor remain awesome and wise throughout their time in Valinor and on Middle-earth. In fact, barring parallels in the Scandinavian mythological hierarchy and the Anglo-Saxon cultural response, Tolkien’s Elves have very little in common with previous incarnations of their legendary namesakes. As the elf was being relegated to folklore in England, however, an Irish manuscript was compiled that told the story of Ireland’s invasion by a race of demigods; and in the Noldor are found unavoidable echoes of this invasion and subsequent mythology.

Tolkien repeatedly denied that Celtic mythology played any integral role in the creation of his own mythology. “[Celtic legends] have bright color, but are like a broken stained glass window reassembled without design. They are in fact ‘mad’” (*Letters* 26). The Welsh *Mabinogion*, for instance, is composed of loosely-linked legends following the adventures of Arthur and his knights, with no overarching mythological structure or cohesiveness. Tolkien also meant “bright color” literally; the *Mabinogion* frequently introduces characters in terms of color. In a sense, *The Silmarillion* and accompanying works were Tolkien’s answer to this madness. Dissatisfied with the “imperfectly naturalized” Arthurian mythos and the “fundamental unreason” of the Celts, he sought to create a body of legend that would “possess the tone and quality that I desired, somewhat cool and clear, be redolent of our ‘air’ (the clime and soil of the North West, meaning Britain and the hither parts of Europe)” (144). Evoking a sense of northern “harshness” succeeded with Men, but, despite Tolkien’s best efforts, a Celtic sentiment pervades *The Silmarillion*’s primary character group in the form of significant thematic and direct parallels between the Irish Tuatha Dé Danaan and the Noldor.

Historically, little is actually known about the Tuatha Dé Danaan. It is agreed that Ireland endured six waves of invasions, and that they were the penultimate invaders. Racially, they were of the Gaelic branch of the Celts, of

Finnish descent, and as such were "tall, pale, and light-haired" (Macbain 51). However, this history is presented in the context of—and so often mixed in with—mythology, as most "knowledge" of the Tuatha Dé Danaan comes from the *Lebor Gabála Éirenn* (the Irish Book of Invasions). The *Lebor Gabála Éirenn* is a pseudo-history of Ireland that constitutes the largest part of the Mythological Cycle of Irish literature and frames most of that cycle's stories. In it, the Tuatha Dé Danaan are not merely warriors but also enchanters whose sorcery enables them to take Ireland from the monstrous Firbolgs and keep it until the arrival of the Milesians, who drive them under the hills and into legend. The *Lebor Gabála Éirenn* is set apart from the mythological cycles of other cultures by its limited approach—it concerns a nation, not its creation. "No cosmogony, cosmology, or creation myth in a Celtic language survives to our time" (MacKillop 127). Instead, the Mythological Cycle is valuable because it provides a "narrative of social origins," within which each invading race has its own place in the Irish cultural consciousness (152). It is a comprehensive narrative that details each invading group and the conflicts between them, for "one understands that the Mythological Cycle deals with endings and transitions [and] is also about the ends of ages and the passing of peoples" (Gillespie 8-9). The Tuatha Dé Danaan are the immortals; they are considered gods and are certainly godlike in stature and ability. Yet, in keeping with the no-cosmogony stipulation, they are not the creators of the people but their ancestors, and instead of living apart in a divine realm, they rule Ireland from Tara, the seat of the High King. Although placed within a human social organization, the Tuatha Dé Danaan are immortal, with the ability to shift shapes at will, use enchantments in battle, summon the very elements to their aid, ride chariots over water, and impose unbreakable curses.

However, the purity and clarity of the Irish mythos, and specifically that surrounding the Tuatha Dé Danaan, is diminished by the lateness and overall inadequacies of Irish literature. The prominence of oral tradition resulted in a decided lack of written sources: none earlier than the seventh century, with no mention of the gods until the eighth century. The Romans visited but did not conquer Ireland, and so two of Rome's favorite exports—Christianity and a written script—didn't take hold until the eleventh century. This timeline helps to explain Ireland's literary drought, which might have worsened without Christian influence (however incomplete and sporadic that influence was). Ecclesiastics had compiled and edited most of the *Lebor Gabála Éirenn* by the eleventh century, although "the full five volumes [...] appear to have grown over several centuries and were contributed to by many hands" (MacKillop 128). This is no one historian's work; there is no Irish Snorri Sturluson, which has led some scholars (here, MacKillop quotes Patrick K. Ford) to concur that the *Lebor Gabála Éirenn* is a "masterpiece of muddled medieval miscellany" (128). However, many agree that muddled is better than missing entirely. The Christian influence on Celtic

literature—and on all pagan literature—is considered a double-edged sword; without it, many (if not most) legends would have been lost; with it, those legends are twisted into tales acceptable to Christians, and therefore barely recognizable to their original people.

The Tuatha Dé Danaan were not exempt from this phenomenon. “There is a degree of confusion about the gods of the ancient Irish because of the fact that the myths were first set down in writing by Christian monks who often changed things to fit their religious sensibilities” (Ellis 136). As was the fate of most pagan mythologies, the gods and goddesses were demoted to figures of legend, as “supplication and adoration of the native deities” would have been deemed inappropriate by Christian redactors (Mac Cana 64). For instance, Lugh of the Long Hand was originally a sun-god figure whose magical sword was one of the Four Hallows of the Tuatha Dé Danaan. In later legends, he is the third High King of Ireland and hero of the Battle of Moytura South, when the Tuatha Dé Danaan wrest Ireland from the Fírblogs. Hints still remain of his former powers; during the battle, it is said that “Lugh also had recourse to his magic powers [...] [and] chanted an incantation to lend strength and courage” (58). After retiring from his position as High King, Lugh withdrew into the hills, where he faded into legend with the rest of his people.

A final picture emerges of a mythical ancestral race, immortal, beautiful, divine in deed if not name. Already, the Tuatha Dé Danaan and the Noldor share what can be called a “historical trajectory”—that is, both races enter the established world of legend triumphant, live in it with an elevated status, and leave it diminished. However, the two races also blend their superhuman natures with human customs to produce a culture that defies Tolkien’s claim that his Celtic influences were negligible.

It is important to note that, with his deep and lasting interest in medieval mythology, Tolkien incontrovertibly knew about the Tuatha Dé Danaan. He even exhibited an interest in them as potential players in his unfinished “time-travel” story, *The Lost Road*. The result of a discussion with C.S. Lewis, *The Lost Road* was to have been the tale of a father-and-son journey into the Germanic past, culminating in their eventual presence at the drowning of a Land in the West called Númenor. This scenario would have given Tolkien the opportunity to explore two major areas of interest: medieval Germanic and Lombardic tradition, and the Atlantis myth. Tolkien wrote the beginning and end of the story, but never completed the intervening episodes because “[I]t was too long a way round to what I really wanted to make, a new version of the Atlantis legend” (Tolkien, *The Lost Road* 7). Númenor and the *Akallabêth* were where his real interest lay. However, he did leave proposed subjects for those incomplete episodes, including a rough outline listing Chapter IV as “the Irish legend of Tuatha-de-Danaan—and the oldest man in the world” (86). Tolkien is referring to

Finntan, who, according to legend, came with fifty girls and three men—all relatives of Noah—in the first conquest of Ireland. He slept through the Flood and awoke a year later in his house at Dun Tulcha, where he lived until the 6th century.

Finntan is referred to specifically in a rough outline of “The Ælfwine story.” Tolkien writes “They [Ælfwine and Eadwine] come down in [?real] sea and west wind blows them back. Land in Ireland (implication is that they *settle* there, and this leads to Finntan)” (88). From these cryptic notes, it is impossible to ascertain how or why the Tuatha Dé Danaan and Finntan would have fit into Tolkien's overarching mythology, and he dropped the idea without elaborating further. However, although Chapter IV never materialized, and the Tuatha Dé Danaan are never named in any of Tolkien's work, they do make a subtle appearance in *The Silmarillion* in many aspects of the characterization of the Noldor.

The phrase “superhuman natures,” (or, as Gunnell says, “superhuman classical heroes” [5]) is perhaps misleading; yet neither the Noldor nor the Tuatha Dé Danaan are entirely divine, and they are certainly not entirely human. They are the children of the gods—the Children of Ilúvatar and the Sons of Danu, respectively—gifted with skills and powers appropriate to such a status, with especial emphasis placed on their mastery of the arts. Gunnell quotes Tolkien biographer Humphrey Carpenter as describing the Noldor as “craftsmen, poets, scribes, creators of works of beauty far surpassing human artefacts,” while the Tuatha Dé Danaan “are also described as craftsmen, warriors, poets, and magicians, and they acquired these skills in the northern islands of the world” (qtd. in Gunnell 5; Fimi 162-63). Artistry differentiates: one of the principle differences between Elves and Men is the Elves' skill in the arts, while Men are noted for their courage in battle.

This is not to say that the Noldor and Tuatha Dé Danaan spent all, or most, or even much of their time composing lays and avoiding battles in some abstract realm. In fact, the opposite is the case, and herein lies a crucial difference between Tolkien's Elves and all elves before or after. Gunnell states that Scandinavian elves “do not inhabit forests or live in trees. Nor—for 99% of the time—are they warriors” (Gunnell 7). The Noldor—and the Tuatha Dé Danaan—are. Immortality guards them from old age and disease, but even the greatest heroes are vulnerable to death in battle, and often receive it. “Their divinity does not render them permanently invulnerable, nor exempt from violent death” (Mac Cana 64). Nuada, the first High King of the Tuatha Dé Danaan, perishes in the Battle of Moytura North at the hands of the Fomorian king Balor (who, in a sequence of unavoidably suspicious similarities, is also called the Evil Eye, and who resides in the Tower of Glass). Fëanor, who of all the Noldor is deemed “mightiest in word and deed,” is killed in the Second Battle of the Wars of

Beleriand by Gothmog, Lord of the Balrogs and servant of Sauron. These are no removed *álfar*; they are warlords who willingly trade immortality for a glorious death in battle.

And in the aftermath of such a death, there is—uncertainty. Despite his own Catholic beliefs, Tolkien's Middle-earth is completely devoid of organized religion, and so also of any concrete concept of an afterlife. For Men, death means the release of the spirit from Arda and passage to a mysterious place unknown to the Elves or even to the Valar. For the Elves, the afterlife is not so much a release as a journey. A valorous death in battle does not buy a place in any Elysium or Valhalla, does not secure any everlasting favor with the gods. There is no better, higher place or state of being to which the dead ascend; in fact, if the dead move at all, it is horizontally, and not vertically. According to Tolkien, "When 'killed,' by the injury or destruction of their incarnate form, they do not escape from time, but remain *in the world*" (*Letters* 236) where they are "gathered to the halls of Mandos in Valinor, whence they may in time return" (*Silm.* 42). Death does not imply cessation or elevation of being; it is merely a separation from the living. After his death, it is said that Fëanor "sits now in the Halls of Awaiting and comes no more among his kin" (*Silm.* 67). Although death is perhaps the most prominent theme in Tolkien's work (his Men experience their own Fall in an effort to avoid it), the focus is on the act of dying (or not dying) itself, not the aftermath. Elves "are concerned rather with the griefs and burdens of deathlessness in time and change, than with death" (*Letters* 146).

The legends of the Tuatha Dé Danaan present a similarly vague afterlife, complicated by the fine line between gods and heroes. Nuada, considered the first High King by some accounts and a sea god by others, is killed in battle thirty years after the Tuatha Dé Danaan's invasion of Ireland; yet, though his death is avenged and his body buried, nothing further is said of his spirit. The closest one comes to the Irish afterlife are brief, rare references to the Tech Duinn, which, like the Halls of Mandos, serve as a sort of holding area for the dead. The Tech Duinn is guarded by the aloof Donn, who, "preferring to live away from other gods," chose instead to live among the dead ("Tech Duinn" translates as "House of Donn") (MacKillop 41). For the Tuatha Dé Danaan, as for the Noldor, death was only a changing of place.

Deaths are honored; for, despite their artistry, immortality, and beauty, the cultures of the Noldor and Tuatha Dé Danaan are distinctly feudal in nature, with social and hierarchical aspects Théoden of Rohan or Boromir of Gondor would recognize. "They have the same local loyalties, the same internal dissensions and petty warfare [...]. [T]heir whole social organization resembles that of the human community" (Mac Cana 64). Power is centralized in a High King, an office bestowed based upon nobility and bloodline; however, each race values one quality above the other. The High King of the Tuatha Dé Danaan

more closely resembles a chieftain—a “war leader and president of his assembly”—than an all-powerful ruler (MacKillop 54). He is also seen as a symbol of the kingdom itself: his strengths and weaknesses are not his own, but the peoples’ as well. With such responsibility placed upon his person, his bloodline does not secure his office: High Kings were considered unfit to rule if physically injured. In the Battle of Moytura South, when the Tuatha Dé Danaan first fought the Fírblog (successfully) for the possession of Ireland, the High King Nuada lost his right hand. “Thus even though victorious, Nuada forfeited his throne, for a blemished king could not rule” (Monaghan 361). For the Noldor, the right to rule is tied more closely to bloodline. After Fëanor’s death, his eldest son Maedhros was taken captive by the hosts of Morgoth and imprisoned in Angband, suspended by his right hand from Thangorodrim. Fingon, Maedhros’ cousin, reached him with the help of the Eagles “but could not release the hell-wrought bond upon his wrist, nor sever it, nor draw it from the stone” (*Silm.* 110). Therefore, Fingon severed the hand itself, but “Maedhros in time was healed; for the fire of life was hot within him, and his strength was of the ancient world” (110). He did surrender the kingship, but did so for diplomatic reasons and not because of the loss of his hand.

However he is chosen to rule, the presence of a High King results in two major cultural imperatives: loyalty and kinship. Without the basic social equilibrium created by loyalty to a centralized leader, there would be no stable framework within which the legends could take place. The oath figures prominently in both cultures as a means of assessing and ensuring that loyalty. Called in Irish the *geis*, it is also a measure of honor; and in a world with no certain afterlife, a man’s honor is all that is assured him. As such, oath-breaking is almost literally the worst thing a man can do, and its punishment the harshest that can be delivered. Of an oath-breaker of the Tuatha Dé Danaan who swore by the elements, it was said that “it was the sun and the wind that wrought his death, because he had violated their sanctity” (Macbain 119). The prevalence of oral tradition also elevates the value of the oath; the Tuatha Dé Danaan sign no contracts, honor no written bargains – their word is their bond, and to break a promise is to defy the conventions that regulate social order.

Tolkien takes this concept to the furthest extent possible with the Oath of Fëanor, which dooms the entire race of the Noldor. After the theft of the Silmarils by Melkor,

Fëanor swore a terrible oath [...] vowing to pursue with vengeance and hatred to the ends of the World Vala, Demon, Elf, or Man as yet unborn, or any creature, great or small, good or evil, that time should bring forth unto the end of days, whoso should hold or take or keep a Silmaril from their possession. (*Silm.* 83)

Here, Tolkien is playing with the traditional role of the oath. The Tuatha Dé Danaan hold the oath in high esteem for two reasons: it attests to personal honor and indicates loyalty, and *should not* be broken. The Noldor hold the oath in high esteem because it sets their path and seals their fate—the Oath of Fëanor *cannot* be broken: “For so sworn, good or evil, an oath may not be broken, and it shall pursue oathkeeper and oathbreaker to the world’s end” (83).

Fëanor’s oath also overrides the second essential bond—that of kinship. In societies such as those of the mythical Ireland and Middle-earth, the bond of brotherhood can prove an infinitely uniting or infinitely dividing force. Alliances between brothers create dynasties; feuds between brothers destroy kingdoms. Frequently the first and second cultural imperatives coincide as oaths are sworn to protect or, more often, avenge kinsmen. To avenge the murder of his father by the three sons of the neighboring king Tuirrean, Lugh swears that “the people of the gods of Dana have done treachery on one another, and it is long that they will be under loss by it and weakened by it” (Gregory 46). He then sets the murderers a set of impossible tasks; they die in the attempt, after which their father perishes of grief. Although Lugh is one of the great heroes of the Tuatha Dé Danaan, called Ildánach for his mastery of the arts and Lamfada for his skill in battle, he too is capable of ruthlessness in response to threats or injury against his kin.

The bonds of kinship are felt even more strongly by the Noldor than the Tuatha Dé Danaan, since the Noldor place a higher value on bloodline. Yet when Tolkien shows the oath having an impact on the bonds of kinship, the result is far less honorable. The Kinslaying of Alqualondë is the result of Fëanor’s Oath, and is one of the most shameful episodes in the history of the Noldor. After the Silmarils have fallen into the hands of Morgoth, Fëanor and the Noldor follow him north; however, they cannot pass over the Great Sea without the white ships of the Teleri, the Elves who reside by the sea in sight of Valinor. The Teleri refuse to lend the Noldor aid, wishing to dissuade their kinsmen from embarking on such a rash venture, but Fëanor, “wrathful, for he still feared delay,” attempts to take the ships by force (*Silm.* 86). When the Teleri resist, “swords were drawn, and a bitter fight was fought upon the ships [...]. Thus at last the Teleri were overcome, and a great part of their mariners that dwelt in Alqualondë were wickedly slain” (87). Out of the Kinslaying comes the Doom of the Noldor, pronounced by Mandos, the Judge: “Tears unnumbered ye shall shed; and the Valar will fence Valinor against you and shut you out, so that not even the echo of your lamentation will pass over the mountains” (88). So binding is the power of the Oath of Fëanor that it trumps even the bonds of kinship.

From each mythology, then, a different outlook: Tolkien shows the consequences of breaking the bonds of word and kinship, while the Irish legends show what happens when they hold strong. Tolkien focuses on the potential

dangers of conflict between oath and family loyalties when he describes the Kinslaying of the Teleri; the legends of the Tuatha Dé Danaan show how the oath can be used to defend or avenge wronged kinsmen, as when Lugh avenges his father. Within each mythos, however, these two “cultural imperatives” are considered integral to the survival or destruction of the society. Without honor, there is no trust among the people. Without brotherhood, there no loyalty to anyone but the individual. Either way, society crumbles.

However, neither society will endure to see that day. The cultures of the Tuatha Dé Danaan and Noldor are destined to end in another, less dramatic fashion that involves neither destruction nor death—only a very soft, slow fading away. After a certain number of years (at least 4,000 for the Noldor, approximately 150 for the Tuatha Dé Danaan), their time as the most prominent/powerful/important race on earth (or Middle-earth) is ended. Ironically, the race that replaces the immortals in both mythologies is the race of mortal men.

The inherent mistiness of Irish mythology coalesces long enough to determine that the ultimate invaders of Ireland, the Milesians, were probably of Gaelic origin. The contrast is stark between the transcendent Tuatha Dé Danaan and the corporeal Milesians, called the “eponymous ancestors of the modern, mortal Irish” by Gerald Gillespie (8). This contrast emerges at first contact when the Milesians attempt to land on the shores of Ireland, for “If the Sons of the Gael could land on the coast in spite of them, then the Tuatha Dé Danaan should give up the kingship and be under their sway” (Gregory 72). Using their enchantments, the druids of the Tuatha Dé Danaan raise a curtain of mist to hide the island from the Milesian ships; however, the Milesian druids dispel the mist by calling upon the spirit of Ireland, and land upon the shores. Though weaker in stature and simpler in nature, the Milesians spurn the druidic magic of the Tuatha Dé Danaan, and in doing so end the reign of the Irish demigods. Yet invasion does not mean defeat: the Tuatha Dé Danaan did not give up Ireland itself, only the rule of it, and “went away by themselves [...] [and] chose out the most beautiful of the hills and valleys of Ireland [...] to settle in” (77).

Following this relocation in accordance with the “agreement of the Tuatha Dé Danaan to dwell underground, in ancient barrows and cairns” as well as other isolated places in the world, the motif of the hidden house emerges (Fimi 163). These are dwellings hidden from the mortal world, with “walls about them, that no man could see through, but they themselves could see through them and pass through them” (Gregory 77). From here comes the concept of the *sídh*, and the idea of the Tuatha Dé Danaan as the “People of the Sídh.” Lugh possesses one of these hidden houses, which the hero Conn stumbles across when he passes through “a great mist [...] and a darkness,” and where he learns the future of the Kings of Ireland (69). Except through invitation or accident,

these mystical dwellings are barred to mortals. Here the Tuatha Dé Danaan live away from the world, fading in strength, though their beauty remains: "Their persons were more beautiful and majestic than those of men; a 'sublimated' humanity characterized them" (Macbain 147).

The diminishing of the Noldor follows much the same pattern, without the violence of invasion. From the beginning, Men are considered the natural successors of the Elves; the Song of the Ainur foretells it. There is no war for the dominion of Middle-earth, no agreement by which Men take over while the Elves fade into obscurity. The process is almost organic, and Elves and Men live in mutual society for an age, intermarrying and fighting alongside one another. Their cultures never completely mesh, however; intermarriage is rare and discouraged, and allies are not necessarily friends. Even as bloodlines come together (usually with tragic results), the races drift further apart. "After a time the Elf-kings, seeing that it was not good for Elves and Men to dwell mingled together without order [...] set regions apart where Men could live their own lives, and appointed chieftains to hold these lands freely" (*Silm.* 147).

Meanwhile, as Men establish great cities, the Noldor withdraw into their own hidden kingdoms. Chief among these is Gondolin, the hidden city of Turgon, son of Fingolfin. Gondolin, also called Ondolindë ("the Rock of the Music of Water") is Turgon's attempt to recreate Tirion, the city upon the hill Túna in Valinor, "for which his heart yearned in exile" (115). Of all the realms of the Noldor on Middle-earth, Gondolin will remain intact the longest thanks to its secrecy. Ulmo, the Lord of the Waters, swears to Turgon that "None shall mark thy going, nor shall any find there the hidden entrance against thy will" (125). And so Turgon and his followers "came unseen to Gondolin, and none knew whither they had gone [...] and passed the gates in the mountains, and they were shut" (126). There they remain, enclosed in the rock of the mountain, separated from the rest of Middle-earth, while outside their kinsmen, estranged from the race of Men, "wandered in the lonely places of the great lands and the isles and took to the moonlight and the starlight, and to the woods and caves, becoming as shadows and memories" (105).

As mentioned, intermarriages (usually between a mortal man and immortal woman) between these divided races occur in both mythologies, but they serve to highlight instead of alleviate the sometimes-strained relations between the races. By definition of the parties involved, these marriages seem destined to end badly, and as a rule they do. In the Irish legends, there was a High King called Bodb Dearg, who was the eldest son of the Dagda, and the first High King after the Milesians conquered Ireland. His daughter, Scathniamh, was also called the Flower of Brightness; but she fell in love with Caoilte, one of the Fianna (that is, one of the warriors following legendary hero Fionn mac Cumhail). It is said that "they were forced to part from one another, and they

never met again till the time Caoilte was old and withered" (Gregory 80). When Scathniamh finally comes to him towards the end of his life, Caoilte explains to onlookers why such a beautiful young girl is with such an old man: "I am of the sons of Miled that wither and fade away, but she is of the Tuatha Dé Danaan that never change and that never die" (80). As he did with the Oath of Féanor, Tolkien takes this idea—the lovers doomed by their differing natures—and makes it a centerpiece of *The Silmarillion*.

"The Lay of Beren and Lúthien" is one of Tolkien's most poignant and personal works, for in it he saw himself and his wife, Edith Bratt—they too shared a "forbidden love." As Tolkien was told to stay away from Edith by his guardian, Catholic priest Francis Morgan, the mortal Man Beren was sent from the side of his love, Lúthien. Lúthien was the daughter of Thingol, King of the Elves of Doriath (who was called also the Hidden King for his refuge in the Dwarf-hewn fortress of Menegroth). Dissuaded from killing the presumptuous mortal, Thingol asks the impossible in return for Lúthien's hand: that Beren bring him one of the Silmarils, then ensconced in Morgoth's crown. Doom looms, the quest ensues, and at the end of the lay, Beren delivers the Silmaril to Thingol with his dying breath. He goes to the Halls of Mandos and there, as Lúthien had asked him to, "the spirit of Beren at her bidding tarried in the halls of Mandos, unwilling to leave the world," until she came to the Judge himself and sang for Beren's release (186). Mandos acquiesced, but the price for Beren and Lúthien's reunion upon Middle-earth was Lúthien's own immortality. "So it was that alone of all the Eldalië she has died indeed, and left the world long ago" (187).

The legend of Scathniamh and Caoilte is barely a footnote to the story of her father, Bodb Dearg, who plays a much more prominent role in Tuatha Dé Danaan legend and politics when a struggle of, literally, godlike proportions breaks out between the Dagda's sons over who will assume kingship on their father's death. In contrast, Tolkien's "Lay of Beren and Lúthien" is a soaring, emotional epic tale of love and fate—so complex, in fact, that it may seem ridiculous to compare the two. However, depth aside, the fact that both stories exist at all speaks equally to the struggle between cultures that takes place within the Irish and Tolkienian mythological worlds. Love between a mortal and an immortal, between the waxing and waning races, is not punishable by death or exile, but it is guaranteed to bring hardship. As happy as the lovers themselves may be, they are by nature inherently different—the woman will not die, and the man will grow old worshipping her. This is made known subtly from their first meeting, which, in each case, takes place in a natural setting. Scathniamh comes to Caoilte from within a cave; Beren comes upon Lúthien "at a time of evening under moonrise, as she danced upon the unfading grass in the glades" (*Silm.* 165). Each woman serves as a "magical, queenly [figure] endowed with Celtic enchantment," that "represent[s] the highest and best [...] and sometimes

inspire[s] reverence of a nearly religious kind" (Burns 10). In order for love—and not time—to triumph, the woman must compromise her own natural abilities. However, even those young lovers who manage to defy the expectations of their races are not immune to the natural progression of those races.

Because it is not enough that the Tuatha Dé Danaan and Noldor fade into the natural world; the dominion of men necessitates that they leave the world altogether. As Galadriel tells Frodo, "[O]ur power is diminished, and Lóthlorien will fade, and the tides of Time will sweep it away. We must depart into the West, or dwindle to a rustic folk of dell and cave" (*Lord of the Rings* II.7:365). This journey is not to an Afterlife; it is to an Otherworld. The idea of the "Otherworld" is integral to the Irish Mythological Cycle and a standard motif in the Celtic mythos. It is used as a general term for the various lands of the gods, which are often depicted as existing in a liminal space – that is, they are neither here nor there, and a transition of realm or state of being is necessary to gain entrance to them. The *sídh*e reappear in this context – they are not merely hidden houses, but doors. Tolkien was familiar with this concept, and in fact explored the idea in his poem *The Nameless Land*. The poem is modeled after the medieval alliterative poem *Pearl*, authored by the anonymous *Gawain*-poet. In it, Tolkien describes a mystical place "than Tir-nan-Og more fair and free / Than Paradise more faint and far" (*Lost Road* 111).

Despite these supernatural qualities, the Otherworlds of the Noldor and the Tuatha Dé Danaan are not inaccessible; in fact, they can be reached by concrete methods. They have a location (an island across the sea), a direction (the West), and a name (Emhain and Valinor, respectively). Actually, in accordance with oral tradition's emphasis on names as a means of identification or commemoration, they have many names, all connoting a higher, better world. For the Noldor, Valinor is also called the Blessed Realm or the Guarded Realm. For the Tuatha Dé Danaan, Emhain is called literally Emhain Ablach ('the Region of Apples') but also the Land of Joy, the Far Island, the Land of Promise, Magh Meall (the 'Delightful Plain'), or Manannan's Country (Fimi 163). Words like "island" and "country" denote a physical location, and such is the case: the Otherworld of Irish and Tolkienian mythology is "not a 'heaven' like that envisioned by Christian believers as above and separate from this earth" but is located on the same horizontal plane, accessible by ship (Monaghan 371). Tolkien addresses this issue directly in an outline to *The Lost Road* sketching out a debate between Ælfwine and Eadwine: "Ælfwine objects that Paradise cannot be got to by ship [...]. Eadwine says he does not think it true—and hope it isn't" (88). In both cases, the Otherworld is an immortal land located within the mortal realm.

The journey to the Otherworld concludes the historical trajectory of the Noldor and the Tuatha Dé Danaan. Each race leaves the dominion of their land to mortal men and sails into the West, bound for a destination not even legend

describes in full. What glimpses there are show a land of transcendent beauty and peace. Of Emhain it is said:

There are feet of white bronze under it, shining through life and time; a comely level land through the length of the world's age, and many blossoms falling on it. [...] [E]very color is shining there, delight is common [...]. [T]here is nothing hard or rough, but sweet music striking on the ear. (Gregory 104)

Similarly, one of the final paragraphs of *The Return of the King* describes Frodo's passage into the West in the company of the last Elf-lords:

[T]he sails were drawn up, and the wind blew, and slowly the ship slipped away down the long grey firth [...] and went out into the High Sea and passed on into the West, until at last on a night of rain Frodo smelled a sweet fragrance on the air and heard the sound of singing that came over the water. And then it seemed to him that as in his dream in the house of Bombadil, the grey rain-curtain turned all to silver glass and was rolled back, and he beheld white shores and beyond them a far green country under a swift sunrise. (*Lord of the Rings* VI.9:1030)

Tolkien's denial of Celtic influences loses much of its legitimacy in the face of such obvious direct and thematic parallels—parallels that extend even down to prominent place of music in the Blessed Realm. Even in what few fragments of Irish mythology have been handed down in the Irish Mythological Cycle, it is easily discernible that the mythical ancestors of the Irish people, the Tuatha Dé Danaan, have far more in common with Tolkien's Noldor than do the Norse *álfar*, the Anglo-Saxon elves, or the Scottish residents of the Seelie and Unseelie courts. These similarities are more complex than emotional, physical, or spiritual parallels, though those are included as well; the Tuatha Dé Danaan and the Noldor share a basic nature, social structure, and overall history. Each can be described as “a race of god-like heroes who initially came across the sea to Ireland [...]. Their time, however, is limited, and they finally agree to go into exile – many going across the sea” (Gunnell 7).

It would be wrong to imply that Tolkien completely denied Celtic influences upon his work outside of the linguistic arena (he was very forthcoming about the influence of Welsh upon the Sindarin tongue), for this is not the case, and nor did he ever claim it to be. Nor did he deny knowledge of and even interest in Irish mythology specifically, though that interest never coalesced in any concrete form. His focus, however, was on capturing the Celtic *feel*—he wanted his mythology to be “full of dark and twilight, and laden with

sorrow and regret," a mix of "Celtic enchantment and Norse vitality" (qtd. in Fimi 166; Burns 10). Like most Englishmen, he believed in the popular image of the magical, maudlin, almost effeminate Celt—an image that had been fostered by the negative influence of Arthurian romances and courtly love. In reality, the Celts were just as fierce and warlike as the Norse warriors Tolkien so admired. He was even more strongly prejudiced concerning the Irish. Although he often used the terms "Welsh" and "Celtic" interchangeably, "When Tolkien speaks of the Irish, he means only the Irish, and all too often he singles them out as a Celtic negative, as the shadow manifestation of what a Celt ought to be" (Burns 173). The argument herein has been that Tolkien relied on Celtic, and particularly Irish, mythology for more than linguistics and overall atmosphere; that his Elves are not aberrations in his overall methodology but as traceable as any other aspect of Middle-earth; and that the history of Elves as a mythological construct played very little role in Tolkien's own interpretation of the species. Often, Tolkien's unacknowledged sources are far more relevant than those he did acknowledge.

But the similarities between the two mythologies go deeper than the direct and the thematic. At the most basic level, they are both "true." For Tolkien, myths were not synonymous with legends or folktales; they were not merely stories to inspire pride or cause enjoyment. Myths sought to channel something greater – something of the Creator. As Raffaele Pettazzoni said, "Myth is true history because it is sacred history" (102). In "the tales of beginnings, the cosmogonies, theogonies and legends of superhuman beings who brought things into existence and founded institutions" that make up mythologies world-wide is found "the very truth of myth, an absolute truth because a truth of faith, and truth of faith because a truth of life" (101, 107). A Truth so Absolute as to transcend cultural boundaries permeates Myth; fellow Inkling Owen Barfield called it "the principle of living unity" (Barfield 87). If myths, indeed, are the "ghost[s] of concrete meaning," then it is within them that man gets the smallest glimpse of that which utterly eclipses himself (92). Tolkien would have called that eclipsing force God and the Truth conveyed by myth godliness.

This idea played a crucial role in Tolkien's attempt to convert his friend and colleague C.S. Lewis from theism to Christianity. On a cold September night in 1931, "Tollers" and "Jack" entered into a discussion on myth during a 3 a.m. stroll down Addison's Walk. According to Humphrey Carpenter's description of the event, Tolkien asked why the idea of sacrifice made in Christianity was so much harder to accept than the sacrifices made in pagan mythologies. Lewis responded famously: "Myths are lies, even though lies breathed through silver." No, Tolkien said. Because we have come from God, "myths woven by us, though they contain error, will also reflect a splintered fragment of the true light, the eternal truth that is with God. [...] Our myths may be misguided, but they steer

however shakily towards the true harbour" (Carpenter 147). The concept of God revealing Himself (or what of Himself humanity could comprehend) through myth resonated with Lewis. It echoed the words of George MacDonald, a Scottish theologian whose works of Christian fantasy greatly influenced "Jack": "the modifying influence of the human channels may be essential to God's revealing mode" (MacDonald 31).

According to Tolkien, myths were not a lie but the truth breathed through silver—the Truth of God filtered to the point that humanity could understand it. He found this Truth in Irish mythology (as well as in the Norse, the Celtic, the Welsh, and every other mythology he encountered) and sought to convey it in his own mythological world as well. There are many superficial similarities between the Noldor and the Tuatha Dé Danaan, but Tolkien's true debt to the Irish mythos lies in the fragments of Truth it conveyed to the Irish people – fragments that Tolkien adapted in order to convey them to his readers. There may be no God in the Tolkienian universe, but because there is Myth, there certainly is God's Truth.

Works Cited

- Barfield, Owen. *Poetic Diction*. London: Faber and Faber, 1927.
- Battles, Paul. "What is 'Middle-earth'? Origin, Evolution, and Mythic Function." *Constructing Nations, Reconstructing Myth: Essays in Honor of T.A. Shippey*. James G. Leyburn Library, Washington and Lee University. 319-42.
- Brunsdale, Mitzi M. "The Hobbit: Norse Mythological Elements." *Mythlore* 9.4 (#34) (Winter 1983): 49-50, 55.
- Burns, Marjorie. *Perilous Realms: Celtic and Norse in Tolkien's Middle-earth*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005.
- Carpenter, Humphrey. *J.R.R. Tolkien: A Biography*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, Inc. 1977.
- Ellis, Peter Berresford. *A Dictionary of Irish Mythology*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. 1987.
- Fimi, Dimitra. "'Mad' Elves and 'Elusive Beauty': Some Celtic Strands of Tolkien's Mythology." *Folklore* 117.2 (August 2006): 156-170.
- Gillespie, Gerald V. "The Irish Mythological Cycle and Tolkien's Eldar." *Mythlore* 8.4 (#30) (1982): 8-9, 42.

- Gunnell, Terry. "Tivar in a Timeless Land: Tolkien's Elves." Lecture transcript. Symposium, the Nordic House. 13-14 September 2002. 3 November 2008. <<http://www.ask.hi.is/Apps/WebObjects/HI.woa/wa/dp?detail=1004463&id=1011155>>
- Kirk, Robert. *The Secret Commonwealth of Elves, Fauns, and Fairies*. New York: New York Review Books, 2007. Originally published: London: D. Nutt, 1893.
- Lady Gregory. *Gods and Fighting Men: The Story of the Tuatha Dé Danaan and of the Fianna of Ireland*. Buckinghamshire: Colin Smythe, Ltd. 1904.
- Mabinogion*. Trans. Lady Charlotte Guest. London: Wyman and Sons, 1877.
- Macbain, Alex. *Celtic Mythology and Religion*. New York: E.P. Dutton and Co., 1917.
- Mac Cana, Proinsias. *Celtic Mythology*. New York: Barnes and Noble, Inc., 1968.
- MacDonald, George. *George MacDonald: An Anthology*. Ed. C.S. Lewis. London: Geoffrey Bles, Ltd., 1946.
- MacKillop, James. *Myths and Legends of the Celts*. London: Penguin Books, 2005.
- Monaghan, Patricia. *The Encyclopedia of Celtic Mythology and Folklore*. New York: Checkmark Book. 2004.
- Pettazzoni, Raffaele. "The Truth of Myth." *Sacred Narrative: Readings in the Theory of Myth*. Ed. Alan Dundes. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984. 98-109.
- Shippey, Tom. "Light-Elves, Dark-Elves, and Others: Tolkien's Elvish Problem." *Tolkien Studies* 1 (2004): 1-15.
- Sturluson, Snorri. *The Prose Edda*. Trans. Arthur Gilchrist Brodeur. New York: Dover Publications, Inc. 2006. Originally published: New York: American-Scandinavian Foundation, 1916.
- Tolkien, J.R.R. *Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*. Ed. Humphrey Carpenter. New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1981.
- . *The Lord of the Rings*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1994.
- . *The Lost Road and Other Writings. The History of Middle-earth V*. New York: Del Rey Books, 1987.
- . *The Silmarillion*. 2nd ed. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2001.

