



Mythopoeic Society

mythLORE

A Journal of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis,  
Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature

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Volume 27  
Number 1

Article 15

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10-15-2008

## Letters

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### Recommended Citation

Lacon, Ruth (2008) "Letters," *Mythlore: A Journal of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature*: Vol. 27: No. 1, Article 15.

Available at: <https://dc.swosu.edu/mythlore/vol27/iss1/15>

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## Letters



A GOOD FRIEND RECENTLY PASSED ON TO ME a copy of an article from the Fall/Winter 2007 edition of *Mythlore*, Eric Seddon's piece "Letters to Malcolm and the Trouble with Narnia: C.S. Lewis, J.R.R. Tolkien, and Their 1949 Crisis." This is without a doubt one of the finest pieces on the subject that I have ever read. Like Mr. Seddon, I have found most previous analyses of the waning of friendship between Lewis and Tolkien to be ultimately unconvincing, and not in accord with what can be understood of the character of either man. Mr. Seddon's fine article is on the contrary solidly believable. More, his analysis opens up further views into the complex and important friendship between Tolkien and Lewis, rather than closing off discussion as other theories often seem to me to do.

May I put forward a plea for Mr. Seddon to extend his acute and insightful research? I should very much like to see what he could discover regarding the influence of Charles Williams on Lewis's thinking, particularly on religious matters. From even limited consideration it seems clear to me that Williams was something rather different to the "maverick Anglican" he tends to be dismissed as on this side of the Atlantic, if he gets a mention at all. The only full-scale biography of Williams that I am aware of is that of A.M. Hadfield, who was herself one of "Williams's women" and has produced a hagiography rather than a thoughtful consideration of a life. In particular she plays down to the limits of her ability the connection between Williams and A.E. Waite (who thought of himself as a Christian mystic even if he is usually regarded nowadays as an occultist, one of the foremost figures in the Golden Dawn and its successor movements). A comparison between the thinking of Williams and Lewis is sure to be interesting, given what seems to be a complex weave of literary influence between the two. Such an investigation might well also shed further light on the slow breakdown of friendship between Lewis and Tolkien. It would be interesting to see if Williams who certainly looks like a destabilizing factor was actually one, or not.

There is one further point I should like to make. I do hope that no-one would still agree with all of Joe R. Christopher's characterization of Lewis's use of mythology as eclectic and classically based versus that of Tolkien as "self-consistent and Nordic." That Lewis was a magpie on the grand scale and Tolkien

aimed for consistency is true enough (though Tolkien changed his mind more often and more deeply than most people realize.) With the description of Tolkien's ideas as 'Nordic,' though, I have to take issue. The term is wholly inadequate and loaded with inappropriate baggage. Tolkien himself refuted its use in Letters no.294, in the strongest terms, and that should have settled that. As so often, it hasn't. However different the modern definition of 'Nordic' might be to the one which Tolkien reacted so severely against, it is still totally insufficient as a description for the basis of Tolkien's thinking. Any sensible definition of 'Nordic' fails utterly to include Old and Middle English, the heart of Tolkien's professional work and source of so much of his creative inspiration. Beyond this, Tolkien himself made deep and far-reaching use of Classical material, demolishing the proposed opposition between himself and Lewis. I can state this quite categorically having co written (under a pen-name) a book on Tolkien's use of Classical material—*The Forsaken Realm of Tolkien*, Alex Lewis and Elizabeth Currie, Medea 2005.

The use of 'classical' as the opposite to 'Nordic' in this sense is itself a straightforward piece of 19<sup>th</sup> century academic dualism which should be dead and buried. I have yet to see it employed without total mischaracterization of one side or other, and it is too often a device for running down one term and exalting the other, depending on the writer's views. This dualism is inaccurate and useless in historical terms since the two cultures concerned (itself a wild oversimplification) were never isolated from each other. It has no literary or mythographic utility either, since the writers of the medieval works in which those very 'Nordic' myths and legends were preserved did not recognize such an absolute split, rather a vital connection—and anyone who doesn't believe me can try reading Snorri Sturluson. The medieval "web of story" with which Tolkien was so closely and fruitfully engaged in both his professional and his creative work was a much bigger beast than any of our modern academic pigeonholes. We have to recognize and understand this if we want to come to a better understanding of what Tolkien was doing. We also need in my view to be alert for similar transgressions over our perceived boundaries by other authors—Charles Williams springs to mind—and to be able to ask what such transgressions mean for the writers and their work.

Yours sincerely,  
Ruth Lacon