Celtic Myth in the Twentieth Century

Evangeline Walton

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Abstract  
Discusses Celtic myth and “the comments made on it and its influence by the Celtic-born authors who can be said to influenced [her] own work.”

Additional Keywords  
Celtic mythology—Influence on literature; Valerie Protopapas

This article is available in Mythlore: A Journal of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature: https://dc.swosu.edu/mythlore/vol3/iss3/6
a whole chapter is given to "The Dark Night of the Soul," pp. 300-412; other parallels than those which were alluded to in the above essay appear, of course. I understand that some critics consider other works on mysticism to be better than Underhill's, but since Williams was influenced by its work, it is important in the study of the Inklings.

WALDOFF, Leon. "Wordsworth's Healing Power: Basic Trust in 'Tintern Abbey.'" Hartsook Studies in Literature, IV:2 (1972): 147-166. [An interesting comparison to Wilcox's theory (below); Waldoff, arguing from psychoanalytic theory and Romantic history, finds Wordsworth's return to the Wye Valley a regression to the oral stage, in which the capitalized Nature of the last verse paragraph is definitely Mother Nature. Waldoff sees four main defenses in Wordsworth to "gratify the longings for union and onmipotence as well as defend against feelings of loss, diminution of self, and depression" (p.162): "regression, the fantasy of Nature as maternal, identification, and a reverential attitude" (p.164.).]


WATTS, Alan W. "The New Alchemy." In Watts's Alchemy, pp. 125-153. 1960. New York: Collier Books, 1967. [A description of the results of seven experiences of using LSD over a several-year period. A forerunner to the book discussed in this essay (listed above); a few comments on the drug are also included. (I wish to thank Thom Christopher of Chicago, Illinois, for allowing me to find this essay in his collection of Watts's books.)]

WILCOX, Stewart C. [In the spring of 1955 at the University of Oklahoma, I heard Professor Wilcox read a paper on the last verse paragraph of "Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey" which I still believe the best explication I have found. Although the paper was never published, Professor Wilcox has given me permission to summarize it in this note. He began from the phrase "For thou art with me" (spoken by William Wordsworth to his sister, Dorothy, in L.I.14), noting the echo of Psalm 23. He pointed out both the imagistic and phrasal echoes of this psalm in other parts of this paragraph, including Wordsworth's reference to "this green pastoral landscape" in L.I.150. Religious language not derived from the psalms includes "this prayer I make" (L.I.121), "Our cheerful faith" (L.I.133), "my exhortations" (L.I.146), "A worshipper" (L.I.152), "service" (L.I.153), "with far deeper zeal/ Of holier love" (L.I.154-155). The series of negatives in L.I.176-180 may echo Romans 8:36-39, and the phrase "Shall e'er prevail against us?" (L.I.132), Obadiah 19:19 and Job 12:20.]


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**Celtic Myth in the Twentieth Century**

_Evangeline Walton_

I PROMISED TO SPEAK ON WELSH AND CELTIC influence on Mythopoeic literature, but on thinking it over I see that that is not exactly my thing. I'm a story-teller, not a critic; it's my business to put things together, not to take them apart and analyze them. So I think I'll do better if I just talk about Celtic Myth itself, and about the comments made on it and its influence by the Celtic-born authors who can be said to have influenced my own work.

Wm. Butler Yeats, himself every inch an Irishman, felt that it was wrong to nail down certain literary traits as "Celtic." He preferred to look upon them as part of what he called the "Ancient Religion of the World," to which he thought even modern Celts were still closer than most people. In his essay on Magic he described this primeval religion as only a poet could, speaking of gods whose passions flamed in the sunset, of ancient beauty or terrible images—and the imagination. (Though of course these ancient gentlemen may have been too used to the smell to notice them: I admit that.)
his men's names came straight out of the old Norse Gylfaginning, itself a pretty mysterious piece of work. Boromir and Faramir even sound Slavic to me, though I'm no philologist. Also the grim and noble heights to which some of the main characters rise (even if it sometimes takes them awhile to get there) facing or even accepting destruction in order to save their world, bring in the real thing. In the real Celtic tone, the emphasis on self-sacrifice do not belong to any pre-Christian Western epics that I know of. One could try to read something of it into the words of the Irish King Conachur when the severed head of Sualtaun rails at him and makes him from his throne, "Unless the sky with its shower of stars fall upon the earth or unless the ground burst open I will bring back every cow to its cowhouse, every woman to her house." But this is really trivial, not individually focused, based on the notion that for the CELTIC man, it is to survive every tribe-man must risk his life for it; there is no thought of humanity in general; people outside your own tribe just don't count. In the Mabinogion itself, Emnissyn displays the same mentality when he decides to die in the Cauldron to save his people, while his own sons and nieces have a right to live. Only has led to death thinking of the island of the Mighty into this strait! The scene is a strange one, much more complicated than the Irish incident I just quoted—it's a bit like seeing the devil himself turn into Christ and accept the Cross—but the underlying idea is the same. Emnissyn dies for his people ("Great man, no man") but he doesn't give a damn about anybody else. His Irish mythology still has a long way to go.

In mythology—yes, you never find our modern preoccupation with good and evil, this preoccupation doesn't even make us noticeably good yet. And perhaps you find it least of all in the Celtic. Yeats says—this time in his Celtic Twilight—that fantasy and caprice would lose the freedom which is their breath of life if they were to unite with either good or evil. This is, probably, a little of the reason why Shakespeare has presupposed his ancient gods. Mortals may occasionally—just occasionally—stop and worry and have quails about what they have done to each other, and worry but never really seems to worry the gods except not getting what they want. They are so beautiful, and airily and inno-cently they can say, We're out of this one, and We've got the bird's wings. Why educate the poor little thing so carefully if the only end she was just going to use it like an ordinary illiterate carrier pigeon? Plenty of us modern authors make such mistakes as we move from chapter to chapter, but I don't see how anybody could do it in one paragraph, and they're always as angry as they can. A modern editor would also have something to say about how Branwen had no right to write it. A whole new generation of writing materials when she was at best a prisoner among jeering enemies who could neither read nor write, and probably never heard of anyone's writing a letter. But she may not even have had the freedom of the kitchen into which she had been thrown, a queen made a slave. She may have been a bit as we are told Irish cooks often were back even in early Christian times.

I WAS VERY STARTLED some months ago, when someone wrote to Mythsprint magazine saying that he wondered why everybody wrote about the Welsh and never about the Irish. Then began writing my Mabinogion tetralogy the Irish held the field, and I thought that the stories in the Red Book of Hergest were still very absorbing. I never would have dreamed of tackling the great Irishmen on their own ground: James Stephens, AE, Yeats, etc., etc., but I did include an Irishman who, one who wrote fantasies that had a sheer beauty of language perhaps unequalled, he wrote very little about Irish mythology.

For while the Irish held the center of the world stage, I think, because of the brief, lovely flowerings of their godhood in order to free their Christian predecessors. To get back to my subject: Welsh story is very different from its Irish cousin. The Mabinogion is full of Mysteries, but the Otherworldly element has been so carefully combed out of it that you only know it's there to look for it. You have to watch for it, the way we do when the mortals are entering Fáry and when they are leaving it. The stories that the Welsh peasants told among themselves show that they originally knew the difference between fairy time and mortal time—it isn't new that the Irish did. Yet in the Mabinogi it appears only once—when that sad little band of great adventurers, the Seven Who Returned from Ireland, stop at a certain place and wait for 80 years. Yet Pryderi, one of the band, returns home to find the young bride he left behind him still fresh and blooming, though by all the rules of earthly time she should have been about 100 years old, if she was still alive at all. This is a complete reversal of the usual idea of fairy time, which usually is supposed to run much slower than ours, and the character doesn't seem to notice that anything odd has happened.

This raises comparison with another howling mistake made by the man who wrote down the Mabinogi. He says that "Branwen reared a startling in her kitchen-rough, and she taught it to speak, and told it what kind of man Bran her brother was....and that silly thing, when she was drawing to the end, just going to use it like an ordinary illiterate carrier pigeon? Plenty of us modern authors make such mistakes as we move from chapter to chapter, but I don't see how anybody could do it in a paragraph, and they're always as angry as they can. A modern editor would also have something to say about how Branwen had no right to write it. A whole new generation of writing materials when she was at best a prisoner among jeering enemies who could neither read nor write, and probably never even heard of anyone's writing a letter. But she may not even have had the freedom of the kitchen into which she had been thrown, a queen made a slave. She may have been a bit as we are told Irish cooks often were back even in early Christian times.

It seems to me just possible that another attempt was being made to eliminate magic—on notices that Branwen's bird not only speaks, but can understand what people say to it—but in that case why not just scratch across the lines about the bird's education? It is slips like this that make me doubt that the Mabinogi was written down by the man who composed it—that unknown author in whose name we place the attribution. Nobody, I think, has ever come to the conclusion that the man who wrote down the Mabinogi was the man who wrote it. There are only children playing with toys, and the toys—we humans—we have to use them, or where they may lead to. This, so far as I know, was the only time when anything of a psychic nature was actually attempted on stage, but we are told that a good many things were tried in the theater of the time that I think would have had value to even the old Welsh "Men of Fantasy and Illusion," a long title usually translated into English as magicians. Unfortunately, it was considered unwise to make many of these attempts. There is too little while the Celtic Twilight really must have glowed like the sun, while what had gone before passed away unnoticed. So that the ancestors would have called magic, and that we now fumblingly call ESP and hypnotism. How the thought of that gorgeous picnic, both of sheer creativity and of playing with unknown power, makes one's mouth water!
Irish counterpart, Manannan son of Lir, and so I borrowed them for him. After all, if the two were originally the same person, they belonged to him.

I do not know why the Welsh monk should have been so particular about some things, for the Irish monks deprived the old gods only of whatever ethical significance they may once have had—also of their control over the dead, which comes out clearly in Irish peasant tales, but is seldom even touched upon in the old manuscripts. They let them keep their immortality, their everlasting youth, and their gorgeous Other-world.

The Mabinogi stands alone. Only a few bits and pieces of its companion myths survive. The great Arthurian cycle has been so thoroughly worked over by courtly French minstrels that we can tell very little about its original Welsh shape. Sir Lancelot, himself chief of the knights of the Round Table, and secret lover of Queen Guinevere, is now generally dismissed as a French addition. Yet the earliest legend in which he appears does not connect him with Guinevere at all, and does surround him with old Celtic supernatural figures. One small instance: we are told that when in his babyhood, while his mother was busy with his mortally wounded father, King Ban, the little Lancelot was stolen away by the Lady of the Lake, and reared in her fairy paradise, the Island of the Maidens. (A place with a name like that must have been a good place for him to get into practice for the Queen.) The Lady of the Lake wished him to grow up to be a warrior to save her son Mabuz, who is generally identified with the mysteriously imprisoned Mabon, the God the Romans identified with Apollo when they found him in Gaul. And in at least one Welsh district, within the last century, people still believed that the fairies lived beneath the lakes, and used to caution their children about going out into a mist lest they be caught and stolen away. One of the children so warned grew up to be the wife of the great Oxford-born scholar, Sir John Rhys, whose researches turned the key that let me into his native Welsh wonderland. Without the understanding he gave me I could not have had enough insight into them to write my own tetralogy. But I will say no more of Rhys, for I understand that a paper about his influence on my work is to be read here and I certainly don't want to steal its author's thunder. Since he admires my work, he is, in my opinion, a gentleman of excellent taste and judgement (though I haven't yet met him).

Without meaning any criticism of either famous lady, I do think it a little ironic that women novelists Rosemary Sutton and Mary Stewart should have banished Sir Lancelot from their versions of the Arthurian cycle. For he is the man Zimmer considered all women's ideal male—their animus archetype. Most of the heroes of the Round Table were definitely men's men, but Sir Lancelot, the great warrior who yet puts love ahead of everything else, is the desire of every woman's heart. Considering the rather silly tyranny with which Queen Guinevere often treats him (these squashed medieval ladies must have had some suppressed desire to get even with their lords and masters), it often seems a wonder that Lancelot doesn't walk out on Guinevere; and indeed, once he does take about a fifteen-year's vacation with the beautiful daughter of the Grail King, she who bore him Sir Galahad. Galahad is a figure you can't trace at all on Celtic ground. But one thing does puzzle me (again meaning no criticism): why do both Rosemary Sutton and Mary Stewart substitute Bedry—Tennyson's Sir Bedivere—for Lancelot? No Welsh fragment yet discovered seems to link his name with Guinevere's, while on the other hand we are told that she was seized by at least two other people: Melwas, a mysterious fair prince, no doubt a shrunken god, and Modred, Arthur's combination nephew-son. Since in the earliest complete Arthurian cycle—Geoffrey of Monmouth—Modred kills his brother, Sir Gawain, and in the French versions it is Sir Lancelot who does this, the substitution is very plain there. Another name coupled with the Queen's is that of Sir Kay, Arthur's foster brother. In Welsh he was anything but the spiteful weakening the Frenchmen (and later nearer our own time, Tennyson) have made of him. He was a great fighter, one whose sword dealt always a wound that no physician could heal, and he became Arthur's enemy. Rhys-believed him to have been one of Guinevere's abductors—she was always getting abducted: the only question is whether she co-operated and these abductions were really elopements. In the oldest French versions it looks suspiciously as if he betrayed her into captivity; also he is ac-
cursed of spending the night with her, though the French poet quickly added that of course it was really Lancelot. In Malory all this seems to boil down to her praising him on his prowess in battle, though this is early in the game—and throughout most of Malory, Kay is again only the spiteful weakling. Guinevere's love life will always remain a mystery.

Another thing that seems quite strange is that the Scotch, a people just as Celtic as the Irish or the Welsh, have produced no great hero, no mythic cycle of tales. Bits of Arthurian lore have been found among them, and some very poetic versions of old Irish tales; and certainly everybody knows of the highland Scott's fame for the latter, but they have no epic. One would like to think that it was trampled underfoot by the Covenanters, those nice people who made laws forbidding such sinful revelry as the celebration of Christmas, but even if all the written versions had been found and burned, a national epic if it had existed would have survived; it would have been too deeply embedded in the national consciousness for such late-comers as the Covenanters to stamp out. And even while they were going to church every Sunday—they'd have caught it if they hadn't—they said they were merely Scotich-Irish blood, and that really means Scotch.

My own work has been deeply influenced by Eastern mystics, which often fits in with folklore remarkably well. You could say that one of our present-day scholars is corroborating that a bit by linking old Irish laws with old Sanskrit ones, and druidic practices and beliefs with those of the Brahmins, but I'm sure he would indignantly repudiate the charge. Also, I myself prefer to accept Rhys' theory that the druids are really pre-Celtic, and converted their warlike invaders. But because ancient peoples did get around a great deal, in spite of their lack of comfortable transportation, it is hard to tell about such things. A great deal of history is left over, somehow associated with the builders of the lost civilization of Mohenjo-daro, which the Sanskrit-speaking invaders presumably overwhelmed. And that folk may very well have been relatives of that lost race whom the Aryan Celts overwhelmed. In view of the great astronomical knowledge displayed in the building of Stonehenge—the comforting idea of Mycenean influence is fading since recent radiocarbon dating suggests that the Celtic mythic building father and farther back—the people who built such an observatory can't have been just ignorant savages. So maybe the Celts themselves were only the heirs of broken and scattered wisdom which they recast and elaborated just as the French poet did the Arthurian cycle, as our unknown Mr. X did with the Mabinogi.

We could take all this still further back, and suggest that perhaps this wisdom was originally brought down from other planets in the distant past. Since scientific opinion is changing so rapidly these days, we can't say at this time what it might be. I'm sure he would indignantly repudiate the charge. Also, I might say that all this seems to be trampling upon our imaginations with iron feet. Another kick I have against science: none of its discoveries about prehistoric man and his world ever really give us an answer; they just take everything one step back. It's like the old saw about which came first: the hen or the egg. Personally, I would say that since all creatures lay eggs, the first egg came out of a egg laid by what you might call some proto-hen, herself doubtless the product of untold ages of evolution. But which started that evolution? If matter and energy somehow collided so violently that what we call the universe is produced, and energy come from? If the chariots of the Gods brought us our civilization, where did they come from, and how did their planet become inhabited and civilized? Religious people say, "Our God." Those who aren't religious have no better answer than the old proverb so well-known here in the Southwest, "¿Quién sabe?"

John L. Leland, New Haven, Connecticut

Dear sir:

Your call in Mythlore & for more commentary on the work of Lewis and Williams has led me to decide to mention a point which I noticed some time ago, when you published The Noises That Warms There, and which I have always meant to examine in detail, but have always failed to study. I am mentioning it now in the hope that someone else will make the study.

This point is that the passage in The Noises which discusses the desire of evil spirits to create life, their concern with succubi, etc., is very closely parallel—I believe in fact for some descriptions on the same subject in Williams' Witchcraft. This raises, of course, a number of questions about the relationship between the two texts, from a purely bibliographical standpoint—that is, when did Williams write the passage, and did he originally intend to use it, did he ever intend to actually appear in two published works, etc.—and also the more generally interesting question of the relationship between Williams' views on magic in the natural world and the processes he describes as actually occurring in his novels. I have been discussing Williams' Witchcraft—and as the only full-length study of "real" magic by a major fantasy author (so far as I am aware), it would seem to merit careful attention—but it seems to me possible that one reason Williams set his novels (by and large) in an approximation of this world, rather than a new world like those of the other Inklings, was because he in some ways took more seriously the open intervention of world-building evil spirits in his plots. That is, I think, the feeling (I may be misunderstanding the question) is that Lewis and Tolkien—though they maintain the theoretical possibility of such interventions in our world—are tacitly accepting the assumption of most moderns that such things do not occur in our world, and then postulating an adversary that merely has the power to express ideas rather than magical systems. That is to say, I think Lewis is less interested in arguing that devils such as Screwtape maintain an actual existence of the sort he ascribes to them than he is in making the point that the methods adopted by Screwtape do in fact reflect undesirable states of mind or habits for the modern Christian; this is not to say that Lewis would have maintained that such states of mind were not in fact sometimes induced in humans by genuine evil entities but that he was using such actions as real or not—as a metaphor for the discussion of the states of mind. Rather my feeling is that Williams really is interested in the implications of the actual (possible, at least) existence of such powers in this world, and their effect on humans. These points, as regards Lewis and Tolkien especially, could be illustrated at great length, but the work is unfortunately beyond me; again I am