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Additional Keywords

Sarah Beach



LETTERS

Jessica Yates

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I must dissent from the generous review given to Nitzsche's Tolkien's Art in Mythlore 28. Although her approach to Tolkien is certainly somewhat original, she often simplifies Tolkien's attitudes to fit her theories, and her prose style is often pompous and jargon-ridden.

In tracing Tolkien's sources she concentrates on the theological rather than the mythological. Thus she rattles off a long list of possible sources for The Silmarillion "like the Bible, Ovid's Metamorphoses...the Eddas, the Welsh Mabinogion, the Irish myths..." (though she doesn't mention the Kalevala). But mediaeval theological works are quoted at length, though she doesn't convince me that Tolkien had them consciously in mind. For instance, because the Ancrene Wisse deals with the Seven Deadly Sins, she thinks that The Hobbit demonstrates the effect of these sins, though deliberately omitting lechery/lust "because this is a children's story" (p. 37). This leads to the ridiculous statement about Gollum "Gluttonous even when young, he taught his own grandmother to suck eggs." Far from being an example of gluttony, this is a linguistic joke by Tolkien, glossing the common English proverb "Teach your grandmother to suck eggs" i.e. tell your grandmother (or other close relative) something they have known for years.

I would not say that 'Leaf by Niggle' was a fairy-story, although it was published with the essay 'On Fairy-Stories.' It does not deal with Faerie, but is set in this world, and in purgatory, and possibly Heaven. Tolkien didn't have to bear in mind the works of Macrobius in order to write 'Leaf by Niggle', as his own concept of purgatory and heaven from being a practising Roman Catholic would have been a sufficient inspiration. It is surprising that although she comments on Leaf throughout the story, she does not explain what the Mountains, and the man who seems to be a shepherd, might represent. And The First Voice does not "represent the fantastic equivalent of God the Father" (p. 65) - He Is. Nor can I agree with the bald statement, with only one critic adduced for evidence, that "In the 19th century fairy-tales were regarded as fantastic and trashy" but that "In the 20th century... fairy-stories have become... acceptable entertainment for children." (p. 49) The matter is more complex than that, the late 19th century and early 20th century was the golden age for fairy-tales, both traditional and literary: Lang, Carroll, Molesworth, Wilde, MacDonald, Ruskin, Grimm, Kingsley and Jacobs and E. Nesbit were all at work. It was after the 1st world war that they went out of fashion, remaining so until the 60s. It was at the time Tolkien composed 'On Fairy-stories' and Lord of the Rings that they were unfashionable, as surely the text of OFS implies.

As Nitzsche concentrates so much on possible theological sources for Tolkien's works, she neglects the biographical element which usually provided the starting-point for epic and short work alike. So much of Tolkien's work was inspired by the personal and unexpected impulse. Although Nitzsche discusses Tolkien's life in her introduction, she doesn't follow

the matter through each work. She hasn't researched Tolkien's early poems thoroughly - I mean, she hasn't compared the early versions with those in Tom Bombadil, for instance. She mentions that he wrote an Earendel poem in 1914, but doesn't ask why he kept reworking the idea of the voyage to the West throughout his life, an idea which amounted to an obsession. Why was The Silmarillion drafted first, but never completed? She admits that the story of Beren and Luthien is a fantastic version of Tolkien's own love-story, but doesn't realise that the story of Arwen and Aragorn is essentially the same story as well, although Tolkien made the parallels perfectly clear.

Nitzsche draws attention to two literary influences in Tolkien's work, the Christian and the "Germanic". But she ignores the Celtic elements, and thus from time to time she confuses Celtic with Germanic! Two basic themes of Tolkien's writing, the voyage to the West, and the encounter of mortal man with supernatural woman, are undoubtedly Celtic, but she doesn't note their continual recurrence throughout his work, and cites "Germanic" elements in the obviously Celtic poems, 'Imram,' and 'Aotrou and Itroun.' On page 99 she calls Sauron a typical "Germanic earl" and on page 119 cites "the good and bad Germanic lords Theoden and Denethor". Yet only the culture of Rohan is typically Germanic. Sauron is more the Asiatic warlord, Denethor reminds us of a Roman dictator perhaps, and neither can be called "Germanic", except by a critic whose trying to force everything into one identical mould.

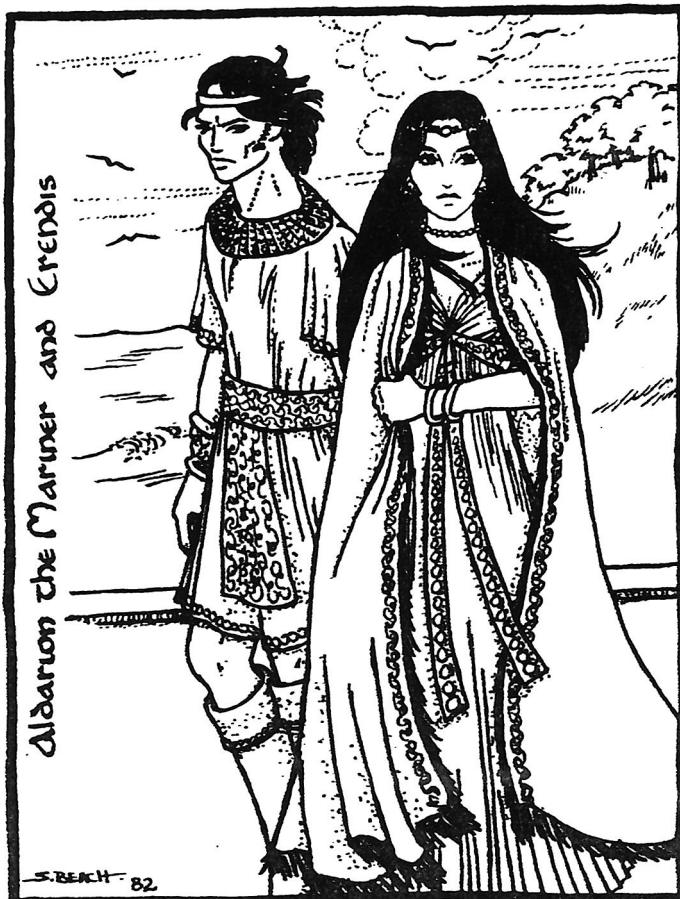
Lack of research into the sources, and neglect of the Celtic elements, mars her discussion of 'Imram,' and 'Aotrou and Itroun.' Regarding 'Imram,' she simply refers us to Kocher for the source. But the Latin Voyage of Saint Brendan was itself modelled on the Irish imram, of which the most famous are The Voyage of Bran, and Voyage of Maelduin, which no doubt Tolkien also knew. (Moreover, Maelduin's voyage was undoubtedly a source of Lewis's Voyage of the Dawn Treader - some of the voyagers' adventures are very similar.) In giving the Voyage of Brendan as Tolkien's only source, she simplifies Kocher, and ignores the original Celtic sources. (See Myles Dillon: Early Irish Literature; University of Chicago Press 1948, chapter 6 The Voyages, for these.) Although Nitzsche rightly calls 'Imram' a "hybrid", she doesn't identify all the separate elements within, which are to my reckoning at least four: English poetic form, as if the poem had been written by a mediaeval English poet; the Irish genre of the imram or voyage to the otherworld; the Latin source with Christian implications; and Tolkien's own concept of the western voyage, which took Brendan in fact to the borders of Eressea.

Now for 'Aotrou and Itroun,' in which, she says, the leading character, a portrayal of "the Germanic king" is a Briton (sic) lord. This is nonsense. However, it's true that Aotrou's racial pride, and need to have a son and heir, bring about his death and the end of his line. But why? Not, as she says, because "Aotrou's failure is clearly attributable to the chivalric code" (p. 84). Not exactly. Comparing Tolkien's version with the original (Keighlley's Fairy

Mythology, 1878), we see that he adds the theme of the bargain for children, the fertility drug. In the original, Lord Nann meets the Corrigan in the wood after his children are born. He owes her nothing - but she still curses him. In Tolkien's version Aotrou is cursed because he refuses to fulfil his side of the bargain. But having sinned because he used a fertility charm, he is doomed anyway. This is the moral introduced to the story by Tolkien, the Roman Catholic. Today's Catholics are more concerned about birth control than fertility drugs! So Tolkien has again added a personal element to a mediaeval genre; to the Breton lay, which often glorified immorality, he has added a stern Catholic warning against artificial birth control or the reverse. It's not the "chivalric code" which Aotrou has disobeyed, it's God's law.

Throughout her discussion of Tolkien's mediaeval-style works, 'Homecoming,' 'Giles,' 'Imram and Aotrou,' she refers to them as "Tolkien's Mediaeval Parodies". This may be a permitted transatlantic use of the word parody, but to me this word means humour, satire, the lampoon. And only Giles is funny in that way. The word pastiche is preferable - after all, one doesn't roll around laughing when reading Aotrou and Itroun.

I conclude with a selection of Nietzsche's pompous or erroneous statements about LOTR. "If Book Three demonstrates the intellectual nature of sin, then Book Four demonstrates its physical nature." (p. 116) "The epic form has proved useful in reflecting the clash of value systems during periods of transition in literary history" (p. 97 - how banal!) Frodo on Amon Hen "here rescues himself instead of being rescued by Glorfindel or Gandalf" (p. 111 - but the Voice telling him to take off the Ring is Gandalf!).



Moreover, she says that in *The Silmarillion* "it is revealed that Gandalf possessed one of the three elven rings" (p. 130) (as if we didn't learn this on the last page of LOTR!) And I can't take seriously as a Tolkien critic who says that "*The Silmarillion* is difficult to read and even more difficult to enjoy". (p. 129) The task of a critic who likes an author is to persuade the reader likewise, not to sell out.

J. Kriss White

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In Mary Ellen Pitts' article "The Motif of the Garden in the Novels of J.R.R. Tolkien, Charles Williams and C.S. Lewis," we wish to take exception to the sentence "The garden in the basic Judeo-Christian myth is, of course, Eden -- the garden of Paradise, of unfallen man and woman."

The sentence perpetuates a common misconception and is therefore inaccurate for, from the Jewish point of view, humankind never fell. Jewish tradition holds that the Almighty could not curse His supreme creation, "...behold it (humankind) was very good.", but instead declared "...cursed is the ground for thy sake ... thorns and thistles shall it bring forth to thee." Because of this, we feel that Ms. Pitts should have either omitted "Judeo" in her sentence or let the "Judeo" stand and omitted "of unfallen man and woman."

As a side note to both this and the article as a whole, the garden, or "getting back to nature," has never held any place in mainstream Jewish literary or religious thought, since in Jewish tradition, the ground is cursed. We are where we should be and the golden age is before us, not behind us.

We also take issue with Dolores Espinoza, in her letter in issue 31, classifying the Star of David as even "only sometimes a Christ symbol." In our opinion, it is never a Christ symbol. Christians' use of the six-pointed star would be understandable if it were in use in Jesus' time. This is, however, not the case.

The six-pointed star originated as a kabbalistic (Jewish mystical) symbol in medieval Europe. It was used by some Christian European regimes as a "badge of shame" that "Christ-killers" were forced to wear. (This culminated in the "Jude" badges imposed by the Nazis.) General Jewish usage of the Star of David is relatively recent, mainly as a cultural symbol rather than a religious one. It has become widespread only in the last few centuries, especially as a Zionist symbol. Initially, its popular Jewish usage was a method of focusing on a derogatory symbol and reflecting it back as a symbol of cultural pride. A linguistic example of this phenomenon is the shift in connotations of the words Black and Chicano, both originally terms of derision, but now used with a sense of racial and cultural pride.

How would Christians feel if the cross were appropriated by a religion ideologically unrelated to Christianity for use as one of its symbols?