The Figure of Taliesin in Charles Williams' Arthuriad

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Abstract
Discusses Taliesin as a historical personage and as a legendary and mythological figure, and specifically the sources for Williams's portrayal of Taliesin in his Arthurian poetry. Speculates on why Williams chose Taliesin as the "romantic focus" of his poems, how he conceived his role, and why he departed from traditional sources.

Additional Keywords
Taliesin; Williams, Charles—Characters—Taliessin; Williams, Charles. Arthuriad—Sources; Christine Lowentrout; Sarah Beach
The Figure of Taliesin in Charles Williams' Arthuriad

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It is generally held by those who have studied the Arthurian poems of Charles Williams that his principal sources were Malory and the French Romances. C.S. Lewis knew that he had adapted some materials from the Mabinogi, but appears to regard their influence as slight. Williams himself, in a prefatory note not published in the unfinished Figure of Arthur but appended by Lewis, stated that "this book is a consideration of the tale of King Arthur in English literature. It does not pretend to investigate, or indeed to record, the original sources, the Celtic tales or the French romances, except insofar as some mention of them is necessary to the main theme." (AT, p. 277)

Nevertheless, as I hope to show, Williams did in fact know a great deal more about the Celtic sources than such comments suggest. Further, the Celtic influence of the bardic tradition was particularly effective, especially with respect to the figure of Taliesin himself. Oddly enough, Williams does appear to have been generally unaware of the great advances being made at the time in critical Welsh scholarship, mainly by Sir Ifor Williams. This is undoubtedly due to the fact that much of Sir Ifor's research and his critical editions of the poems of the early bards were written and published not only in Wales, but in Welsh.

Since Charles Williams' death in 1945, moreover, it can safely be said, I think, that the amount of critical material on the Cynfeirdd, the early bards, available in English has at least doubled. This gives us at once an enormous advantage over Charles Williams himself, but also the means whereby his treatment of Taliesin can be evaluated.

The scope of the present inquiry will be limited to the work Williams sometimes called his "Arthuriad" and at others "the Taliesin poems," for it is here that the question of Celtic influence arises and should be resolved. There can be no doubt that these poems were the chief work of his life, unfortunately left unfinished at his death in 1945. The theme of the Arthurian cycle, as observed by Williams in the preface to The Region of the Summer Stars, is "the Reign of King Arthur in Logres and the Achievement of the Grail." (AT, p. 117) But the focal character, if not the chief actor, is neither Arthur nor Galahad, but the British bard, Taliesin.
Williams began deliberating the composition of a cycle of Arthurian poems when he was comparatively young, as early, according to Anne Ridler, as 1912, when he was 26. In a personal communication, Mrs. Ridler told me that at that time, Taliesin seemed to play no role in the envisioned poems. One of the questions we should consider then, is why and how Williams came to employ Taliesin not only as a major character, but in many respects as the pivotal figure of the cycle.

Taliesin in Myth, Legend and History

The problem of evaluating the place of Taliesin is compounded by the fact that, as with Arthur himself, there are three "Taliesins"—the historical individual, the legendary character, and the mythological figure.

The Taliesin of history is both the most obscure of the three Taliesins and also the most concretely tangible, owing mainly to the scholarly detective work of Sir Ifor Williams, John Morris-Jones, Rachel Bromwich and A.O.H. Jarman. Behind the myth and the legends they have found a true bard, very likely the first poet to write in Welsh and a late contemporary of Arthur. (The only connections with Arthurian material are found, however, in legendary sources.) As Jarman observes, "It must be admitted that we have no contemporary evidence for the existence of... Taliesin...." (Jarman, op. cit., p. 5.) However after a century-long process of textual analysis and redaction, it now seems evident that Taliesin not only existed but flourished as the premier bard of Britain from the middle to the end of the sixth century. According to the ninth century monk Nennius, Taliesin was one of five northern bards who wrote during the years in which Ida was King of Northumbria, that is (according to St. Bede) from 547 to 559. It is also clear that Taliesin lived at the Court of Urien of Rheged and his son Owain, who fought against Theodoric and Hussa during the period 572-579 and 585-592. He is also associated, though mainly in legend, with Maelgwn Gwynedd, against whom he prophesied. (According to Nennius, Maelgwn died of the plague in 547.) Finally, Taliesin is associated with two Welsh Kings of the sixth century, Gwallawg and Cynan Garwyn of Powys in Mid-Wales.

Of the twelve poems among some fifty in the thirteenth century Book of Taliesin now believed to have been composed by the bard himself, the first and earliest is that in praise of Cynan, which supports the belief that Taliesin was a native of Powys who migrated north during the latter part of his career. According to tradition, he was also buried in Powys, where a slab grave, Bedd Taliesin, Taliesin's Grave, can still be seen today near the road from Aberystwyth to Machynlleth. A small town just north of the site is called Tre Taliesin, Taliesin's Village.

We may presume then that Taliesin, the first and perhaps greatest of the early bards, the Cynfeirdd, was born sometime around 520 and died at a ripe age sometime in the last decade of the sixth century. This would make him about twenty at the time of the Battle of Camlan, and might well have given rise to later conjectures of his having been at Arthur's Court as a boy. But his reputation as pencerdd (chief poet) and penbeird (chief bard), depends on his poetry, which even today is hailed as vibrant, evocative and powerful. (See Jarman, p. 30.)

Within two centuries, as reflected in the Welsh Annals and the Historia of Nennius, the name of Taliesin had become synonymous with eloquence and indeed with the office of court poet or bard, along with those of Aneirin and Talhaiarn. Eventually, Myrddin or Merlin came to join Taliesin and Aneirin as the three principal bards of the Island of Britain. Taliesin's association with Merlin, for instance in the Welsh Triads and Geoffrey's Vita Merlini, is also based at least in part on his later reputation as a magician, perhaps a reference to the various prophecies attached to his name.

The Legend Grows

Here we are already well into the legendary Taliesin, who is believed in folk tradition to have created Lake Geirionydd in north Wales to ornament his house, among other feats. He was held to have had a son, Afaon, who is mentioned in three of the Triads, his death being considered one of the three unfortunate assassinations of the Isle of Britain, as was that of Aneirin. Another legendary adventure, one perhaps based on fact, is mentioned in the Chirk Codex of the Laws of Hwyl Dda, circa 1200, which testifies that Taliesin accompanied Rhun, Maelgwn's son and successor,
on a punitive raid into the north. (See Bromwich, Triads, p. 510.)

The compiler of the Book of Taliesin seems to have been mainly interested in the legendary figure. He included fifteen poems ascribed to the legendary Taliesin as well as ten prophecies and a host of religious poems, elegies and eulogies in addition to the twelve poems now accepted as genuine. Of course, as Williams observes, "it is unlikely that the scribe drew a distinction between the work of the legendary Taliesin, Elphin's bard, and the work of the legendary Taliesin, Urien's bard...." (Ibid.) At this point in time, Taliesin was simply and illustriously "the poet-prophet par excellence...." (Ibid.)

Taliesin the Hero

The legendary bard shades into the mythological hero in the Hanes or Chwedl Taliesin, the tale or story of Taliesin, several versions of which have existed. In each, the bard's life is projected backward to a previous lifetime as Cwion Bach, a youth employed by the goddess Keridwen to watch over the cauldron of wisdom. Accidentally, little Cwion intercepts the distillation intended for Keridwen's unfortunate son, Afagddu. Realizing the danger to himself at the moment of inspiration, Gwion flees Keridwen's wrath by a series of shape-shiftings—the most powerful exploit of the Celtic wizard. Keridwen pursues him and eventually devours him when he changes into a grain of wheat and she into a hen. Nine months later, she is delivered of a baby. Despite her displeasure, she cannot bring herself to kill him because of his great beauty. So she sets him adrift in a covered basket, in which he is discovered some time later in a salmon weir by Elphin, the son of the impoverished King Gwyddno Garanhir. Elphin gives the name Taliesin to the child because of the beauty or brightness of his forehead when taken from the sea. (Taliesin means "radiant brow.") At once, the child begins to speak and to prophesy. Grown to manhood, Taliesin saves the unfortunate Elphin from the treacherous Maelgwn and goes on to win everlasting glory as the premier bard of Britain.

Three versions of the story are known to have existed, the most widely known being that published by Lady Charlotte Guest in her editions of the Mabinogi in 1838 and 1877. None of these versions are older than the 16th century, but they clearly contain material far earlier than that, much of which is reflected in the poems attributed to Taliesin in the thirteenth century compilations. (See Bromwich, Triads, p. 520.)

Two myths pertaining to Taliesin have been rather crudely joined in all these tales, the story of Gwion Bach and the exploits of Taliesin and Elphin. The first clearly establishes the semi-divine origin of the poet, incorporating him firmly in the company of Celtic heroes. Together with the account of his discovery by Elphin, the Hanes Taliesin ranges over the whole gamut of characteristics identified by the Rees brothers as conditions for heroic status—his miraculous conception and birth, the hostility of his mother, the danger to his life, his rescue, his identification with various animals, especially the salmon, the wondrous knowledge he displays as a child, his heroic exploits and the process of obtaining an appropriate name, which, as the Rees observe, is often by way of a chance remark.

In her notes to the Hanes Taliesin, Lady Charlotte Guest included several other documents which attempt to account for Taliesin's genealogy in more ordinary if no less fictitious terms. According to various Welsh manuscripts collected by Iolo Morganwg, a somewhat unreliable source by modern standards, Taliesin was the son of Saint Henwg of Caerlleon Upon Usk. Invited to the Court of Urien Rheged, he was seized one day by Irish pirates. Escaping, Taliesin was found by Gwyddno Garanhir and made tutor to his son, Elffin. After Gwyddno's kingdom was inundated, Taliesin was summoned to Arthur's Court at Caerlleon. Upon Arthur's death, Taliesin retired to the north as protector of Prince Elffin. (Cf. Guest, The Maginogion, pp. 495-6.)

Taliesin's pedigree, in another manuscript, traces his ancestry from Henwg to "Caradog the son of Bran, the son of Llyr Llediaith, King Paramount of all the Kings of Britain.... Taliesin became Chief Bard of the West, from having been appointed to preside over the chair of the Round Table, at Caerlleon upon Usk." (Ibid., p. 496.) Yet another manuscript claims that Taliesin, "Chief of the Bards... went to Rome on a mission to Constantine the Blessed, requesting him to send Saints Germanus and Lupus to Britain, in order to strengthen the faith and renew baptism there." Captured by Irish pirates, Taliesin made his escape in a skin coracle and wound up, as usual, discovered in the salmon-weir of Gwyddno Garanhir by Elphin, now the grandson (rather than the son) of Gwyddno, born of his
daughter Elivri. Elphins father, it turns out, is Urien Rheged and thus the two Elphins are united into one. After Arthur's death, Taliesin becomes Chief Bard to Urien. (Ibid., p. 497.)

Other manuscripts testify that Taliesin succeeded Talhalm as Chief of the Bards, presiding in Chairs at Caerlleon upon Usk (Arthur's capital), Rheged (Urien's stronghold), and at Bangor Teivy. He was also invited to the territory of Gwyddnyw, son of Gwydion, in Arlechwedd, Arvon. Dispossed there by Maelgwn Gwynedd, he curses the despot who obligingly dies of the plague.11. Following Iolo Morgannwg, Lady Charlotte suggested that Taliesin was educated as a bard at the school of Cattwg in Glamorgan. He is remembered, she tells us, in the Triads along with Merddin Ehirys and Merddin son of Madoc Morvryn as one of the three baptismal bards of the Isle of Britain. (Ibid. Cf. Bromwich, Triads, p. 125.) She also describes the cairn near Aberystwyth which had been opened some fifty or more years before she wrote, that is, in the late eighteenth century. (Ibid., p. 499.)

Although suspect, compared with the critical introduction in Sir Ifor Williams' editions and the notes of Rachel Bromwich, these references are nevertheless the most extensive complement of materials we have concerning the shadowy figure of Taliesin. And it is clear from The Calling of Taliessin that Charles Williams knew and used Lady Charlotte's research. But he used much more as well as less.

Williams' Sources

In his unfinished commentary on the Taliessin poems, as well as in other briefer essays, Williams identified his major sources, preeminently among them, Malory. In The Figure of Arthur, he also discussed the earlier, Celtic Writers—Gildas, Nennius, the Annales Cambriæ and the obscure Legend of St. Goeznovius in which the name of Arthur "seems first to have been raised to royalty about 1075..." (AT, p. 195.) He notes the first coherent account of the story of Arthur in the writings of Geoffrey of Monmouth—the Prophesies of Merlin, The History of the Kings of Britain and The Life of Merlin. "He first—and if he were not the first, yet he was the first to do it for the courts, the authors, and the reciters of Western Europe—he first made Arthur a King." (AT, p. 210.)

Among Geoffrey's own resources, Williams mentions the Welsh poem, Dialogue of Myrddin and Taliessin, (AT, p. 217. See Bromwich, Triads, p. 511.) which perhaps first introduced him to the bard as an historical figure. Also mentioned are Robert de Barron, Robert Wace and Layamon, with whom and Chretien de Troyes, the stage was set for the appearance of the Romances and Malory—and the rounding off of the Matter of Britain. (AT, pp. 219, 225, 229.)

But Taliessin himself is mentioned in only two places in The Figure of Arthur, and fleetingly at that. Nowhere does Williams indicate further sources for his figure nor why he chose him as "the character through whom the poet (and therefore the readers) most often look at the world," as C.S. Lewis tells us in his continuation. Lewis merely observes that the original figure "is a poet and spell-binder in the Mabinogion." The Calling of Taliessin is clearly based, he says, on that source, referring, it appears, to the Hanes Taliessin in Lady Charlotte Guest's edition. (AT, p. 123.) In the words of his narrator, Williams claims that "By some it was said that Taliesin/ was a child of Henwq the saint, bred in Caerleon,/ and thence came, miracle-commissioned; by some/ that he sprang from the bards, the ancient guards of the cauldron/ called of Ceredwen...." (AT, p. 123.) Williams goes on to recount the central tale of Taliessin's discovery in the weir by Elphin. But at this point Williams departs from the tradition and makes his figure a pagan, reared in a Druid environ. Only later does Taliessin discover "the doctrine of largesse in the Land of the Trinity."

Even apart from the fact that Druid influence had been nearly or wholly absent from Britain's shores for almost five hundred years, Williams' break with traditional accounts at this point is complete, excepting only the brief encounter between Taliessin and Merlin in the same poem. He has Taliessin travel to Byzantium, the heart of the Empire. Neither Taliessin's love for the princess Dindrane nor the founding of the Company owe anything to Celtic myth or legend, much less the Romances or Malory.

The cycle, of course, remains unfinished; whether Williams, like Geoffrey of Monmouth, would have had Taliessin and Merlin escort the mortally wounded Arthur to Avalon can only be conjectured. I rather think he would have. It is, however, Taliessin who greets...
Lancelot at Canterbury with the news of Arthur's death. (AT, p. 106.)

Taliesin as the Image of the Poet

Several questions arise from the gap between the Taliesin of history, legend and myth and the character whom Williams makes the narrative focus of his two set of Arthurian poems. Why, for instance, did Williams select Taliesin rather than another, more obvious character such as Merlin? More importantly, how did he conceive the role and importance of the poet? And why did Williams depart from the sources in developing the story of his hero?

First, Anne Ridler tells us that when Williams began considering the Arthurian materials, as early as 1912, he soon began jotting notes into a commonplace book. This was in fact a printer's dummy of the Concise Oxford Dictionary, first published in 1911. She writes, "into the book went everything—every idea, every scrap of knowledge—that might conceivably be of use in the making of his life's work." (Significantly, he entitled the commonplace book The Holy Grail, which testifies to Williams' real Arthurian concern at his earliest period of interest.) These notes, which cover the years between 1913 and 1920 supply not only early versions of several poems, but invaluable comments on Williams' discoveries, ideas and possible themes, many which later appear in the Arthuriad. Most, perhaps, do not. Page 37 in particular is of some importance because on it Williams listed the works he had selected as background material. Here we find that he was a far more conscientious Celtic student than C.S. Lewis seemed to think. Among his sources Williams lists Sir John Rhys' books on Arthurian Legend and Celtic Heathendom in which he notes, there is a reference to Taliesin on pp. 542-3. He also mentions Stephens' 1849 Literature of the Kymry (p. 57).

The inclusion of Jesse L. Weston's book on the Grail legend is of particular interest, mainly because Williams steadfastly refused to countenance theories such as hers or, much later, that of R.S. Loomis, which locate the origin of the grail in Celtic cauldrons or gnostic vessels of light.

Here too, we find several references to Yeat's Celtic Twilight and, as mentioned earlier, to the Mabinogi (pp. 26 and 82). On p. 154 he quotes passages relevant to Taliesin, the first mention of whom at the top of the page is followed by the words "fair-forehead," the initials D.N.B. and a question mark, all in parentheses. The cited version of the Battle of the Trees (no longer considered an authentic poem of Taliesin's, incidently) and the response to Maelgwn from the Hanes Taliesin are, he notes, from Arnold's Celtic Literature (p. 155). He adds, "Taliesin had walked in the Roman schools and learned the Greek legends and tales of the Gods, but most of all he loved the Irish singers and legends, to eat of the sacred Hazel, and sit at the Feast of Age." This is followed by a parenthesis: "Cf. A.E.'s Collected Poems, note 6." On p. 115 we read "Taliesin—? at one of Arthur's high feasts sings one of the old Irish stories—? Deirdre or Cuchulain or Fingal."

Clearly, the figure of Taliesin has not yet assumed definite form, but the Celtic provenance of the poet is assured, far more, it would seem, than in the finished, but incomplete, work.

Conclusion

What, in retrospect, can we say about Williams and the Figure of Taliesin? Most generally, it is clear that Williams' Taliesin is finally a highly original character based only loosely upon the historical, legendary or mythological sources. He remains an important figure in Arthur's court, where in his role of bard teulu, he surely reflects the Taliesin of Tennyson as well as that of the Triads and several branches of the Mabinogi. But Williams' bard is a poet, not a magician, and only casually a warrior. His wizardry, the Druid-sprung element, consists of wisdom and healing, not shape-shifting or weather magic. Here, Williams is moving back toward the Taliesin of history and away from the figure of legend and mythology.

But even deeper springs of Williams' transformation of Taliesin can be found, I think. First, he identifies the bard with the idealized image of the poet in his relation with household and society—although, as Mary McDermott Shideler pointed out in her preface to the combined edition, as image, not allegory. (AT, p. 8) Taliesin also comes to embody...
much of Williams' own vision of poetic creativity. Charles Moorman writes, for instance, "Taliessin... becomes Williams' model poet and through Taliessin it is possible... to trace many of Williams' ideas of poetry and myth." (Moorman, op. cit., p. 64.) In a brief commentary written for C.S. Lewis, Williams himself wrote, "Taliessin is the poetic imagination of the world...." 15

Even more, however, I am now convinced that Taliessin came to represent not only Williams' ideas, but Williams himself—his imaginative alter-ego. Alice Mary Hadfield tells us in her biography of Williams that he often projected himself into his novels in the form of an important but not necessarily central character, almost always a poet or a literary scholar, men such as Roger Ingram, Lionel Rackstraw, Peter Stanhope and Anthony Durrant. 16

One telling remark by Hadfield adds a convincing and charming touch to the portrait of Williams as Taliessin. Quite outside the context of the Arthuriad, she remarks that "Charles at eight was a sturdy boy, not tall, with a face remarkable by its high and beautiful forehead and deeply serious expression." (Ibid. p. 17) Later, she describes him at 21: "He was not bad-looking, being tall and well set-up and with a fine slim figure, thick hair, a magnificent forehead, and well-shaped head and face, with a warm and serious expression." (Ibid., p. 30.) Anne Ridler comments, similarly, of Williams' appearance at 36, "His hands were in fact wonderfully expressive—no wonder that he found the human hand in general so significant. Apart from these, his brow was his most noble physical feature: it always seemed appropriate that the name Taliessin should mean "Bright Forehead." (The Image of the City, p. XX.) Perhaps Taliessin acquired a measure of self-identification when the young Williams first came across the English translations of Tbliesin's name in the Mabinogion of Lady Guest, which, as comments upon it in the commonplace book show, occurred well before 1920.

Alice Mary Hadfield goes on to point out that Williams himself had told her that in his own life, the first "falling of the Hallows" described in Taliessin's Return to Logres occurred "when as a youth he fell in love." (Hadfield, p. 148.) The second was in the year of anguish, 1929. The third was when the flood of writing was released in the nineteen-thirties and he knew what his life must be. Later, nearly twenty years later than Wordsworth, he knew himself to be a dedicated spirit, a poet.

The harp on my back
Syllabled the signal word." (Ibid.)

And, finally, Hadfield tells us, the publication of Taliessin through Logres was the major turning point in Williams' career: "Taliessin ended his long apprenticeship to grace. From now on, with swift, unhesitating knowledge he wrote the message which was for him alone." (Ibid., p. 155.)

Taliessin is not merely Williams' alter-ego. Yet the experiences Williams creates to illustrate his character's life also illuminate his own. From the perspective of the poet, the Arthuriad is in some measure a spiritual autobiography.

NOTES


2  For references, see Rachel Bromwich, Medieval Celtic Literature: A select Bibliography, University of Toronto Press, 1974.

3  Cf. Charles Williams, The Image of the City and Other Essays, ed. and intro. by Anne Ridler, London: Oxford University Press, 1958, p. 11. It should be noted that Williams retained the archaic spelling Taliessin in contrast to the now-accepted Taliesin not because, as Lewis surmised, he wished to make it "a better word for English ears," (AT, p. 281) but because for Lady Charlotte Guest, Tennyson and other writers, it had customarily been so spelled.

4  The Image of the City, p. Iviii.


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as a retroflex "r". Some of the characters are used as spelling devices rather than to indicate pronunciation. By comparing §5 and §8 it becomes obvious that although the phonetic values of the two are the same, /s/, the distinction made is that of "s" as /s/ and "c" as /s/. Another obvious spelling convention appears in §8, §68, §78, §93, §137, §158, §184, §189, §198, §222, §231, §245, §248, and §269; that of a superscripted dot to indicate silent "e". While it could be argued that perhaps this diacritic might indicate the length of a preceding vowel (like our silent "e" does in contemporary English orthography), it would not explain §8, §184, §245, and §269 where the following "e" has nothing to do with the preceding vowel. It is interesting to note that §21, §39, and §254 (according to Christopher Tolkien's transcription) indicate a preceding "e" as part of the final "r" syllable. It is also noteworthy, however, that if one assumes that the system is consistent, that the words would be spelled "yesterday", "November", and "suffre". The Oxford English Dictionary's entries for these three words indicate that all three are variant spellings which were extant during the thirteenth century through the middle of the sixteenth century. This appeal to medieval spelling is frequent in Tolkien's writings. The subscribed dot is also used to indicate the reduced vowels in §213 and 221.

The use of Tolkien §27 and §28 for "I" and "Id" in Ori's manuscript is problematic. Christopher Tolkien transcribes Tolkien §28 in §57, §65, and §261 as "iI" and in §122 as "id". What is even more confusing is that §210-§212 and §262-§265 are the same word, "hold"; the former using Tolkien §28 and the latter using Tolkien §27 and Tolkien §5. The simplest (though not necessarily correct) conclusion is that either the orthographic system for laterals is in flux or that §212 is a scribal error. There is another explanation which involves articulatory anticipation and missing syntactical elements, but the bottom line of the argument also ends in scribal error, in this case at §261, and so, offers no better solution and an extremely inelegant exegesis.

For the most part, the writing of sounded vowels in the Book of Mazarbul is based on spelling rather than phonetics. The exceptions are the diphthongs. The character "y-following" is used in §23 and §267 and depending on the pronunciation of "day" and "they", the usage is either spelling orthography or phonetic representation; the former if the two words are pronounced the same, the latter if they are pronounced differently. The evidence for phonetic orthography is coupled with the symbol for "w-following". Characters §16, §123, §157, and §203 use this diacritic. In the first two instances, the implementation appears to be simple spelling, but in the last two, "Silverlode" ($151-158) is spelled out "Silverloude" and "doubt" ($202-204) is spelled out "daut".

Another spelling convention which appears frequently in other transcriptions, is accomplished by a subscribed macron meaning "double character". This is used for consonants ($15, $88, $183, $242, and $253) and vowels ($82).

The one-character symbol for "the" is used in the Book of Mazarbul ($28, $124, $151, and $195). Another one-character symbol for "of" (an aspirated "a"), Tolkien §14 is used twice ($133 and §49). A third unique character used for "a" and "an" is seen in §95 and §114, but the vowel symbol for "a" is used in §176. Needles to say, all of this is a bit speculative, educated guesses as to what is really going on. My observation has been, however, that Tolkien leaves little to happenstance. Even aberration in orthography is calculated to contribute to the overall development of the creation which he called Middle-earth.