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Celtic Myth in Contemporary Children's Fantasy: Idealization, Identity, Ideology
by Dimitra Fimi

CELTIC MYTH IN CONTEMPORARY CHILDREN'S FANTASY: IDEALIZATION, IDENTITY, IDEOLOGY. Dimitra Fimi. London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2017. *Critical Approaches to Children's Literature*. 305 p. 9781137552815. \$99.99

IN THE WORK UNDER REVIEW DIMITRA FIMI discusses established classics of the genre from the last half century, including Lloyd Alexander's *Prydain Chronicles*, Alan Garner's *The Owl Service*, Susan Cooper's *Dark is Rising* sequence, and Pat O'Shea's *The Hounds of the Morrigan*, for which collectively Fimi acknowledges there is already abundant existing scholarship; however, Fimi also considers the contributions of a number of lesser known and/or more recently published authors, including those by Kate Thompson, Mary Tannen, Henry Neff, and Jenny Nimmo. At the outset Fimi takes care to establish her terms, notably her concern with the notion of "Celticity," defined as "the quality of being Celtic," as distinct from "Celtic," the latter term having evolved into meaning different things to different people (one cannot help but recall the Tolkien quote from his letter to Milton Waldman where he refers to "the fair elusive beauty that some call Celtic (though it is rarely found in genuine ancient Celtic things)" (*Letters* 144).

The main point Fimi succeeds in making is that the authors of these fantasies not only bear the influence of their source texts, but in most instances were equally influenced by the works of authors who sought to popularize the medieval Welsh and Irish texts; starting in the nineteenth century with Lady Charlotte Guest, Lady Gregory, William Butler Yeats, and others, this movement reaching its apotheosis in the twentieth century in the pseudo-scholarship of *The White Goddess* by Robert Graves, the last's influence on contemporary children's authors proving to be the most pervasive. Not only did these authors tend to provide a gloss on some of the more unsavory aspects to be found in the medieval texts, but they also tended to attempt to synthesize the scraps of surviving mythology into a coherent system. Additionally, scholars working the field of Celtic history and archeology such as Anne Ross and Nora Chadwick also tended to amalgamate different strands from different fields to arrive at conclusions that current scholars of Celtic culture consider to be rather sweeping and stereotyped. Works by John and Caitlin Matthews continue in the same vein today. Fimi rightly points out the efforts by Ronald Hutton and other recent scholars who have succeeded in puncturing this flawed portrayal of Celtic culture.

As an example of how this phenomenon has manifested itself in the field of children's fantasy, Fimi examines how Lloyd Alexander sought to fill in the "gaps" he encountered in Welsh mythology as presented in Lady Charlotte Guest's edition of the *Mabinogion*. While Tolkien's impetus in creating a

mythology for England derived from the faint echoes or lacunae in surviving Anglo-Saxon texts, his approach was at its core linguistic in nature; for his part Alexander's imagination was sparked by what he read in Guest's notes, which have now been shown to be based on forgeries by Iolo Morganwg. Fimi goes on to effectively show the heavy hand of the influence of Robert Graves on Alexander's work, resulting in a fanciful, romanticized rendering of the Welsh sources. She ably demonstrates how Alan Garner and others succumbed to the same non-scholarly influences. However, the point here is not that Alexander and Co. were led astray by false scholarship; they were, after all, producing imaginative works of fiction inspired by ancient texts. That they were also influenced by later writers commenting on those sources who engaged in their own imaginative musings and glosses is all part of the same process (and in its own way, perhaps, a form of sub-creation?). In other words, were not Graves and the others participating in the right-brained acts of creativity akin to creating and writing fiction, as opposed to the left-brained acts of rigorous scholarship? Fimi further explores the degree to which Nimmo's work was influenced by Garner's—an example of source material having been digested and interpreted by succeeding generations in an experience not unlike the protagonists in Garner's *Owl Service* who find themselves seemingly involuntarily re-enacting the dramas from the *Mabinogion* down through the generations. Fimi only briefly mentions the parallels with the 18th century Macpherson-forged Ossian writings, whose influence, while intense at the time, has now subsided into historical curiosity. Meanwhile, the creative imaginings of Morganwg, Graves, and others, while perhaps appearing subtler in their initial impact, continue to exert their considerable influence, having seeped so deeply into the collective unconscious of the children's authors who fuse their fiction with "Celtic" myth that it seems unlikely others working in this vein will shed these influences anytime soon.

As fine as Fimi's scholarship is, this volume suffers from the number of typographical and proofreading errors; on p.2 she states "fantasy literature as a genre has only began." On p.58 she uses "worshipped" and "worshipped" in the same paragraph. On p.145 she quotes from p.113 of the first draft of *The Book of Three* by quoting Alexander as writing "In a shrieked of rage," whereas when I checked the Alexander manuscripts at the Free Library of Philadelphia I was able to confirm that Alexander did in fact write "In a shriek of rage." On pp. 124 and 142 she refers to the character of the Horned King as the "Horned God." These and other errors aside, Fimi's work is a welcome, comprehensive, and up-to-date consideration of these authors and their respective genre.

—Glenn R. Gray

