The Wielders of The Three and Other Trees

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Abstract
Traces roots and characteristics of several of Tolkien’s characters in religious systems and symbols. Argues that “the bearers of the three Elven rings—Galadriel, Elrond, and Gandalf […] as well as the older bearers Gil-galad and Círdan—[are] archetypal figures of a Moon-Water Goddess, a Sky-Air-Thunder God, and a Sun-Fire God.”

Additional Keywords
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by Paula Marmor

Foreword: I realize that many of the conclusions I leap to herein are, to say the least, highly debateable; the degree to which I myself accept their validity is dependent upon my state of spiritual inebriation at the time. Naytheless, of the accuracy of the basic tenets I have no doubt; the other material is included to confuse the issue.

The intent of this conglomeration of useless trivia is to show the bearers of the three Elven rings--Galadriel, Elrond and Gandalf in the Third Age, as well as the older bearers Gil-galad and Cirdan--as archetypal figures of a Moon-Water Goddess, a Sky-Air-Thunder God, and a Sun-Fire God.1 This triplicity long reigned in the Mediterranean and Celtic pantheons, although it is essentially foreign to the norven Mythos as we know it; there the Sea, Wind and Fire are brothers (Hlor, Kari, Logi2), and the Sun is referred to as "She," with the Moon being represented as masculine (as in Middle-earth3). However, in general Norse gods of Air and Fire are men, those of Water women, and Jacob Grimm gives evidence that at a remote period the Sun and Moon were male and female among the Germanic peoples as in the other Indo-European mythologies.4

There are two areas where parallels between the ring-bearers and these divinities may be looked for: in the symbolic "package" which surrounds the bearers in LoTR, and in the overall pattern of the history of the Three. To find the most symbolic passage concerning the Three, refer to the scene at the end of the Trilogy: Sauron is cast into darkness, and the bearers are free to reveal themselves to mortal creatures. But their dominion in Middle-earth has passed, and they are becoming one with the natures of their rings. They are famar of what they will become in the Uttermost West.

It is here that the most revealing description of Galadriel as the archetypal Moon-Water Goddess occurs: "But Galadriel sat upon a white palfrey and was roped all in glimmering white, like clouds about the moon; for she herself seemed to shine with a soft light. On her finger was Nenya, the ring wrought of mithril, that bore a single white stone flickering like a frosty star."5 Nenya is from the Quenya and Sindarin word nen, "water," and this was Galadriel's special province. (For a list of the evidence connecting the Three with the elements Water, Air and Fire--the alchemical triplicity--I refer the reader to Virginia Dabney's "On the Natures and Histories of the Great Rings" in the Mythcon I Proceedings.) In all mythologies, the Moon is given rulership of water, as creatrix of the tides.6 The whole pattern is Moon-rain-water-woman-serpent-fertility-death-regeneration.7 The Moon Goddess also weaves:8 the cloaks woven by Galadriel and her ladies had the hue of "leaf and branch, water and stone"9 and were in effect identical with the cloaks of indivisibility of the fairy tales.

In astrological lore, the solstitial and equinocial (angular) signs are referred to as Cardinal Signs. The Moon is the ruler of the Cardinal Water Sign, Cancer, the sign of the Summer Solstice. In this position, Galadriel is the Lady of Planting and the Harvest; earth from her land will grow marvelous crops wherever it is sprinkled, and only in her land of Lorien will the mallorn grow East of the Sea and West of the Shire-mallorn, her gift to Master Samwise.

In his book The White Goddess, poet-mythographer Robert Graves discusses the Mother Goddess of the Triple
In his exploration of the extent of worship of the Goddess, Graves ties the thirteen-month calendar in with various mysteries of ancient Europe: the assorted alphabets and their tree-symbols (specifically the Irish Tree-Ogham, the beth-luis-nion or boibel-loch), the Twelve Tribes of Israel (a "solarization" of an original thirteen, including the tribe of Gad), and the jewels of the breastplate of the High Priest of the Jews. Using J.I. Myers' identifications of the stones, Graves has reconstructed their arrangement to fit the lunar tree calendar, the tribes, and his own theory; in his version, the stone of the month of the Summer Solstice is the white carnelian, which may be the stone Galadriel wears.

There is not as much evidence for the representation of Elrond as a Sky-Air God. At the Havens he "wore a mantle of grey and had a star upon his forehead, and a silver harp was in his hand..." His ring is the blue Vilya, "air," and his rulership is over the Autumnal Equinox and the Cardinal Sign Libra. Libra is the sign of justice and judgement; hence Elrond's role as counselor. Libra's ruling planet is Venus in her role as Muse; thus he bears the Harp, the Sky divinity Zeus was the patron of poetry and song. Elrond's father was Earendil, the Morning Star (called Earendel's Toe by the Anglo-Saxons), and his daughter is Arwen Undomiel, the Evenstar. If Arwen were a Celtic divinity her name would mean "The High White One;" in reality the Welsh name for the Evening Star is Gweno, "The White One." Arwen," were a Celtic divinity her name would mean "The High White One;" in reality the Welsh name for the Evening Star is Gweno, "The White One." 17 wen and gwen being the same word. The Morning and Evening Stars are both phenomena of the planet Venus, the one coming before the sun and the other after. Ilris's ring was given him by Gil-galad, whose name means "Star of Bright Light." This may be another aspect of Venus. The name Elrond is "Star of the Vaults." Rond is any large, high enclosed area; it is translated "Hall" in Merethond and "Cave" in Aglarond. "Vault" is an Elvish metaphor for sky; Orion is sometimes called Telumehatar, "Lord of the Vaults."

Gandalf is the bearer of Narya, the Ring of Fire. In relating Fire and Sun, recall that the Eldarin words for "Sun," anar, anor, nox, are derived from the words for "Fire," nor and nor; nor is used for "Sun" in the month names Narquiel, Narbelcho, and Narvine, Narwain (Sundancing and Sunless in Q. and S.). The Elves though of nor as red (in the index to the RHM edition, Narsil is glossed "red-and-white flame"), probably because the setting sun appeared red over the Undying Lands.

The jewel of Narwa is "red as fire," and Gandalf has special dominion over that element, His sign is the Cardinal Fire Sign Aries, ruler of the Spring Equinox. Aries is ruled by the "red planet" Mars, although one contemporary astrological theory—which I adhere to but will spare the reader the details of—assigns the rulership of Aries to Pluto, the planet of death, rebirth, and the underworld, reminiscent of Gandalf's transformation after the battle with the Balrog on Zirak-Zigil.

In the lunar calendar, the Vernal Equinox falls in the fourth month, that of the alder, a tree connected with fire in British folklore. The tribe of this month is Judah; the stone is—Eureka!—the brilliant red fire-garnet or pyrope. 22

To digress for a moment (I have to put in at least one digression or I'll ruin my reputation), consider the third month. It began on February 19 and ran through March 18, with Aragorn's birthday, March 21 (the feast day of St. David, the patron-saint of Wales), neatly in the middle. The tribe is Zebulon and the stone is (may I have the envelope, please?) the sea-green beryl, 24 the Elfstone! (By the way, Bilbo calls Earendil's stone an emerald, but the emerald is a variety of beryl, so consistency is maintained.) Thus Aragorn's royal name is his birthstone, so to speak. This month is also the sign Pisces, the sign ruling the sea and usually considered the symbol of the Christ. 25

It should surprise no one to learn that Aragorn means "Lord of the Tree." The tree of the third month is the ash, the same as the great world tree, Yggdrasill (from *ygg, another name of Odin). Grimm defines *ygg as the thrill or shudder of terror; 27 Graves connects it etymologically with the Greek *gygos, "hairy or sea, " and mentions that it was sacred to the Sea God Poseidon. 28

A word (or several) on the White Tree: as I indicated above, it may have been an ash. In the Norse Edda, the first man and woman are Askar and Embla, literally ash-tree and work-woman. Perhaps this resemblance would indicate that the second of the Two Trees was an elm;
the High Elves. This process continues within recorded beings with closer ties to men: the lesser Valar and in turn, the ancient supreme sky gods, they have been replaced by Eru and Manwe, the Lord of the Valar (whose name is un-aran, "king, lord," earen, "sea," or(od), "mountain." Diovis Pater'll)-Zeus-Tyr-Zio of the Indo-European mythos with are, "sunlight," aure, "daylight," aire, "holiness," aran, "king, lord," earen, "sea," or(od), "mountain." Eru and Manwe, the Lord of the Valar (whose name is undefined), are seldom mentioned and never invoked. Like the ancient supreme sky gods, they have been replaced by beings with closer ties to men: the lesser Valar and in turn, the High Elves. This process continues within recorded history. Cirdan has relinquished his position to the Wizard Gandalf (who is very involved in the affairs of men), and the last High Elven king, Gil-galad, has passed away and been replaced by Elrond Peredhil, the Half-Elf.

Graves outlines the development of Mediterranean mythology from this pantheistic level back to monotheism in three basic stages. The first consists of the Great Goddess, Queen of Heaven, a triple lunar deity, whose Star-son becomes her lover and is slain by the Serpent. The Serpent lays an egg which the Goddess swallows, becoming impregnated and giving birth to the Star-son again. This is the representative myth of the primitive matriarchal (and primarily agricultural) society, depicting the death and rebirth of the Sun (that is, the vegetational year.) The second stage sees another son born to the Goddess; he is Thunder-Storm-Sky God. He destroys both the Star-son and the Serpent, marries his mother, and begets on her children who become the assimilated gods and goddesses. Among the children are a Sun God and his sister, who becomes the Triple Muse and effectively takes over the position and devotees of her mother, the Triple Goddess. This stage is transitional; Graves interprets the marriage of the Goddess (who before become lover but never accepted the bonds of mony) and her subsequent dethronement as the sociological or military conquest of a matriarchal society by a patriarch-alone. Eventually, this patriarchal system conquers completely: the Sun God gradually absorbs the attributes of the other deities and the Goddess-cult fades into the background.

The third stage is purely patriarchal (or begins that way; as far as Christianity is concerned, the Goddess has made an effective return in the person of the Virgin Mary); there are no goddesses at all, but one father god who may be seen as a dual or tripartite being, as the Father, Son and Holy Spirit of Christianity. (But the "spirit that moved on the face of the waters" was conceived of by the Hebrews and Greeks as female; so in Gothic, the word for "spirit, soul" is saula, derived from saius, "sea," and thought of as...
feminine; it was perceived as an "undulating fluid force,\"48

Again we have the triplicity male-female-male.)

Now we must apply this historical pattern to the rings.

There was only one bearer of Nenya, Galadriel, and she is
the Goddess. The Star-son who is destroyed by the Serpent
is Gil-galad 'Star of Bright Light' who first bore Vilya and
who was killed by the touch of Sauron.49 (It is not conincidental
that this name is so similar to the Greek sauros,
lizard--as in dinosaur. The serpent has ever been the sym­
bol of the Devil) Vilya "sky, air" is then passed onto El­
rond, who becomes the Sky-Thunder God. In stead of m a­
rying the Goddess Galadriel, he m ares her daughter, Cel­
ebrian, the Goddess-as-wife. (The name Celebrian means
"silver-something." It would be nice if the second part
were "wheel, " as in the Welsh Arianrhod, another Moon
Goddess. But it probably is not.)

In most mythologies, the Sun God has a twin brother
with whom he battles, their alternate terms of kingship taking
the place of those of the Star-son and Serpent as the waxing
and waning year. There are two possibilities for this enemy
of Gandalf. The first that comes to mind is the Balrog, who
defeated Gandalf and cast him down. However, the more
likely candidate is Saruman; the myth always specifies a
brother (that is, the hero's darker self) as tanist. Saruman
is another figure of the man whose thirst for knowledge has
led him to the paths of evil. He is to the Third Age what
Feanor and Celebrimbor are to the First and Second.

The third stage of the myth pattern properly belongs to
the Fourth Age and lies outside of the compass of the Lord
of the Rings. Then the Rings hold no sway over the hearts
and minds of Men; for all of their glory and grace, the time of
the Lesser Powers in Middle-earth is passed, and they are
forgotten, and Men worship only the One.

Footnotes
1. Eliade, Patterns in Comparative Religion; see in
general ch. II-V.
3. LotR, I 172 (RHM)
5. III 303.
7. ibid., p 107.
8. ibid., pp 181-182.
9. I 386.
10. See Also James, The Ancient Gods, pp286 ff.
13. ibid.
14. III 308.
15. Grimm, p 901.
16. ibid., p 723.
17. ibid., p 1507.
18. Road p 65.
19. III 438.
20. III 310.
22. ibid., p 269.
23. III 370.
24. I 213; Graves, p 271
25. Grimm, ii.
27. Grimm, p 572.
29. Webster's New International Dict. pp2040-41;
Graves, p167.
30. II 86; see also p. 87.
31. See ibid.
32. I 391.
33. I 246.
34. III 355.
35. Graves, p 299.
38. Eliade, p 52; see p 126.
40. Eliade, p 66.
41. ibid.
42. ibid., pp 163-69
43. James, p 316.
44. Graves, pp 338-93.
45. ibid, p 157.
46. Grimm, p 826.
47. I 286.

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