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The Wielders of The Three and Other Trees

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

Archetypes in J.R.R. Tolkien; Comparative religion; Tolkien, J.R.R.—Characters—Aragorn; Tolkien, J.R.R.—Characters—Elrond; Tolkien, J.R.R.—Characters—Galadriel; Tolkien, J.R.R.—Characters—Gandalf

The wielders of the Three

AND OTHER TREES

by Paula Marmor

Foreword: I realize that many of the conclusions I leap to herein are, to say the least, highly debatable; the degree to which I myself accept their validity is dependent upon my state of spiritual inebriation at the time. Nonetheless, 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 northern mythos as we know it; there the Sea, Wind and Fire are brothers (Hler, 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 fanar 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 Nenyä, the ring wrought of mithril, that bore a single white stone flickering like a frosty star."⁵ Nenyä 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 equinoctial (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





Moon (new-full-old-maiden-wife-old woman-Arwen-Celebrían-Galadriel) as she figures in Celtic and Mediterranean mythology¹⁰ and her predominance in ancient cults of tree and forest theophany scattered throughout Europe. She is the Lady of the Trees;¹¹ while each month of the lunar calendar (thirteen in all) is represented by its specific tree, the Goddess rules them all. The name Galadriel in Sindarin means either "Lady of the Tree(s)," from *galadh*, or "Lady of Bright Light," from *galad*. The Quenya form is Altariel: *alta* may be the archaic form of *alda*, "tree," or the High Elven equivalent of *galad*. (The similarity is intentional; see below.)

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-níon or boibel-loth), the Twelve Tribes of Israel (a "solarization" of an original thirteen, including the tribe of Gad¹²), and the jewels of the breastplate of the High Priest of the Jews.¹³ Using J.I. Myers' identifications of the stones, Graves has reconstructed their arrangement to fit the lunar tree calendar, the tribes, and his own theo-

ies; 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..."¹⁴ His ring is the blue Vilya, "air," and his rulership is over the Autumnal Equinox and the Cardinal Air 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.¹⁵) Elrond's father was Earendil, the Morning Star (called Earendel's Toe by the Anglo-Saxons¹⁶), 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 *Gwen*, "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. His ring was given him by Gil-galad, whose name means "Star of Bright Light;"¹⁸ 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 "Hill" in *Merethrand* and "Cave" in *Aglarond*. "Vault" is an Elvish metaphor for sky; Orion is sometimes called *Telumehtar*, "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*, *nor*, are derived from the words for "Fire," *nar* and *naur*; *nar* is used for "Sun" in the month names *Narquelie*, *Narbeleth*, and *Narvinve*, *Narwalin* (Sun-fading and Sunless in Q. and S.). The Elves thought of *nar* as red (in the index to the RHM edition, *Narsil* is glossed "red-and-white flame"¹⁹), probably because the setting sun appeared red over the Undying Lands.

The jewel of Narya is "red as fire,"²⁰ 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 Balrogs 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.²¹ 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 23 (the feast day of St. David, the patron-saint of Wales), neatly in the middle. The tribe is Zebulun and the stone is (may I have the envelope, please?) the sea-green beryl,²⁴ the Elfbstone! (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."²⁶ The tree of the third month is the ash, the same as the great world tree, *Yggdrasil* (from *Ygr*, another name of Odin). Grimm defines *Ygr* as the thrill or shudder of terror;²⁷ Graves connects it etymologically with the Greek *hydra*, "water 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 Askr and Embla, literally ash-tree and work-woman²⁹ (hmpfh!). Perhaps this resemblance would indicate that the second of the Two Trees was an elm;

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most likely, however, it was the oak, a tree more widely revered than any other.³⁰ However, I believe that the Tree of Gondor was actually the Mountain Ash, or rowan, which isn't really an ash tree at all. It is related to the apple, which brings in Avalon the Golden Apples of the West and all sorts of tempting irrelevancies which I will avoid at the moment. The rowan, however, has always been identified with the ash family in the popular imagination, or the name Mountain Ash would not exist at all. In country England, the rowan is called the quicken or quickbeam, Anglo-Saxon *cwicebeam*, "tree of life."³¹ Now our Quickbeam was very attached to rowan trees ("Whenever he saw a rowan-tree he halted awhile with his arms stretched out, and sang, and swayed as he sang."³²) but the name *Bregalad* mean "quick-beam" in the sense of "fast light"³³ (as in Gil-galad, "bright starlight." See above.) But Sindarin *galadh*, like the older *beam*, means "tree." Now, there is no etymological explanation this side of Sigma Draconis for the similarity between *galad* and *galadh* except as intentional word play on the name Quickbeam, meaning both "fast light" and "Tree of Life." The prosecution rests.

To digress again (this is fun!), there is one symbol of Aragon not covered above: the eagle. In Gondor, he was known as a Thorongil "Eagle of the Star" "...for he was swift and keen-eyed, and wore a silver star upon his cloak."³⁴ The Elfstone which Galadriel gave him on behalf of Arwen, and which had been hers, was set in a brooch in the form of an eagle.³⁵ (I suspect that it was a twin to the one Earendil wore into the West--"Upon his breast an emerald"³⁶--but there is no evidence for this.) Now it happens that in addition to the thirteen-consonant Tree-Ogham, there is a Bird-Ogham. Graves identifies the eagle with the sacred bird of the Winter Solstice, the day that belonged to no month.³⁷ The Winter Solstice is the first day of the Cardinal Earth Sign Capricorn. (Interestingly enough, while traditionally the eagle is the highest octave of Scorpio--the cherubim being the angular signs of about 2000bc, Taurus-Leo-Scorpio-Aquarius, that is, Bull-Lion-Eagle-Man (and any Tarot or other book that says Eagle is Air and Man war should be donated to the nearest garbage heap. 'Tis the other way round)--sidereal astrologer Cyril Fagan has connected the eagle with Capricorn.³⁸) I believe the eagle to be the symbol of two people: the greatest of the Elven smiths, he who made the Great Jewels, and his descendant whose name means "Silversmith," he who forged the Rings of Power: Fëanor and Celebrimbor. These two created beyond their measure and in their pride gave Morgoth and Sauron the keys to their power. It is fit that those who followed Fëanor into exile should bear the eagle of his house as a sign of their inheritance.

The Three Rings were wrought by Celebrimbor in Eregion c. SA1500. Originally they were in the possession of the three highest of the Exiles, Gil-Galad, Círdan and Galadriel. Before his death on Orodruin, Gil-galad passed his ring on to Elrond. Círdan gave Narya to Gandalf upon his arrival at the Havens from the West.³⁹

There is evidence in the history of the rings of a pattern corresponding to what Eliade calls "a movement away from the transcendence and passivity of sky beings towards more dynamic, active and easily accessible forms."⁴⁰ Thus Erú, the One, is generally inactive in the affairs of Middle-earth, and in this reflects the position of such heavenly deities as Ouranos and the group *Diens-Dyaus-Jupiter* (older *Diowis Pater*⁴¹)-Zeus-Tyr-Zio of the Indo-European mythos.⁴² These names are etymologically connected with both "light (day)" and "sacred."⁴³ Thus Erú, "one" is from a root *er-ar-or* meaning "high, great, light, vast" and is connected with are, "sunlight," aure, "daylight," aire, "holiness," aran, "king, lord," earen, "sea," or(od), "mountain." Erú and Manwë, 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. Círdan 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.⁴⁴ 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 assorted 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 matrimony) and her subsequent dethronement as the sociological or military conquest of a matriarchal society by a patriarchal one. 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 god⁴⁵ who may be seen as a dual or tripartite being, as the Father, Son and Holy Spirit of Christianity.⁴⁶ (But the "spirit that moved on the face of the waters" was conceived of by the Hebrews and Greeks as female;⁴⁷ so in Gothic, the word for "spirit, soul" is *saíula*, derived from *saíus*, "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 Nyenya, 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 coincidental that this name is so similar to the Greek sauros, lizard--as in dinosaur. The serpent has ever been the symbol of the Devil.) Vilya "sky, air" is then passed on to Elrond, who becomes the Sky-Thunder God. In stead of marrying the Goddess Galadriel, he marries her daughter, Celebrian, 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 the place of the son of the Sky God comes Gandalf, the Sun-and-Fire God, who brings wisdom to Middle-earth as counselor to Aragorn, that is, mortal man aspiring to the love of the muse, Arwen, granddaughter of Galadriel and the Goddess-as-maiden. (The Triple Moon Goddess, by the way, was represented as white, red, and black, for the young, full, and old moon as pictured by the ancients. Galadriel was blond, Arwen brunette. By all rights Celebrian should have been a redhead!)

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 Fearon and Celebriamor 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.
2. Grimm, Teutonic Mythology, pp 601, 631.
3. LotR, I 172 (RHM)

4. Grimm, pp882-884.
5. III 303.
6. Eliade, p 159.
7. ibid., p 107.
8. ibid., pp 181-182.
9. I 386.
10. See Also James, The Ancient Gods, pp296 ff.
11. Eliade, pp280 ff.
12. Graves, The White Goddess, pp269ff.
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.
21. Graves, p 169.
22. ibid., p 269.
23. III 370.
24. I 213; Graves, p 271
27. Grimm, II.
28. Graves, pp 168-69.
29. Grimm, p 572.
30. Graves, pp 176 ff.
31. Webster's New International Dict., pp2040-41; Graves, p167.
32. II 86; see also p. 87.
33. See ibid.
34. III 335.
35. I 391.
36. I 246.
37. Graves, p 299.
38. American Astrology, May 1971, p 29
39. I 256, III 364-66.
40. Eliade, p 52; see p 126.
41. Webster's, p 1342.
42. Eliade, p 66.
43. ibid.
44. ibid., pp 163-69
45. James, p 316.
46. Graves, pp 338-93.
47. ibid., p 157.
48. Grimm, p 826.
49. I 266.

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