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The White Raven: A Personal Response

Abstract

Gives a personal response to those elements of Paxson's *The White Raven* "that touched [him] most deeply." Discusses Branwen's character at length, and that of Ogrin.

Additional Keywords

Paxson, Diana—Characters—Branwen; Paxson, Diana—Characters—Ogrin; Paxson, Diana. *The White Raven*

The White Raven

A Personal Response

Paul Nolan Hyde

A paper read in honor of Diana L. Paxson, Author Guest of Honor at the Twenty-first Mythopoeic Conference held in Long Beach, California

I find myself in a decidedly awkward position and one, too, in which I am not completely comfortable. Those who read my column in *Mythlore* on a regular basis are painfully aware of how awkward my positions can be, and yet are frequently astonished that I am comfortable enough with them that I allow them to appear in print. The ease with which I express my views is facilitated by the fact that my mentor has gone to the Mountains, to use his metaphor, and any gainsaying on the part of others is, for me, merely peer opinion. Textual evidence and plausible logic are the present criteria for discussion when addressing the writings of Tolkien, Lewis, and Williams, and the shades of authors past curse or smile depending on which side of the argument the reader chooses to join. But what does one do when the author of the selected work for discussion is not quite yet a shade and is quite likely sitting within arm's reach or a stone's throw of the one making the presentation? One is not completely comfortable.

I have called my paper "*The White Raven: A Personal Response*" and therein lies the essence of my presentation. All literature, both on the part of the author and the reader, is by nature quite personal. Writers, particularly the very best, have an inward compulsion much like Coleridge's *Ancient Mariner*, a consuming obsession to tell the Story that has welled up within them. Rhetorical devices, grammatical accuracy, character development, narrative style, plot structure, and other writing skills, while important, are really incidental to the Story itself. The true Story is, at its heart, the germ of human experience passing from one individual to another. Readers, particularly the very best, have an inward capacity to believe the Story in spite of the author's personal biases and inadequacies if they so choose. The willing suspension of disbelief has little to do with the Story itself, but rather with the reader's willful acceptance of the mannerisms and eccentricities exhibited by the Story-teller which naturally accompany his or her telling of the Story. The symbiosis between reader and writer is delicate, as are all human relationships, and the slightest offense can bring to tatters the gossamer link that Creation and Belief have spun between them. When the writer turns manipulator, using the truthfulness of the Story to convey some sort of hidden agenda, the reader's personal dignity is insulted and violent separation is imminent as the reader begins to withdraw from the author's narrative; when the reader resorts to cold analytical academics as the driving force of his experience with the author's writing, the con-

necting filaments between reader and writer freeze and shatter into a million crystalline fragments, and no amount of analysis will reveal the almost mystical pattern that had once, or almost, existed. Hence, my remarks are primarily confined to those aspects of *The White Raven* that touched me most deeply, the connecting links between Diana Paxson and Paul Nolan Hyde. You may not agree, but that is between you and Diana. Diana may not agree, but that is between her and me.

Motifs

The most obvious, yet the most subtly dealt with image in *The White Raven*, is Branwen herself, together with her essential twin, Esseilte.

The incongruous conjunction of the two elements of Branwen's name in translation, *White Raven*, is not a simple oxymoron, but a title which foreshadows her mediating role between the life of the Waking World and the power of the Hidden Realm. When, after the deaths of Drustan and Esseilte, King Marc'h finally realizes that it was Branwen that had been with him during the track of the Dragon Power, he says:

"Who... are... you?"

His words were lost in the roaring of the sea, of the wind, of the flames. And it was they who used my voice to reply.

"I am the White Raven of Logres... I am the Queen of the Hidden Realm... I am the Brigantia of Kernow." (p. 383)

By the end of the novel, Branwen has become the nexus of life, power, and love for all things, in all realms.

The development of Branwen into this connecting link between all things luminous progresses continuously and consistently throughout Diana Paxson's depiction of her heroine. As the central character of the narrative, Branwen is designated in one of the book's appendices, "People in the Story" (p. 403), as a figure from legend rather than from history. But Diana makes her the first-person narrator of the entire tale, a character whom we have to willingly accept before the story even begins. She is literally a legend come to life as soon as we accept her voice. Branwen is also a young woman in transition in the Waking World, passing gradually from obscurity into eternal renown. A careful reading of the text reveals an even-paced development of the dark-haired serving girl into the Queen of heaven and earth, the Cauldron of Creation and its Crown. Her role as a mediator is functionally equated to and mirrored by the white stag who leads Branwen to the Lady of the

Fountain (p. 283), or to the white doe and fawn in Drustan's story of Winomarc'h (p. 296-297). They are mythical figures impinging upon the real world, informing the real world that all is not well, but can be.

All three major female characters, Queen Mairenn, her daughter Esseilte, and Branwen, are consciously depicted in raven terms, through clothing, mannerisms, and bodily appearance. Several ironies involving their ravenous attributes are clear from the outset of the novel. All three women are capable of great passion and frequently exhibit that passion in extraordinary fashion. Mairenn's fierce loyalty to Diarmait MacCearbhaill and her brother the Morholt move her to rapacious acts against their enemies through her powers as a "sorceress", as the princess of Ulaid would say (p. 20). Mairenn's ravaging cursings prove her undoing, however, a betrayal of her relationship with the land. The poisoning of the blade of the Morholt's sword and the vile deprecations against his unknown slayer, without consideration of the fairness of the fight or of the personality of the Morholt's opponent, eventually bring her and almost all that she loves to ruin. Esseilte drinks from the same spring as her mother, and although the great molten hatred that she initially feels for Drustan as her uncle's murderer is completely turned by the power of her mother's love potion, her own vicious invocations upon Drustan, before and after their assignation to one another, condemn her as well. These two are both fair ravens, literally; blond vixens who betray the preternatural within themselves for personal revenge, and pay for it dearly. Branwen, shadow to Esseilte's sunlight, becomes Mairenn's spiritual heir, but a self-possessed heir. Her fealty to the land and her king wavers not so much by a willful spiritual choice as by the weakness of the physical world of which she is a part. After Keihirdyn's rape and subsequent manipulation of her, Branwen concludes:

Sometimes I tried to remember how it had been with Marc'h, when I had been the Hawthorn Queen. But that was someone else, another lifetime, a dream. In that life I had scorned Esseilte for her passion, but now I knew that she was also trapped by this aching female body that was so vulnerable to a man's attention.

If there was a Lady, then she had betrayed me, for all my struggles to protect Esseilte and remain faithful to Marc'h and his land had come to this – that I was only a thing of flesh made to serve the flesh of a man. (p. 339)

Branwen does not initiate or perpetuate betrayal, she feels betrayed, and even in her depressed circumstances never willingly does anything to violate her relationship with the Land. In the following chapter, Branwen attempts to get even with her violator, but not by virtue of her power and influence with the Hidden Realm. When Keihirdyn mocks her physical passion for him, Branwen recalls

I felt the blood leave my face, but I did not fall. Dimly I was aware that what Keihirdyn was saying was true, and that my reaction was as much against that part of myself that had yielded to him as against him. But that made its violence all the more necessary. What I tasted now was the opposite of the chaotic fury I had felt as he was raping

me. I knew what had moved Mairenn when she cursed the Morholt's murderer.

Rage is far deadlier when it is cold. (p. 344)

But she does not evoke the power that Mairenn has bestowed upon her. Branwen's rage is physically expressed in the ceremony of the last sheaf when Keihirdyn was cleverly positioned to be beaten by the harvesters to Branwen's secret delight. When the injured Drustan innocently happens upon the field, however, and receives the pummeling instead, Branwen's inner response reveals the extent of her intended revenge.

Damn you, Drustan! I thought as I watched it. That pummeling was meant for Keihirdyn! I did not want him to understand! (p. 348)

Branwen's revenge consisted in Keihirdyn's being beaten senseless without having any clue as to why it happened, much like her own experience in having been sexually assaulted by virtue of the supposed conspiracy of Keihirdyn and Drustan. Later when she confronts Drustan with his complicity in Keihirdyn's actions and his response is not to her liking, she contemplates what to do next.

Esseilte had cursed him, and what had that accomplished? I saw her smile as he clasped her hand, and suddenly I hated her, as well.

Feelings for which I had no name tore at my control. I had sacrificed life and honor for the man and woman who cuddled by the fire, and my reward – my eyes blurred – Esseilte's laughter mocked me! Her face and Drustan's flickered bright and dark in a distortion of vision, and Keihirdyn's somehow with them, twisted in lust and a sly glee as they all remembered how they had used me! Laughter like the screaming of ravens rasped my soul....

My consent allowed all this to happen. I have the power to make it end. The thought came so clearly, as if someone else had whispered it in my ear.

There was a moment of quiet in the midst of madness in which I could do – what? Not to curse them – Esseilte had cursed Drustan, and now she fawned on him. I must act so they could never use me again! Images of vengeance welled through my awareness, drowned thought and bore it away. (pp. 352-353)

Branwen has more than enough influence with the powers that be to bring destruction upon her erstwhile friends, but she chooses a rather mundane, though vicious solution: she simply brings King Marc'h to the farm where the lovers are. It is a betrayal, yes, and one that she will rue, but is not a betrayal of her power and relationship with the Sovereign and the Land. In that sense she is, indeed, a White or Pure Raven.

In conjunction with Branwen's developing role as the White Queen, it is interesting to consider the dark-light imagery that not only fills the narrative in general, but also emphasizes the gradual darkening of Esseilte and the progressive brightening of Branwen. This frequently appears in Diana's descriptions of the two young women in

firelight related scenes especially. The motif can also be illustrated by pointing out that Branwen's hair bleaches in the sun during her duties as healer and keeper of the household, and Esseilte's countenance darkens and her hair turns from sun-gold to moon-silver during her exile. The respective dwelling places and choices in clothing of the two characters emphasize this progressive exchange as well. Admittedly these are small details, but they serve as constant reminders as to what is transpiring between the ravens of the novel.

Ogrin: the Sympathetic Christian

Someone suggested to me years ago that Diana Paxson was not a theological Christian, but a Druid. I am not altogether sure how that conclusion was drawn and I have not been impudent enough to risk my friendship with her by asking outright if it is true. Central to the heart of the story is the apparent conflict between the Sidhe and the Christ: the vicars of Jesus verses the spirits of the Land. Wherever Diana's personal convictions lie, her depiction of the time and place of the story, insofar as the religious ambiance is concerned, is historically accurate. There is a spiritual separateness that begins to resolve itself in the poetry of *Beowulf*. Few poets, if any, have been able to tell a story untrammelled by their religious convictions. C.S. Lewis and Charles Williams simply did not bother to distinguish between religion and story. It was all the same to them. J.R.R. Tolkien was studiously careful, for reasons of his own, to sublimate as deeply as possible the theological undercurrents of his created world as they conformed with his own personal beliefs on the reality of spiritual and eternal things. So carefully was this done that it was not until the publishing of *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien* that many scholars were willing to admit that there was Christianity, and specifically Catholicism, in any form or fashion in *The Hobbit* or *The Lord of the Rings*. Somewhere between Tolkien's Middle-earth and the world of *Beowulf* is the time and place of Diana Paxson's *The White Raven*, a world in which the power of Christ and the power of nature openly struggle for survival. The nexus of this battle and perhaps the embodiment of its resolution is the hermit Ogrin.

The descriptions of Ogrin and Branwen, and Branwen recollections of the old man are extraordinary in accomplishing the symbiosis between the two powers in the land. After Branwen is found and cared for by Ogrin subsequent to her powerful experience in the Hidden Realm she recalls

For the next few days I woke only to eat a little and then sleep again. My world was bounded by the flickering light of Ogrin's turf fire. But after a time I began to be aware of some things. It was the hermit's own bed I was sleeping in, while he lay on bare earth by the fire. When he was not tending me, he prayed, sometimes weeping, but mostly with great outpourings of praise. At first it made me uncomfortable, as if I had surprised someone in the act of love, but after a time I began to understand that to Ogrin, prayer was as natural as the singing of the swallows that nested in the crags. (p. 207)

When she finds enough strength to move outside

Had my eyes grown so unaccustomed to the light? I blinked, rubbed my eyes with the heels of my palms, and opened them again. But it was the same. I saw a radiance around each leaf and blade of grass. The hermit was hurrying up the path, and the light that surrounded him was more brilliant still. *I am seeing haloes*, I thought, *like the illuminations in the holy books, but it is only the fire of life that glows in everything....* (p. 208)

Branwen and Ogrin then begin an exchange that unfolds the hermit's accommodation of the seen and the unseen. When Branwen tells him of her experience of the Otherworld she suspects that he would declare her damned or insane. Instead he says

"Were you?" Astonishingly, he simply looked interested. "I have seen them too, sometimes. They are fair indeed, dancing beneath the moon."

"I danced with the Horned One --" I added. I think that I was hoping to shock him. My vision of the Lady was too holy a thing to share.

"Him I have not seen," said the hermit, "but that he is a great lord among them I have heard (p. 208).

After explaining his belief regarding the spirits of the Hidden Realm which were not antithetical to Branwen's experience, Ogrin is asked by the girl

"Do you not call them demons?" I challenged.

"If they are in this world it is because the good God made them, and who am I to question His handiwork? They have never done any harm to me..."

I stared at him, beginning to understand why the fair folk had left me at Ogrin's door.

"I have listened to the words of many mitred abbots" -- I thought of the fulminations of Ruadan -- "and never heard such mildness toward the Old Ones before."

Ogrin shrugged uncomfortably. "Well, I daresay all those great men of the Church are right, and I am wrong. But I am too aware of my own unworthiness to judge other creatures, whether or not they have immortal souls. If the Creator is all-powerful as scripture tells us, how can their existence threaten his sovereignty?"

Tears welled up from beneath my shut eyelids. Only then did I realize how I had feared that when Ogrin knew where I had been, he would shun me. Perhaps there were some things I would not tell him -- not all my secrets were my own -- but the last barrier to healing had disappeared. I felt his hand brush my head in blessing, laid my head upon my knees and simply cried. (p. 209)

Ogrin's connection between the so-called pagan and the Christian continues shortly afterwards when Branwen observes that both Ogrin and the Blessed Brigid could speak to the bees and that hardly anyone could be as blessed as the old man. She then asked for a blessing from him

"I will give you the blessing that Mary asked for her Son," said Ogrin. He lifted his hands above me, and I saw the power come out of his palms in a golden glow.

"God over thee, God under thee,
God before thee, God behind thee,

Thou on His path, my child, and He in thy steps.
 The augury made by Mary for her own offspring
 When He was for a space amissing,
 Knowledge of truth, not knowledge of falsehood,
 That thou shalt truly see all thy quest.
 Son of the beauteous Mary, King of Life,
 Give thee eyes to see all thy quest,
 With grace that shall never fail before thee,
 That shall never quench nor dim." (p. 210)

Branwen is not merely the vessel of the power of the Hidden Realm, she is the vessel of the blessings of the power of Christ as well. She is a White Raven in earnest, a divine compound of two cultures. She is not the White Dove, but she is not the Black Raven either; she is something of both. The final touching scene between Ogrin and Branwen in the next to the last chapter is worth citing almost in full. Branwen has pursued her course to what she feels is complete disaster and in anguish she seeks Ogrin in his cell in the moor. She confesses what she believes to be her failure and Ogrin sighs

"My poor child." I felt the light touch of his hand upon my hair. "And what do you seek from me?"

"Absolution!" I exclaimed. But what I really wanted was for him to make the past four years go away so I could start over again.

"I could give you a penance of prayer and forgive you in the name of the Holy Trinity. There are brethren of mine who have worn out their knees that way, seeking release from the bonds of the flesh and the world. And maybe for them such pains have merit. God knows there are times when my awareness of my own unworthiness brings me to my knees with tears and groaning...." He rubbed his hands back and forth on the worn cloth of his robe, remembering. "But you, I think, know already that self-denial can lead to more subtle sins."

"I tried so hard," I whispered. "I thought that I could make all right for everyone —"

"And did you labor out of love, or pride?" he asked then.

"I thought it was love...." I hiccupped. "I thought that if I did enough, they would love me...." Once more I saw Marc'h's face, rigid with pain, and Esseilte's angry eyes.

"And are you not worthy of love as you are?" he asked even more softly.

Not the chance-got daughter of a captive, not the servant fosterling! I began weeping again.

"I love you," he said then. "My God loves you...." He put his arm around me and cradled my head against the rough wool that covered his bony chest. It was not a comfortable breast to lie on, but the peace that was in that man was like cool water on the fever of my pain.

"But I do not pray to your God," I said after a time. And that had not been my decision. It was the Lady, I thought, who had chosen me.

"Does that matter?"

"Abbot Ruadan would say so!" Incredibly, I wanted to smile. There was a little silence, then Ogrin sighed. I straightened and turned to look at him.

"I am a hermit not because I do not love my fellows,

Branwen, but because I fear to be a scandal to them, and so I came out here to seek God in the wilderness. And though perhaps I am imperiling your soul and my own by saying so, it seems to me that He who is the Word cannot be bound by the names by which men try to limit Him."

"Or Her?" I asked.

"Perhaps, though that is beyond my theology." Ogrin's frown eased, and he began to smile. "Still, not even our Lord could become a man without taking flesh in the womb of a woman. Pray to the Mother of God, if you will. That should not offend even your Abbot Ruadan!"

"And what about those who have sinned against me?" I said, after a time.

"Their evils are not for your judging. Love them. Pray for them."

I did not understand it, for Ogrin had done no magic to take away my sins, but when I lay down on my pallet that night, I sank into a sleep that was as deep and comforting as any spell of the Sidhe, and I did not dream. (pp. 365-366)

There is a sensibility about Ogrin that is endearing. I came away from the story loving him in a way that I knew Diana must have loved him while in the act of creation. Years ago as I lay upon the Altar of Academia, fresh from the crucible of Graduate School, one of my examining Professors asked me to bear my soul in a sectarian setting. I said that I thought it inappropriate to present elements of faith in a scholarly venue. His reply touched me deeply, "Paul, we may not all be Christians here, but neither are we lions. Please tell us what you believe." Regardless of Diana's personal faith in these matters, she is no lion. She has captured in one of her finest characters, the personification of the love of the Christian God for all of his children, he who is no respecter of persons.

The Raven in the Lighted Hall

My final gossamer thread that I will share today takes its image from an Anglo-Saxon metaphor. The ancient poet likened life to a bird winging its way through a starless sky, that for one brief moment finds itself in a lighted banquet hall and then leaves by another window as abruptly as was its entrance. Imagine for a moment the extraordinary panoramic display of sight and sound that must greet the bird, a sudden rush to the senses that must overwhelm and forever impress. My reading of *The White Raven* began as every other novel and short story that I have read over the years, a dogged pursuit of the narrative until the magical "click" sounded that would indicate that I was caught in the grip of the tale. Even now, after numerous readings and seemingly endless essays, that "click" doesn't happen to me until after page 50 of *The Hobbit*; but then, of course, I am stuck until the end of *The Return of the King*. The "click" in *The White Raven* happened for me in Chapter Six.

It began innocently enough on page 97 at the feast in the Mead-Circling Hall.

At Diarmait's right hand several notable churchmen who

had paused at Temair on their travels were already deep in discussion, with the king's men of learning listening intently behind them. Across the fire sat the officers of the royal household. But the poets who should have been among them were off that night at their own conclave, and it was Dughan who sat tuning his harp on the low stool, scrubbed and combed and looking surprisingly elegant in a new blue robe. (p. 97)

The two churchmen sit like loaded shotguns on the mantle, as Nathaniel Hawthorne would say, although I would not have eyes to see until a page later. I hope you won't mind little editorial asides as I go through the passage.

"And think you that it was truly the Land of Promise you found?" [What?]

A lull in the other conversations let the words come through clearly [*this would be fortuitous indeed*], and I turned. It was the younger of the two churchmen who had spoken, and I recognized him at once, for the Abbot of Derry was born a prince of the northern Ui Neill, with the look of a warrior about him despite the coarse robe. I picked at my food, straining to hear as they went on [*so was I straining*].

"That is what Ternoc called it, and I am certain that this island was the same. For six weeks we explored, and never came to its ending. And all the time we were praising God for the sweet sight of groves of trees that have never known the axe, and flowers and fruits like the meadows of Eden. Ah, Columba [*Ah, Columba? Haven't I heard this name somewhere else?*] my brother – if only I could have remained. From a land unstained by the evils of men surely it would be a simple step to Paradise!"

The monk who had replied was older, with a bushy beard and dark grizzled hair springing back from his shaven brow. Even in the hall, his gray eyes seemed fixed on some far horizon. Columba smiled a little at his enthusiasm, and then shook his head. Firelight shone from his ruddy hair as he leaned forward.

"But Brendan [*CLICK!*], could even the groves of Eden compensate for the loss of Eriu? This land that bore us is surely the pearl of the countries of creation, and if it be stained by the sins of men, then it is our duty as servants of God to cleanse it!" (p. 98)

Diana captured me with Saint Brendan. At the mention of the name of Brendan, I knew that I was supposed to dislike Columba and his sly mockery even before he displayed his arrogance. Saint Brendan was already my friend from long ago and I wanted to hear more from him. Two pages later, after Columba had left off his spleen venting, Brendan's sublime voice appears again.

"Indeed we do have peace now," said the monk Brendan after a little time had passed. "And the land prospers whose king fears God. But all men, even kings, are mortal, and if the people have no other source of justice, who will protect them if the king be an evil man?" Brendan has spoken calmly, and the sense of danger did not return. I could feel them settling happily to the debate. (p. 100)

Although I would not meet him formally for another hundred pages, there is a little bit of Ogrin in Brendan, a

peacemaker of great proportions. Again, after Columba causes more consternation among the guests, Brendan's calm and reasonable commentary saves the day.

"Indeed, it is an evil time," said Brendan then. "And I fear that even when a king is just and the land at peace there is no perfection in the world. Men, and women too, come to the monasteries to seek what they can never find at home, and hermits go even farther, building their oratories on every barren rock to find the kingdom of God."

"And you, Father, have gone farther still. Is that what you are seeking in your voyages?" asked the High King.

"In the world or out of it, what other goal can there be?" the monk said simply. "And we have the word of the saints who went before us that the Land of the Blessed lies across the western sea. Even before Christ's coming those islands were known to the men of Eriu, and surely that is no wonder, for our country is the westernmost land in all this sinful world. Did not Bran son of Febal go to the Land of Joy? And did not Oisín return from the Land of Youth to tell Blessed Padraig of the wonders there?"

For a moment everyone was silent, as if Brendan's words had awakened in them the same longing that shone in his eyes. And into that silence fell the sweet shimmer of music, and Dughan's clear voice upraised in song: (p. 102)

Then Dughan sings his song of the distant isle and I knew my initial reaction to sainted mariner was proven correct as Branwen, Esseilte, and the harper Dughan shared their feelings at Brendan's words.

If Brendan had shown us a ship, I would have gone aboard without a backward look, for the lilt of the sea was in that singing, and the cry of the restless gulls, and the song of birds whose music this earth shall never know. I looked up at Esseilte, and in her blue eyes I saw the glitter of tears.... (p. 103)

"Would you sail with Brendan if you could?" said Esseilte to me.

"At a word –" After the feast, I had dreamed of Brendan's islands, and wept like Oisín when I woke in the dawning and realized that they were gone. "Between the monk's tales and Dughan's singing, I think Brendan could have filled a flotilla. They say that the men who built the ships for his last voyage asked no wage but a place among his crew."

"The sea-longing is strong in the people of Eriu," said Dughan. "As if even the conquest of the island were only a stop on a journey to a fairer land." (pp. 103-104)

"Would you go with Brendan?" I asked him then. Slowly he smiled.

"I have told you of the city of Ys that was swallowed by the sea. Sometimes, when the wind is right, they say you can hear the mournful echoes of drowned bells."

"Did you ever hear them?" Esseilte had drawn closer and was looking at him as if she could read in his eyes the wonder he had sought beneath the waves.

"Once, when I walked along the shore, I thought I did. But to me they did not sound sorrowful... what I heard was a summoning to all the peace I can never find in this

Continued on page 47

translation of the *Commedia*: from her novel-writing, the habit of visualizing a narrative in three dimensions and the ability to handle structure, characterization and dialogue; from her experience as a playwright, a heightened awareness of the interplay of character and plot; from her polemics, skill in the marshalling of facts and in presenting a case with logic and cogency; from her Christian apologetics, a grasp of doctrine and a capacity to expound unfamiliar concepts in present-day terms; from her poetry (which she wrote all her life), skill in verse-form, meter and rhyme.

More importantly, Sayers possessed what she herself call "the passionate intellect," defined by Reynolds (with a nod to R.J. Reilly) as a mind attuned to "the union of the intellect and the imagination as the highest means of religious truth." Combining this myth with adept translation skills enabled Sayers (and later Reynolds) to produce a translation which has reached more readers in forty years than had previously read Dante in the preceding six-and-a-quarter centuries combined.

Reynold's book is tightly written, well researched, and well organized. Altogether, Reynolds has produced what should be recognized as one of the two most valuable books yet written on Sayers, the other being Ralph E. Hone's *Dorothy L. Sayers: A Literary Biography* (1979). In *The Passionate Intellect* she has explained the significance of Sayer's encounter with Dante and its importance to the whole of her canon as clearly and rewardingly as anyone can.

— James E. Pearson, Jr.



Editorial Notes

The technical production of *Mythlore* has recently been upgraded to make the journal both faster and easier to produce on the computer, as well as to provide previously unattainable effects. The current tools are as follows — SOFTWARE: Microsoft Word (word processing); Xerox Ventura (page layout); Logitech Scanman (scanning art and text); Corel Draw (text manipulation for titles & graphics); Cassidy & Green (for the Celtic and other added fonts). HARDWARE: a 386/25mhz PC Computer; MDS Genuis full page monitor; QMS PS (Adobe Postscript) 410 laser printer. The access to this printer makes last minute changes much easier, and makes proofing far easier and more accurate, since we are able to see a page *exactly* as it will be printed. This was not possible previously with the fickle and visually confusing dot-matrix printouts, which frequently did not print in the correct point sizes.

The editor is aware that improved proofreading is needed, and along with the new equipment, has taken measures to improve the proofing and copy editing. It is exciting to have the access to the added resources, and, with the prospect of several art projects expected in the near future, the Editor looks forward to many great issues to follow that keep the readers' pleasure in mind. — GG



The White Raven — continued from page 40
world, and all the beauty, and all the joy.... If Niamh should shake her silver branch over me, I would not be so foolish as to return to the world of men!"

"And are you still seeking that country?" she said in a still voice.

Dughan nodded. (pp. 104-105)

I dare not say that Diana placed that little aside for me. I think she knows me well enough to have done it, but in reality I think it was there for all who are like me. It was another example of Diana's careful use of a connecting link between her and her readers. How could anyone steeped in the lore of Eriol, the Magic Isles, Eressea, the Blessed Land of Aman, the Valinor of Middle-earth, the lore of the Elves, and their hot desire for the Belegaer, not respond to Diana's counterparts in *The White Raven*? J.R.R. Tolkien's deep affection for Saint Brendan is quite explicit in his early writings and Diana Paxson's portrayal of Brendan elaborates and vitalizes Tolkien's conception. As I read that account, I felt as if I had met the ancient mariner again in a lighted hall that I had flown into momentarily while on another journey. This time, however, I did not see him from afar; Diana introduced him personally to me.

Conclusions

Diana Paxson's capacity for captivating her readers is demonstrated by her careful depiction of her characters who in turn draw us into the world of the Story through their own sensitivity. I think that it is a great complement to her craft that Diana relegates so much of what a narrator does to her creations. The three women, Ogrin, and Saint Brendan are just a few of the many examples that might be cited to demonstrate the vitality and importance that the author of *The White Raven* places on the delicate relationship between reader and author, a relationship that every writer covets and Diana Paxson establishes and maintains.

I think it would not be amiss to conclude my remarks by making some sort of categorical statement about Diana's style of writing. I once took on the world defending the prose style of another Guest of Honor whom I had met at a Mythopoeic Conference years ago. The fracas that appeared in several issues of *Mythlore* had to do with who was the literary heir of J.R.R. Tolkien. Some of you may remember the episode. In my letter to the Editor, which somehow got printed, I suggested that the whole procedure was in vain. Tolkien's style, I said, is like drinking clear, cold spring water from cut crystal, and that to compare my friend's prose to Tolkien's was like trying to drink Dinty Moore stew from that same sweet glass. Use stemware for Tolkien, I suggested; use a great stone bowl for Stephen Donaldson. Since we are now in the midst of a somewhat festive metaphor, to what shall we compare Diana Paxson and her *White Raven*? A flagon of hot Irish ale, please; lift it high and drink it to the dregs. ☞