



Mythopoeic Society

mythLORE

A Journal of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis,
Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature

Volume 15
Number 4

Article 11

Summer 7-15-1989

Tales Newly Told

Alexei Kondratiev

Follow this and additional works at: <https://dc.swosu.edu/mythlore>



Part of the [Children's and Young Adult Literature Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Kondratiev, Alexei (1989) "Tales Newly Told," *Mythlore: A Journal of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature*: Vol. 15: No. 4, Article 11.

Available at: <https://dc.swosu.edu/mythlore/vol15/iss4/11>

This Column is brought to you for free and open access by the Mythopoeic Society at SWOSU Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Mythlore: A Journal of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature* by an authorized editor of SWOSU Digital Commons. An ADA compliant document is available upon request. For more information, please contact phillip.fitzsimmons@swosu.edu.

To join the Mythopoeic Society go to:
<http://www.mythsoc.org/join.htm>

SWOSUTM

Online Summer Seminar 2023

August 5-6, 2023: Fantasy Goes to Hell: Depictions of Hell in Modern Fantasy Texts

<https://mythsoc.org/oms/oms-2023.htm>



Tales Newly Told

Abstract

Edgerton, Teresa. *Child of Saturn*.

Tales Newly Told

A Column on Current Fantasy by Alexei Kondratiev

What is perceived as excellence in a work of mythopoeic fantasy can be due to a variety of literary strengths, which in some cases can mask (or excuse) corresponding weaknesses. For instance, the sheer inventiveness of an author's imagination, the wealth and complexity of material he/she has provided for a secondary world, can fill the reader with a sense of pleasant intoxication and gain some lasting affection for the author's subcreation, even if the use of language and the plot structure displayed in the work are not particularly original. On the other hand, a story can be built on images that have become commonplaces in the literary fantasy tradition – a pseudo-Medieval setting, magic rings or swords, dragons, unicorns, etc. – and yet be completely redeemed by the author's attention to form and style, which places these familiar images in a different perspective and thus extends the meaning they have for us. By and large, facility of invention is a more widespread talent than stylistic polish (let us leave aside those works – met with more and more often nowadays – that are blessed with neither). Comparatively few are those true masters of fantasy whose originality of vision is matched by their creative approach to language, or at least by their conscious grasp of the craft of writing. In her first novel *Child of Saturn* (Ace, 1989), Teresa Edgerton suggests that she may well belong in this last category even though she does deal, up to a point, in mock-Medieval "commonplaces," the excellence of her craftsmanship is incontestable, and her vision, however much it may owe to the literary fantasy tradition in general, is entirely her own.

Child of Saturn is the first volume of a projected "Green Lion" trilogy (the subsequent volumes are to be called *The Moon in Hiding* and *The Work of the Sun*). The green lion is a heraldic motif of Ynys Celydonn – the imaginary land in which the action takes place – but is also, of course, an alchemical symbol, which alerts us to the fact that this is to be a story of magical transformation, of growth and development on more levels than one. To best suit such a theme, the author has set her tale in an ancient land with a rich, many-layered tradition – a land rather like Mediaeval Wales as one might imagine it from reading Welsh literature (indeed, Celydonn looks amusingly like the map of Wales surrounded on all sides by ocean!). Beginning with this premise, she then gives Celydonn an elaborate, internally consistent cultural history, which is clearly reflected in the backgrounds and actions of her protagonists. However, unlike many other fantasists with comparable gifts of invention, she introduces us to this wealth of material in very small doses, never letting us know more than is necessary to understand a plot development. As a result, we are constantly aware that the author knows a great deal more about her fantasy world than she

is showing us: an excellent method of ensuring the suspension of disbelief.

So we discover, little by little, the qualities of the different kingdoms that make us Celydonn: Gorwynnion is linked with harsh, overscrupulous religiosity; Tir Gwynelli is conservative and more than a bit wild (rather like the Scottish Highlands); the folk of Draighen are clannish, competitive, and avaricious, and so forth. We gather, from the evidence of names, that Celydonn is Welsh-speaking but has absorbed an Irish-speaking minority (even though Edgerton denies any attempt to portray Celtic languages realistically, her use of Celtic names is in fact quite effective). We also learn that while Celydonn is officially Christian, and the magical systems in which the lead characters are involved reflect Mediaeval and Renaissance "high magic" with its Judeo-Christian underpinnings, the land retains memories of a rich Pagan past, which implies another sort of magical awareness co-existing with – and influencing – the dominant world-view. The complexities of this dual heritage are expressed through a wealth of unusual and beautiful imagery. And, most delightfully, Edgerton has also invented a literature for her world, which she allows us to glimpse through quotes – wonderful pastiches of the Mabinogion and other Mediaeval texts – and which provide another vivid exposition of the cultural history of Celydonn. All these elements, internally consistent to a fault, are allowed to suggest the scope of the author's subcreation without ever revealing its full pattern, just as Tolkien, in *The Lord of the Rings*, only gradually makes us aware of the intricate edifice of the Elvish languages and the accumulated experience of the Three Ages of the world.

Yet, however elaborate and fascinating an author's secondary world may be, the story can only come to life through its characters. And in this area, too, Edgerton's talent is unquestionable. All her characters, whether appealing or unappealing, are driven by the complicated mix of motivations that we associate with real people. Even the evil Princess Diaspad, who alone of the *dramatis personae* comes close to being a cartoon villainess, is given three-dimensional interest through the wit and economy of Edgerton's style. The understated humor which suffuses the entire narrative provides a certain sharpness of perspective to all the scenes, including those whose theme is dead-serious, like the burgeoning relationship between the two main protagonists, the child-sorceress Teleri and the tormented werewolf-knight Ceilyn mac Cuel.

Teleri's master is the wizard Glastyn, who would seem to be the "wise old man" Gandalf-figure of this story –
(continued on Page 66)

opening page of "A Long-expected Party"; two pages in which the One Ring, and the Ring-verse, emerge in the narrative; a scrap showing "the emergence of Treebeard," originally "a giant who pretends to be friendly, but is really in league with the Enemy"; and a page of text which includes the inscription on the West Gate of Moria. Also reproduced, in black and white, are a manuscript plan of Bree and "The earliest map of the lands south of the Map of Wilderland in *The Hobbit*"; and in color, the earliest extant map of The Shire.

In the American edition lines 15-16 on p. 32 are corrected to: "Bingo's last words, 'I am leaving after dinner', were corrected on the manuscript to 'I am leaving now.'"

Reviewed in this issue of *Mythlore*. (WGH)

Tolkien and Romanticism: Proceedings of the Cambridge Tolkien Workshop 1988. Ed. by I.R. Morus, M.J.L. Percival, and C.S. Rosenthal. Cambridge [England]: Cambridge Tolkien Workshop, 1988. [iii] + 34pp. [Lewis 9, 11,13,25; Barfield 25]

Five papers and a satire, presented at the Third Annual Tolkien Society Workshop:

(1) "Servant of the Secret Fire" by Paul Bibire, pp. 2-7. Discusses fire as image and symbol in *The Hobbit*, *The Lord of the Rings*, and *The Silmarillion*. Fire is central to the world, which began and will end with fire, and is "at the heart of Being" (p. 5). It is the "most central image" in Tolkien's mythology. Bibire also examines, tangentially, passages of mountain, wood, and water in Tolkien.

(2) "Tolkien and the Development of Romance" by Alex Lewis, pp. 8-13. On one level, *The Lord of the Rings* is a "fully fledged Romance," while on a higher level the work "transcends the Romantic and becomes quasi-Classical, philosophical in its scope and intent" (p. 11). *The Silmarillion* likewise transcends definition. Alex Lewis concludes that "it is not possible to examine Tolkien's writings in the narrow confines of 'Romantic' and 'Classical' for they break new ground when looked upon as part of a whole life's evolution" (p.13).

(3) "Tolkien, Wagner, and the End of the Romantic Age" by John Ellison, pp. 14-20. Compares *The Lord of the Rings* and the Ring operas. Both works assume "an elemental opposition of the principles of good and evil" (p. 15); they share themes of power and corruption, of the defilement of Nature, of death and the acceptance of death; both present worlds which suffer a dyscatastrophe. Siegfried and Frodo each in his own way is an "innocent," but Siegfried remains so to the very end while Frodo matures. Wagner "rounded off the romantic age" in music (p. 14), Tolkien "presents the appearance of a romantic survival existing in the midst of a later and more cynical age" (p. 20).

(4) "Bow-Wow or Pooh-Pooh: Natural Modes of Language from Plato to Tolkien" by Iwan Rhys Morus, pp.

21-26. The first two-thirds of this essay is a discussion of linguistic theory, particularly the philosophy of language held by Samuel Taylor Coleridge. In this context Morus examines Tolkien's claim about the relationship between language, thought and mythology" (p. 24) as expressed in "On Fairy-stories." "For Tolkien, neither language nor mythology could exist without the other in a reciprocal relationship.... [The] production of language and the production of myth occur simultaneously in the human mind" (p. 25). Owen Barfield makes a similar point in his *Poetic Diction*.

(5) "Elf-Spear, The Wand of Youth, and the Starlight Express" by David Doughan, pp. 27-29. Discusses Sir Edward Elgar's *Starlight Express* and *Wand of Youth*. The name Elgar may be derived from Old English *ælf-gar*, "elf-spear." Like Tolkien in his early fantasy writings, Elgar in his music reconstructed childhood visions "at a particularly critical time in history [the years of World War I] for this sort of sentiment" (p. 29).

(6) "The History of Middle-earth, Volume 24" by Duncan McLaren, pp. 30-34. Sketch satirizing the *History of Middle-earth* series. (WGH)

Webb, Kaye, Ed. *I Like This Story: A Taste of Fifty Favorites*. Illustrated by Anthony Kerins. Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Puffin Books, 1986. 384 pp. [Tolkien 312-25 and cover]

Excerpts from fifty Puffin Books, comprising the 2000th Puffin. Included is part of chapter 5 of Tolkien's *The Hobbit*, beginning with "Deep down here by the dark water lived old Gollum" and ending with "The ring felt very cold as it quietly slipped on to his groping forefinger." The text is not, however, from the notorious 1961 Puffin edition which had *dwarfs* for *duarves*, *elfish* for *elvish*, etc., but from the 1978 "fourth edition."

The illustration at the head of the excerpt depicts Bilbo facing Gollum on the shore of the lake, but in a serious departure from the text includes trees in the foreground and distance and a cloud-streaked sky behind (presumably) Gollum's "slimy island of rock." Bilbo seems to have a beard and no hair on his feet. He and Gollum also appear as tiny figures in the cover painting-montage. (WGH)

TALES NEWLY TOLD (continued from page 47)

except that he has vanished before the story begins, and appears only in the characters' memories. He is the plot's central enigma, and thus its main driving force: why has he disappeared, and where to? What are his plans for Teleri, not to mention Celydonn as a whole? What is his true relationship to the Old Ones – the surviving Pagans of the land, who don't seem to like him much? It is because of these questions remain unanswered, and also because of our well-earned confidence in the author's imagination, and resourcefulness, that we eagerly await the further metamorphoses of *The Green Lion*. ☞