

SOCIEDAD TOLKIEN ESPAÑOLA

**Middle-earth Without Clovers:
Unveiling the Myth of ‘Celticism’ in
Tolkien**

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Needless to say they are not Celtic! Neither are the tales. I do know Celtic things (many in their original languages Irish and Welsh) and feel for them a certain distaste: largely for their fundamental unreason. They have bright colour, but are like a broken stained glass window reassembled without design.

—**J.R.R. Tolkien,**

The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien, 32

1. Introduction

J.R.R. Tolkien's academic career, spanning nearly forty years from his appointment as Reader in English Language at Leeds University in 1920 to his retirement as Merton Professor of English Language and Literature at Oxford in 1959, established him as a prominent figure in literary scholarship and education. While he gained recognition for his teaching and significant critical contributions, Tolkien's most enduring legacy lies in his literary works, including *The Silmarillion* (1977), *The Hobbit* (1937), and *The Lord of the Rings* (1954-55). The latter, which began in the mid-1940s, is particularly notable for its rich tapestry of influences, drawing from Nordic, Finnish, Germanic, and, most controversially, Celtic backgrounds.

Despite his explicit rejection of the term "Celtic" in describing his work, Tolkien acknowledged the aesthetic allure associated with this tradition. He famously noted in

Letter 131 to Milton Waldman the "fair elusive beauty that some call Celtic" (*Letters*¹ 167), indicating an awareness of, if not a direct alignment with, Celtic influences. This acknowledgment raises critical questions about the nature and extent of Celticism within his oeuvre, particularly during a period when Britain was experiencing a significant identity crisis amidst the waning of its empire.

Many scholars have engaged in the ongoing debate about the presence and role of Celtic influences in Tolkien's work, often oversimplifying or mischaracterizing his relationship with this tradition. In this essay, I aim to navigate this complex discourse, analysing key works to uncover how Tolkien's mythos both reflects and transforms Celtic elements. Rather than treating these aspects superficially, I will critically examine *The Lord of the Rings* (1954-55) as a focal point, exploring the ways in which Tolkien indirectly integrates Celtic themes and motifs. By doing so, this study seeks to illuminate the profound impact of Celtic literature and language on Tolkien's creation of a unique mythological framework, challenging the notion of his detachment from this influential heritage.

2. Where It All Begins: A Question Rooted in England

The phrase "a mythology for England" lingers in the mind of J.R.R. Tolkien, encapsulating the essence of his literary ambition and his foundational inspiration for *The Lord of the Rings*. Over the years, this well-known statement has sparked significant interest, not only among Tolkien enthusiasts but also among scholars globally. As a result, prominent Tolkien experts have identified and highlighted the three major 'Matters' of medieval literature, the Matter of Greece and Rome, centered

¹ The way to cite J.R.R. Tolkien

on Alexander; the Matter of France, revolving around Charlemagne² and his court; and the Matter of Britain, focusing on King Arthur³ and his knights. From this perspective, Tolkien, however, envisioned a fourth—The Matter of Middle-earth⁴—which stands as a testament to his desire to weave a distinctly English mythology. This “Matter of Middle-earth” is more than a mere compilation of stories; it represents a deeply personal endeavour to create a mythic landscape that resonates with the cultural identity of England. In a 1951 letter to Milton Waldman⁵, he candidly shared, “... once upon a time (my crest has long since fallen) I had a mind to make a body of connected legend... which I could dedicate simply to: to England: to my country” (*Letters* 168). This ‘to my country’ of course, refers to England, a territory that, despite its rich folkloric and mythological heritage, has historically lacked a distinct personal mythos.

Tolkien was a pure nationalist and despite his birth in Bloemfontein⁶, South Africa, his literary identity is firmly rooted in English culture and traditions. As he navigated through the late 19th and early to mid-20th centuries—a period marked by burgeoning nationalism in Anglo-Saxon regions—Tolkien perceived a critical gap in the representation of English identity. This was an era where Scotland, Ireland, and Wales experienced a renaissance of indigenous culture, mythology, and legends, yet England remained an overlooked epicentre. Tolkien’s awareness of cultural significance and personal identity got further evidenced by his lifelong dedication to the study of

² Charlemagne (c. 747–814), King of the Franks and Lombards, was crowned Emperor of the Carolingian Empire in 800 AD. He unified much of Western Europe and initiated the Carolingian Renaissance, a revival of learning and culture grounded in classical traditions.

³ A legendary British ruler, traditionally placed in the 5th–6th centuries. He is central to medieval Arthurian legends, often portrayed as the leader of the Knights of the Round Table and a model of chivalry.

⁴ The fictional universe created by J.R.R. Tolkien, serving as the setting for *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*.

⁵ Milton Waldman (1895–1976) was an American literary agent and editor, recognized for his work with several notable authors, including J.R.R. Tolkien. As an adviser and senior editor at the London publisher Collins, Waldman significantly contributed to the publication of Tolkien's works, particularly in promoting *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*.

⁶ One of South Africa's three capital cities, serving as the judicial capital. Established in 1846, Bloemfontein is often referred to as the "City of Roses" due to the abundance of these flowers in the area.

mythologies and ancient cultures. As he witnessed the awakening of national narratives in other regions, he felt a profound longing for England to reclaim its mythic essence. In a subsequent letter written in 1956, he elaborated on his aspirations, stating that his mythology should embody “the tone and quality that I desired, somewhat cool and clear, be redolent of our ‘air’... not Italy or the Aegean, still less the East” (*Letters* 168).

3. Songs of the Sídh: Exploring Faërie Realms and Elvish Dreams

Tolkien’s treatment of faeries and their resemblance to Celtic mythological beings—despite his apparent disavowal of Celtic influences—requires a nuanced approach. Although Tolkien consistently distanced himself from Celtic mythology, there is substantial evidence, particularly in his essay *On Fairy-Stories*, suggesting that the faeries he conceptualized in his legendarium share notable similarities with the *Sídh*⁷ of Irish mythology.

In *On Fairy-Stories*, first delivered as a lecture in 1939 and later published in 1947, J.R.R. Tolkien articulates his ideas on the nature of fairy tales and, more specifically, the term *faërie* as it relates to his fictional world of Middle-earth. Tolkien emphasizes *faërie* not merely as a type of being but as both “a spell cast and the altered and enchanted state the spell produced” as well as “the Perilous Realm itself and the special air of enchantment that blows in that country” (*OFS*, I, 114). In his conceptualization of the *Perilous Realm*, Tolkien does not focus solely on the beings of *faërie* themselves but on the elements that define this otherworldly realm. His definition of *faërie* is complex and, at times, ambiguous, but one thing is certain: Tolkien was not ignorant of Celtic

⁷ Refers to a supernatural race of beings often associated with the faerie folk or elves, believed to inhabit the mounds (*sidhe*) scattered throughout Ireland. They are considered to possess magical powers and are linked to the Otherworld, where they are thought to live in a parallel realm. The *Sídh* play a significant role in folklore, representing the intersection of the human and mystical worlds.

traditions. Indeed, he later acknowledged that his portrayal of the Grey Elves had a “Celtic type” (Fimi 2), drawing attention to the influence of Celtic culture on his work.

By the time he delivered *On Fairy-Stories* in 1939, Tolkien had already begun writing *The Lord of the Rings* and expressed his desire to create a mythology, referencing “the fair elusive that some call Celtic” (*Letters* 144). This acknowledgment of a Celtic influence challenges Tolkien’s earlier critiques of Celtic mythology, which he often disparaged for being chaotic and lacking coherence. Despite these critiques, Celtic elements—particularly regarding the Otherworld, temporal fluidity and watery element—are clearly present in his depiction of *faërie*. Tolkien also links the creation of the Secondary World with what he calls “elvish craft,” a form of enchantment that produces an alternate reality. In the typescript ‘A’ draft of *On Fairy-Stories*, Tolkien clarifies that this form of enchantment enables both the designer and the audience to enter the Secondary World in a way that feels real and satisfying while inside, though it remains distinct from the Primary World⁸ (*OFS*, II, 141). These realms, much like the Celtic Otherworld, are places that appear perilous and inhospitable to mortals but are also places of beauty and enchantment for those deemed worthy to enter.

The concept of the Otherworld, as explored by Tolkien scholars, offers significant insight into Tolkien’s mythopoeic vision. Carey defines the Otherworld as “any place inhabited by supernatural beings and itself exhibiting supernatural characteristics” (1). This aligns closely with Tolkien’s descriptions in *On Fairy-Stories*, where he asserts that the Otherworld is “nearby, perhaps indeed immediately present, but hidden and alien as well” (*OFS*, III, 175). Tolkien elaborates that the Otherworld may exist beneath a “single well or hill” (175) or even be linked to distant points in the geography of

⁸ The “Primary World” is inhabited by humans and other real beings, reflecting the actual historical and cultural contexts of Earth. It serves as the foundation for his literary creations, where elements from the Primary World influence the narratives set in the fantastical “Secondary World.”

mortals, thus signifying a world that is simultaneously accessible and transcendent. Flieger and Anderson suggest that Tolkien “retained and wrought to a high finish the concept of the Otherworld” (36), which manifests in Middle-earth through locations such as Rivendell and Lothlórien. With the foundational understanding of the Otherworld established, two further questions emerge: What constitutes this potential Tolkienian Otherworld? How do time and other key elements, such as water, function within it?

Time in Tolkien's Otherworld is subjective, differing fundamentally from mortal time, reflecting the concept of “Otherworld Time”. Kris Swank observes that this realm has its own seasons, “often out of step with the seasons of the mundane world” (86). Irish myths mirror this, with adventurers experiencing temporal distortions where “time does not pass at the same rate” (Blamires 66). This is vividly depicted in *The Lord of the Rings* in places like Lothlórien and Rivendell, where “time seems to stand still and decay is restrained” (Carpenter 157). Tolkien’s Otherworld is a “parallel reality tangential in time and space to the ordinary world” (Flieger and Anderson 65), where mortal perceptions are altered by the magic of the *faërie* realm. Dreams, too, play a significant role in accessing time, with Tolkien noting “in dreams strange powers of the mind may be unlocked” (*OFS*, I, 41).

Lothlórien embodies a mystical quality where past, present, and future converge, resulting in a unique temporal experience. As Shippey notes, in Lothlórien, “we can see Tolkien exploring... variant ideas about the elves and time” (46). The realm is characterized by time that “appears to be halted” (Aldrich 7) and is central to “discussions of time travel” (Flieger 91). For example, in *The Fellowship of the Ring*, it is stated that “they remained some days in Lothlórien, so far as they could tell or remember” (*FR*, II, vii, 359), emphasizing the difficulty of perceiving time in this

enchanted land. Frodo's experience as the Fellowship enters Lothlórien is telling; he feels as if he has “stepped over a bridge of time into a corner of the Elder Days” (*FR*, II, vii, 364). The term “Elder Days” reinforces the timeless and magical nature of this *faërie* realm, while Frodo’s sensations emphasize a connection to the past, transitioning to “a world that was no more” (Flieger 92). Upon departing Lothlórien, the Fellowship grapples with time's passage: “though they could not count the days and nights that they had passed there” (*FR*, II, viii, 370). Frodo reflects, “in that land, maybe, we were in a time that has elsewhere long gone by” (*FR*, II, viii, 388), suggesting that they only return to the ordinary flow of time after exiting the Secondary World of Lothlórien. This underscores Tolkien’s exploration of time as a complex interplay between the mortal and the mystical, emphasizing how Lothlórien alters perceptions and experiences of time for those who enter it.

Upon leaving Lothlórien, Samwise Gamgee experiences “a return to reality” (Ostaltsev 1), struggling to recall how many days they spent in the Elven realm. Legolas elucidates the Elves' unique perception of time in Lórien: “Nay, time does not tarry ever... For the Elves the world moves, and it moves both very swift and very slow” (*FR*, II, ix, 388). This distinction highlights Tolkien’s integration of personal feelings with temporal perception, as Sam becomes acutely aware of his transition, experiencing both “the bitterness of farewell and the dramatic complexity of the spatiotemporal dynamics of Middle-earth” (Ostaltsev 1). Legolas's lunar cycle analogy resonates with the Celtic calendar. The Fellowship enters Lórien on January 15, 3019, and departs for Amon Hen on February 16, 3019. MacLeod notes that “just as the year begins at the point of darkness and rebirth, so too does the lunar cycle begin with the appearance of the new moon after a period of darkness” (97). This symbolism of rebirth is significant, marking a transition in the characters' journeys.

Lothlórien's unique temporal structure features a perpetual present, where the Elven realm is conceptually contained within a single hill or well (Carey 14). This is exemplified in Galadriel's Mirror, which intertwines past, present, and future. This raises important questions about the Mirror's relationship to time, revealing a dream-like quality. Treebeard's reference to Lothlórien as "Dreamflower" (Flieger 192) underscores this dream-like essence. The mystical energies in the Elven realm influence perceptions of time, allowing characters to see "things that were, and things that are, and things that yet may be" (*FR*, II, vii, 362). Tolkien further states that "the mirror shows many things, and not all yet have come to pass. Some never come to be, unless those that behold the visions turn aside from their path to prevent them" (*FR*, II, vii, 363). This suggests that the Mirror's visions transcend mere reflection, facilitating a traversal through different temporal dimensions. The depiction of vision shifting, "like a dream," emphasizes the fluidity of time in Lothlórien, inviting readers to reflect on the complex relationships between time, memory, and experience in Tolkien's narrative.

In J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*, Lothlórien is depicted as a *faërie* realm where time operates in peculiar ways. Frodo observes, "Time doesn't seem to pass here: it just is" (*FR*, II, i, 231), underscoring the mystical quality of this land. Rivendell shares this quality, especially when Frodo awakens after being wounded by a Nazgûl. This experience echoes motifs found in Irish tales, such as the story of Mongán⁹ from the *Compert Mongáin*, where time behaves erratically in the Otherworld. In Mongán's narrative, he requests a seven-year pause to recount his adventures and, upon awakening, realizes a year has passed. This theme of temporal distortion parallels Frodo's experience in Rivendell. Upon being brought there, Frodo asks, "Where am I, and what is the time?" He learns it is "ten o'clock in the morning... on October the

⁹ An Irish prince from the *Cruthin* tribe, the son of *Fíachnae mac Báetáin*.

twenty-four” (*FR*, II, i, 219), highlighting his disorientation. Elrond's comment that Frodo has been tended to for “days” adds to this confusion when Frodo realizes, “Well, four nights and three days to be exact” (*FR*, II, i, 221-222). This indicates that once mortals enter the Elven realm, their perception of time changes, appearing to slow down significantly. Frodo's initial belief that his experiences were a dream—“after a long unpleasant dream that still hovered on the edge of memory” (*FR*, II, i, 219)—reinforces the connection between dreams and time.

In a discussion with Bilbo about how long he might stay in Rivendell, Bilbo’s response—“Oh, I don’t know. I can’t count the days in Rivendell” (*FR*, II, iii, 274)—highlights the temporal ambiguity present in these realms. The elven music that envelops Frodo further illustrates this distortion, as it transports him into a meditative state where time and space blur: “Almost it seemed that the worlds took shape... and visions of far lands... opened out before him” (*FR*, II, i, 233). Through these portrayals, Tolkien not only draws from Celtic mythology but also invites readers to reflect on the nature of time and existence. His emphasis on altered perceptions of time in *faërie* realms emphasizes the contrast between the ephemeral nature of mortal life and the timeless essence of the Elves.

In the context of J.R.R. Tolkien's watery element, one must consider the fundamental elements he emphasizes across various works, notably in *The Lord of the Rings*. This discussion begins, again, with Rivendell, recognized as the first significant elven settlement where the Fellowship is established. Rivendell is presented as a pivotal elven stronghold, embodying a liminal space where crucial decisions are made. It is described as a mystical valley, surrounded by waterfalls, serving as a crossroads for travellers who must choose to "turn away from their path, or to continue" (Auer 246). This dual nature—as both a place of respite and a point of no return—underscores the

transformative journey undertaken by the Fellowship, particularly during their arduous trek to Rivendell and the Nazgûl's inability to cross its enchanted waters.

The rivers leading to Rivendell—Mitheithel, Loudwater, and Bruinen—serve as symbolic markers of entry into a mystical realm, echoing themes found in Celtic mythology. In Celtic tradition, water often symbolizes the boundary between worlds, representing portals to other dimensions that can be both enlightening and perilous. The rivers in *The Lord of the Rings* not only serve as geographical features but also embody a guiding force that facilitates the characters' spiritual journeys, akin to heroes' voyages into the Otherworld in Celtic tales. This connection is reinforced when the characters observe a distant river and inquire, "What is that other river we can see far away there?" (*FR*, I, xii, 201). Such observations highlight the symbolic weight of rivers, which form a roadmap guiding the heroes deeper into the mystical realm. Aragorn's comments about the Loudwater and Bruinen further emphasize that the path along these rivers leads to transformation: "The Road runs along the edge of the hills for many miles from the Bridge to the Ford of Bruinen" (*FR*, I, xii, 202).

The Bruinen River functions as a magical defense against the Nazgûl, preventing their passage and evoking ancient Celtic beliefs in water's spiritual power. Similarly, the enchanted waters of the Bruinen embody the mystical strength of the Elves, forming a barrier against malevolent forces. The journey to Rivendell is thus a rite of passage for the characters, akin to the hero's journey in Celtic mythology, which involves confronting both physical dangers and metaphysical challenges. Burns describes the water in Rivendell as a "pure element that provides protection from the evil" (47). Frodo's near-fatal encounter with the Witch-King exemplifies this protective quality, as Glorfindel observes the Nazgûl's hesitance at the Bruinen River: "Suddenly, the foremost Rider spurred his horse forward. It checked at the water and reared up" (*FR*, I,

xii, 215). The Nazgûl's aversion to water is further illustrated when Glorfindel calls upon the river's power to repel them. The description of the water as "a roaring and a rushing: a noise of loud waters rolling many stones" (*FR*, I, xii, 215) reinforces water's dual role as both a natural and supernatural guardian, paralleling the role of water in Celtic myths as a conduit for otherworldly protection.

Peter Jackson's film reflects this motif through Arwen Evenstar, who rides to Rivendell with Frodo. When the Nazgûl approach the river, they stop at the boundary. Arwen's invocation—"Nîn o Chithaeglir lasto beth daer; Rimmo nîn Bruinen dan in Ulaer!"—occurs at a critical moment when she summons the waters to protect Frodo (*The Fellowship of the Ring* 01:35-01:50). This emphasizes the Elves' connection to nature, where water acts as a dynamic agent of protection. This concept also aligns with druidic beliefs, where druids "were thought to control water and summon storms against foes" (Wood 101). By invoking the river, Arwen channels ancient traditions, transforming the Bruinen into a protective barrier that embodies water's duality—its capacity to nurture and defend. The image of "white riders upon white horses with frothing manes" (*FR*, I, xii, 216) evokes the ethereal nature of water spirits in Celtic lore, further amplifying the theme of purity overcoming malevolence.

Of course, Lothlórien is not exempt. Tolkien's depiction of water in Lothlórien, particularly through the rivers Nimrodel and Silverlode, holds profound symbolic significance. Lyman-Thomas observes that "to enter Lothlórien, the Fellowship must cross the Silverlode and Nimrodel, as well as be led blindfolded over water and other unknown perils in a series of initiatory steps" (280). This initiatory journey underscores the perceived "perils" of water, signifying a transition into an "Otherworld." The Fellowship's encounter with Nimrodel, situated miles from the Silverlode, establishes it as the initial gateway to the Otherworld. Water's sacred significance, echoed in Irish

and Welsh traditions, reinforces its role as a conduit to the Otherworld. These transitions are particularly evident in Frodo's experience upon reaching the far bank of the Silverlode, where he feels "a strange feeling" and realizes he "was now walking in a world that was no more" (*FR*, II, vi, 349). This liminal experience signifies water as a boundary between the tangible and the mythic, reflecting the Elven realms' transient and elusive nature.

Tolkien introduced a critical element within his legendarium that significantly reinforces this theoretical framework and its ties to Celtic mythology: the Ring of Waters, known as Nenia, plays a crucial role in J.R.R. Tolkien's Middle-earth mythos, particularly in its representation of Elvish power and environmental guardianship. In *The Silmarillion*, Tolkien describes the Rings of Power, stating, "In those days the smiths of Ost-in-Edhil surpassed all that they had contrived before" (*Silmarillion* 360). Nenia symbolizes life, renewal, and preservation against darkness. Tolkien notes its power in a letter to Michael Straight, indicating that Nenia "included the healing of the real damages of malice, as well as the mere arrest of change" (*Letters* 254). This metaphysical association with water aligns with MacLeod's assertion that "Celtic goddesses were associated with rivers and other bodies of water" (30) particularly relevant to Galadriel's character.

In Letter 131 to Milton Waldman, Tolkien elaborates on the Rings' purpose, stating, "The Elves of Eregion made Three supremely beautiful and powerful rings, almost solely of their own imagination, and directed to the preservation of beauty" (*Letters* 172). This sentiment is echoed in *The Unfinished Tales*, where he writes that Nenia enhances the beauty of Lórinand¹⁰ while also having unforeseen effects on Galadriel (*UT* 174). Thereby, Nenia is portrayed as a tool for preserving beauty and

¹⁰ Refers to Lórien or Lothlórien.

healing the natural world, emphasizing the Elves' role as protectors. Galadriel's stewardship of Ninya highlights her nurturing function within Lothlórien: "Verily it is in the land of Lórien upon the finger of Galadriel that one of the Three remains. This is Ninya, the Ring of Adamant, and I am its keeper" (*FR*, II, vii, 365).

Moreover, Ninya's significance can be contextualized within Celtic traditions, where rings were seen as conduits for spiritual energy and sacred wells linked to divine power. Carpenter refers to Ninya as the "White Ring" (*Letters* 445), tying it to Celtic symbolism of purification and protection. As such, Ninya embodies these cultural beliefs, signifying a connection between its bearer and the ethereal forces of nature.

4. Challenging Camelot: A Rejection of Arthur's Realm

In his correspondence with Waldman, Tolkien also acknowledged the weight of the Arthurian legend, indicating that it "was and is all the Arthurian world, but powerful as it is, it is imperfectly naturalized, associated with the soil of Britain but not with English...." (*Letters* 144). This acknowledgment revealed Tolkien's possible truest motivations: he sought not merely to displace existing myths, as Celtic ones, but to redefine them within a framework that resonated with the authentic Englishness. Evidence of Tolkien's engagement with Arthurian legend can be found in his unfinished poem, *The Fall of Arthur* (2013) and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (2020).

The historical context of the Arthurian myth is noteworthy, as stories surrounding King Arthur were prevalent in Wales prior to the 11th century. One of the most significant and reliable sources reflecting the influence of Arthurian myth is the tale of *Sir Gawain*. The story follows Sir Gawain, a valiant Knight of the Round Table, as he embarks on a perilous journey into the unknown. The relationship between the Arthurian myth and Tolkien's works raises crucial questions: Is the Arthurian myth

inherently Celtic? Did Tolkien draw from this myth, or did he merely adapt its elements to fit his own vision? Various interpretations and answers emerge from this inquiry.

The Celtic influence is particularly evident in the concept of the Otherworld. Alewine's analysis suggests that the Celtic Otherworld significantly shaped the narrative of *Sir Gawain*, a sentiment that resonates in Tolkien's translations and interpretations of these ancient legends. Although it may spark debate among scholars to assert that Tolkien did not 'detest' all things Celtic, his deep appreciation for the Arthurian Cycle—particularly for *Sir Gawain*—is undeniable. This work became a foundational element in *The Lord of the Rings*, making the kinship between the two texts, especially regarding themes of the Otherworld and Tolkien's "Secondary World," clear and indisputable.

Evidence supporting this connection can be found in Christopher's version, verse 20. Here, the Green Knight invites Sir Gawain to locate the Green Chapel: "To the Green Chapel go thou, and get thee, I charge thee" (Pearl 32-33). This passage suggests it may exist beyond the boundaries of ordinary reality. In this context, the Green Knight not only challenges Sir Gawain but also invites him to his domain, a place described as "about which no man knew no more than they had learned." (Pearl 33). The theme of the Otherworld further unfolds as Gawain inquires about the Green Chapel's location, only to find that its existence is largely unknown: "The knight took pathways strange by many a lonesome lea, and oft his view did change that chapel ere he could see" (Pearl 40-41). This sense of disorientation parallels the experience of the characters in *The Lord of the Rings*, where the allure of mystical places also carries a sense of peril: "And now we must enter the Golden Wood, you say. But of that perilous land we have heard in Gondor, and it is said that few come out who once go in; and of that few none have escaped unscathed" (*FR*, II, vi, 334).

Tolkien's use of Arthurian motifs within his works reflects a deep engagement with Celtic mythology and folklore, where themes of loss, sacrifice, and the passage into the Otherworld are prevalent. The portrayal of Arthur's and Frodo's final journeys serves as a powerful commentary on the nature of heroism and the bittersweet acknowledgment of the impermanence of peace and prosperity. In Malory's account, after Excalibur's symbolic destruction, Bedivere¹¹ carries Arthur to the riverbank where "a little barge with many fair ladies, among them a queen, awaited" (*FA*, 138). In *The Return of the King*, Frodo, along with Bilbo and other hobbits, is led to the Grey Havens, where the last ship of the Elves awaits. Both Arthur's and Frodo's final journeys mark the end of significant bonds: Arthur with his faithful companion Bedivere, who poignantly asks what will become of him, to which Arthur replies: "Take comfort and behave as you ought, for I have no reason to support you. For I must go to the valley of Avalon to heal my grievous wound. And if you never hear from me again, pray for my soul" (*FA*, 138).

The relationship between Arthur and Bedivere closely parallels that of Frodo and Sam. Both Bedivere and Sam serve as indispensable companions in the success of their respective quests, suffering deeply from the departure of their leaders into an otherworldly realm. In *The Return of the King*, Frodo bids farewell to Sam, who believes Frodo will continue to enjoy life in the Shire. However, Frodo reveals his intent to depart with Bilbo, emphasizing: "I have been too deeply hurt, Sam. I tried to save the Shire, and it has been saved, but not for me... You are my heir: all that I had and might have had I leave to you" (*RK*, VI, ix, 176). In integrating these themes from Celtic sources, Tolkien emphasizes the significance of memory and legacy, suggesting that even in departure, heroes leave behind a world enriched by their sacrifices. This

¹¹ A Knight of the Round Table in Arthurian legend, known for his loyalty to King Arthur and for returning Excalibur to the Lady of the Lake after Arthur's death.

notion resonates with the underlying ethos of Celtic mythology, where the cycles of life, death, and rebirth are deeply interwoven with the human experience, elevating the ordinary to the realm of the extraordinary.

Tolkien's mythos intertwines with themes of healing, transcendence, and the cyclical nature of legends. In *The Fall of Arthur*, Christopher Tolkien draws attention to the chapter that discusses the Vale of Avalon, where Arthur's journey signifies a mystical transformation. Instead, Tolkien emphasizes the Celtic concept of Avalon as a mythic space, interconnected with the realms of Valinor and Tol Erësea. Tolkien explicates Avalon through a critical lens, referring to Gerald of Wales¹², who recounts that what is now Glastonbury was once known as *Insula Avallonia*, a name derived from its isolation and association with abundance:

This name arose because the place was practically an island, entirely surrounded by marshes, hence it received the name Britannice (in the British language, i.e., Celtic) of Inis Avallon, which meant, he said, insula pomifera, the 'island of apples,' since -aval was the British word for 'apple,' as apple orchards were once abundant there (168).

Christopher elucidates that Avalon, as depicted in Arthurian texts, lies in the West, akin to Valinor, the homeland of the Elves. This connection reinforces the idea that Avalon is not merely an earthly paradise but is deeply embedded in Tolkien's broader mythos. In *Vita Merlini*¹³ Avalon is described as: "the island of apples, which is called fortune," where life flourishes without labour, and time ages differently (*FA*, 170).

In the *Fall of Númenor*, in a subsequent passage, a conversation unfolds between Elendil and his son Herendil, discussing the Valar, Eressëa, and Avalon. Tolkien writes:

¹² A Cambro-Norman priest and historian.

¹³ A 12th-century Latin poem by Geoffrey of Monmouth that tells the life of the wizard Merlin, focusing on his origins, role in Arthurian legend, and themes of prophecy and fate.

“And they [the Valar] recalled the Exiles of the Firstborn and pardoned them; and such as returned dwell since in bliss in Eressëa, the Lonely Isle, which is Avallon, for it is within sight of Valinor and the light of the Blessed Realm” (FN, 45). This dialogue enhances the understanding of Avalon as a locus of joy and serenity, paralleling the descriptions of Celtic mythological realms where the boundary between the mortal and the divine is blurred. Alike, Tolkien had already established a connection between the term 'Avalon' and Tol Erëssea while drafting *The Lord of the Rings*. In a letter to Naomi Mitchison dated September 1954 stated:

Before the Downfall there lay beyond the sea and the west-shores of Middle Earth an earthly Elvish paradise Eressëa, and Valinor the land of the Valar [...] But after the rebellion of the Númenóreans [...] Númenor was destroyed, and Eressëa and Valinor removed from the physically attainable Earth: the way west was open, but led nowhere but back again—for mortals (154).

This passage reveals significant parallels between Avalon and the Elvish Island of Tol Erëssea, which Tolkien later designated as 'Avallon.'

Avallawn in Welsh is one of several otherworlds prominent in Celtic mythology. This mythical isle has long been seen as a place of pure creation, a utopian paradise serving as a bridge between the earthly realm and the celestial. While Tolkien did not explicitly clarify Avalon's influence on his conception of Valinor and Tol Erëssea, hints in his letters suggest a deeper connection. The Celtic Irish *Tír na nÓg*¹⁴ is a plausible source of inspiration, particularly in relation to Avalon's portrayal as an elvish paradise. In his writings, Tolkien mentions a great number of elves returning to Valinor who

¹⁴ A legendary realm in Irish mythology, often referred to as the "Land of Eternal Youth." It is depicted as a paradise where time stands still, and its inhabitants, including the Tuatha Dé Danann, enjoy everlasting beauty and happiness.

encountered an island named *Avallone*, also referred to as 'The Lonely Isle.' This name aligns closely with Avalon, the 'Isle of Apples,' where King Arthur was said to heal from his wounds after the battle of Camlann¹⁵. In Letter 325 to Roger Lancelyn Green, Tolkien emphasizes the term 'immortal' and outlines what exists beyond the West Sea, clarifying the distinction between Valinor and Eressëa:

The 'immortals' who were permitted to leave Middle-Earth and seek Aman—the undying lands of Valinor and Eressëa, an island assigned to the Eldar—set sail in the ships specially made and hallowed for this voyage and steered due West towards the ancient site of these lands [...]. As it vanished, it left the physical world. There was no return. The elves who took this road and those few 'mortals' who by special grace went with them had abandoned the 'History of the world' and could play no further part in it" (447).

5. Conclusion

Throughout this essay, it becomes evident that the notion of J.R.R. Tolkien's lack of influence from Celtic mythology is a misconception. While Tolkien may not have drawn directly from Celtic sources in a straightforward manner, he openly identified himself as a Celtophile in 1929, expressing his deep admiration for Celtic culture. This self-identification suggests that he engaged with Celtic elements, adapting them to fit his narrative style and thematic preferences. It can be argued that Tolkien did not perceive his work as being influenced by Celtic mythology per se; however, he did incorporate and reinterpret aspects that he found worthy of inclusion. This is evident in his creation of a mythology for England, which left a lasting legacy, including

¹⁵ A pivotal conflict in Arthurian legend, traditionally considered the final battle of King Arthur. It is marked by betrayal and loss, leading to Arthur's demise and the end of his reign.

significant elements from the Arthurian cycle. Initially, Tolkien denied any connection to this cycle, but later he acknowledged its influence, revealing that it was rooted not in Christian interpretations but rather in pagan traditions—many of which possess distinct Celtic characteristics.

One clear example of this Celtic influence is found in his adaptation of the tale of Sir Gawain. In this narrative, Tolkien's appreciation for Celtic culture is apparent, which resonates throughout his works, including *The Lord of the Rings*. Furthermore, this influence extends to his posthumously published poem, *The Fall of Arthur*, where his son Christopher acknowledged the significant impact of Celtic themes in his father's work. The parallels drawn between the farewells of Frodo and Arthur illustrate a shared thematic resonance that reflects this cultural influence.

The Celtic influence in Tolkien's oeuvre is not limited to the Arthurian mythos; it is also evident in his portrayal of elves, whom he initially referred to as "faeries." While the concept of fairies is not exclusively tied to Celtic culture, Tolkien himself noted in his essay "On Fairy-Stories" that such creatures bear resemblance to the Irish *Sidhe*. This acknowledgment further corroborates his interest in and influence from Celtic traditions. Tolkien's Secondary World—where the *Sidhe* are prominently featured—reflects a mystical and magical natural world distinct from the primary reality. In this realm, time flows differently, and water possesses magical properties, serving as a conduit between worlds. Additionally, Galadriel's ring, Narya, is described by Carpenter as the "White Ring," which shares characteristics akin to those found in Celtic mythology. The parallels between these elements further reinforce Tolkien's subtle integration of Celtic motifs into his literary fabric.

In conclusion, to assert that Tolkien did not incorporate Celtic elements into his works is a significant oversight. Evidence from his letters and literary output clearly

indicates his engagement with these cultural elements. Perhaps Tolkien did not deny the Celtic influence outright; instead, he sought to avoid being pigeonholed into a specific cultural categorization, allowing readers and scholars to engage with his work in a manner that encourages individual interpretation and imagination.

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