

Adaptation and Use of Celtic Culture in Modern Fantasy Literature

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Abstract: Due to the increasing popularity of fantasy literature, many authors enjoy using mediaeval and Celtic elements to add a cultural and supernatural layer to their writings. This is due in part to the influence of Tolkien and Lewis's books, among others. In contrast to other manuscripts, the frequently ignored *Mists of Avalon* is a direct Celtic adaptation of the Arthurian legend. This study examines the usage of Celtic culture and elements in Marion Zimmer Bradley's *The Mists of Avalon* and J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Silmarillion* through a method of close textual analysis. Similarly, a feminist perspective is selected to interpret the identical conceptions of feminism provided by Celtic components in the works of the two authors. Whereas the legend of King Arthur and Tolkien's writings are commonly viewed as masculine works, *The Mist of Avalon* and *The Lord of the Rings* express a more profound sense of feminism. This study discovers a stronger bond between women and non-Christian societies like the Celts in these writings, including a shared destiny.

Keywords: Celtic mythology, Arthurian legends, fantasy literature, textual close reading

1. Introduction

With the proliferation of authors from numerous countries, modern fantasy literature has become a part of literary studies that cannot be ignored. Due to the influence of authors like as J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, and George R.R. Martin, the usage of ancient and mediaeval Celtic culture in fantasy literature is now a typical occurrence. The majority of academics have studied *The Lord of the Rings* and related works by J.R.R. Tolkien in depth and with great interest. The twentieth-century novel *The Mists of Avalon* by Marion Zimmer Bradley has garnered little notice. As the author of a retelling of the King Arthur legend, Bradley is aware with the different works associated with it. She maintains a reverence for mediaeval texts while adopting a fresh and distinctively female perspective while working on ambiguous or contentious aspects of the mythology.

This paper will employ a close reading of the text to evaluate and contrast the femininity and feminine elements in *The Mists of Avalon* and Tolkien's *Middle-earth* series, and will investigate how these works of modern fantasy literature utilise and adapt Celtic culture in a feminine manner. According to traditional thinking, the Arthurian legends of Celtic culture were about men, and many of the literature associated with them take a mostly masculine point of view. In addition, Tolkien's works are sometimes seen as focusing on masculine adventure and exploration, despite the fact that women in both tale systems are never truly missing from the texts. The objective of this paper is to

explain that a series of often misunderstood and misread legends and texts may not lack a female creator, but rather a female reader.

2. Analysis

2.1. Music

The importance of music in both Celtic and Christian civilizations cannot be overlooked. Almost every character representing Celtic culture in *The Mists of Avalon* is an accomplished musician and views his or her instrument as a companion. Particularly Kevin and Taliesin, the two Merlins, do not permit anybody to freely handle their instruments. Morgaine, as a priestess of Avalon, must have had a good singing voice, as King Arthur invited her to sing at the banquet numerous times.

The songs sung by the various characters in the book are incredibly engaging, and through the music they also depict a distinct style during a time when many civilizations clashed. After leaving Avalon, Morgaine did not sing only songs from the culture to which she belonged. She used to sing incredibly secular tunes that belonged to King Lot's army. And Lancelot, the youngest son of Viviane, who was raised outside of Avalon, was sceptical of the goddesses Avalon worshipped and the Christian God. Lancelot recounted a Welsh Celtic legend at a dinner after Viviane's death to convey his desperate love for his queen Gwenhwyfar (Guinevere). In fact, the beautiful woman created from flowers in his song is not the saviour of her doomed husband, as she ultimately betrays him viciously [1]. From the descriptions in the book, it is unclear whether the song performed by Lancelot simply represents the good parts, or if he withheld the terrible conclusion on purpose. Gawaine's Saxon song is both unexpected and revealing, as it is evident from the episode that he is reciting the classic Beowulf. All of this transpired following King Arthur's conversion to Christianity under the Queen's influence, while the Celtic and Saxon songs sung by the two most heroic and devoted knights around King Arthur formed a subtle cultural balance during the banquet.

In *Middle-earth* by J.R.R. Tolkien, music and songs occupy a more central and significant position. Arda (the world) was formed in the Ainulindal (Music of the Ainur), and it is possible to say that music has affected the history of *Middle-earth*. Tolkien later related the melody of Creation to the element of water through the sea. In Celtic civilization, water is the most significant element. Perilous and Fair reveals that Taryne Jade Taylor has conducted an in-depth analysis of the water and music in *The Silmarillion*, as well as a corresponding analysis of Celtic mythology [2]. Tolkien has already emphasised on the growing relationship between myth and fairy tales in his on Fairy-stories; hence, fantasy literature is better equipped than other fictional works in the genre to connect with ancient myths. Tolkien believed that fantasy was a purer form of art and that fairy tales should serve as a means of escape, recovery, and consolation [3]. Importantly, all of these prerequisites are met by the music of Tolkien.

In later works such as *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*, Tolkien included a great number of chanting poems, such as Galadriel's Lament.

2.2. Tapestry and Embroidery

From ancient times, weaving tapestry and embroidering have been commonly regarded as women's work in several cultures. By their embroideries, the high queen Gwenhwyfar (Guinevere), representing the pious Christians, and Morgan, representing Avalon and the Druids, have both competed for the role of King Arthur. The religious design on the scabbard of Excalibur was meticulously stitched by Morgaine, and it was only given to King Arthur after he pledged to treat Avalon and Christianity equally. Gwenhwyfar also used a religiously embroidered banner of the Virgin Mary to convert King Arthur to Christianity.

In these episodes, it is evident that the author has chosen to let her significant female characters to affect the historical trajectory by their weaving. Despite the fact that they do not become the monarchs who make choices and the warriors who wage war, they continue to play a vital role in influencing the path of history. Nonetheless, it should also be emphasised that Religion had some influence on this arrangement of women's destinies. We can learn from Philip Freeman's book *War, women, and druids* that the Celts were historically courageous and warlike, and that women can be equally courageous warriors [4]. In addition, neither *The Mists of Avalon* nor *The Lord of the Rings* contain any female Celtic warriors. Éowyn, the shield maiden in *Lord of the Rings*, is undoubtedly of Saxon and Viking descent. And the elf Arwen, who shares with Guinevere a more Celtic sensibility, embroidered a flag for King Aragorn of Gondor.

This seeming disregard for female fighters is inconsistent with Bradley's feminist worldview, yet it is not. *Mists of Avalon* is commonly misunderstood as lacking female characters and feminine perspectives, but *The Lord of the Rings* can help dispel this misconception. The primary distinction between Tolkien's female characters and those of other fantasy authors is that Tolkien's female characters choose not to enter the patriarchal social system and value judgement system established by men and to fight them, but rather to reject and abandon the male rules of competition. Idril is a typical character in Tolkien's *The Silmarillion*. She opted to flee the city of Gondolin that her father Turgon had established and guarded. The survival of Earendil's star was made possible by her abandonment of the good creation and her home. In *the Mists of Avalon*, there is a comparable desertion, which is why Bradley did not focus on presenting a Celtic warrior woman but rather a sophisticated priestess.

In addition, in Tolkien's system of *Middle-earth* mythology, it can be learnt that women also chronicle history through weaving. The setting of her weaving expertise has never been altered, regardless of whether she is the elf Vair from *The Book of Forgotten Tales Part One* or the goddess Vair from later *Silmarillion*. In earlier versions, her identity as a knitter is intertwined with that of a historical raconteur. At the conclusion of all historical war and conflict, she is the sole survivor to inform human travellers who are utterly uninformed of the elf story of the unknown history. Her identity is also extremely similar to that of Morgaine, who confirmed King Arthur's death in *The Mists of Avalon*. As Morgaine explained to young Gareth that weaving was not restricted to women, she said that Achilles, the protagonist of the renowned Homeric epic, had also learnt to weave. In *Mists of Avalon*, the Celtic culture reveals that, in the author's view, this society is naturally inclusive, not just desiring coexistence with Christianity and other cultures, but also valuing the shared femininity of the many genders.

In traditional patriarchal civilizations, femininity is frequently viewed as an indication of weakness. In an effort to live up to the expectations of male society's pursuit of strength, many characters hide or reject femininity in themselves and others on purpose. Tolkien and Bradley make us aware of the special significance and power of women through their weaving texts.

2.3. Characters: Morgaine (Morgan Le Fay) and Galadriel

Morgaine in *The Mists of Avalon* and Galadriel in *The Lord of the Rings* have strong ties to Morgan le Fay in the legend of King Arthur. These two characters represent both danger and procreation in the view of other characters. Morrigan, the most famous goddess of Irish Celtic culture, appears in both characters for this reason. This quality is only proved through Galadriel's deeds and personality in *The Fellowship of the Ring*, but it is specifically mentioned in *The Mists of Avalon*. Although Morgaine rarely acknowledges the goddess by name, chapter 11 of *The Mistress of Avalon* contains a formal reference to the deity named Morrigan. And just before King Arthur renounced his vows to the island of Avalon for the Christian banner to which Queen Gwenhwyfar (Guinevere) was loyal,

he also meant to hoist the banner of the goddess Morrigan prior to the great fight against the Saxons. In addition to death and life, it can also be observed that Morrigan also has control over warfare.

In King Arthur's time, life, death, and war were nearly the entirety of a warrior's and king's existence. As a priestess of the goddess Morrigan and an incarnation of the goddess, it was only natural for Morgaine, in accordance with custom, to join with the new king of Britain to facilitate the transfer of sovereignty and dominion. As such, Viviane's voice in this novel accurately expresses the viewpoint of Celtic culture about Arthur and Morgaine's convoluted relationship: not a horrible incest, but a sacred union.

In the grip of traditional male narratives and Christian discourse, Morgan le Fay is frequently presented as a dangerous and malevolent sorceress. And it must not be forgotten that Morgan le Fay was also regarded as a strong healer, and that King Arthur returned to the Island of Avalon, which she represented, after suffering severe injuries. Bradley's novel narrative subverts the conventional viewpoint by situating the healer and the fertility represented by Morgan at the centre of her entire story.

In addition, one of the most remarkable changes is the author's decision to have King Arthur die fully, bringing an unmistakably tragic dimension to the narrative. This decision eliminates the ambiguity and mystique of the mythology and offers the reader with a fresh story that practically describes actual history. Bradley had previously shown a Druidic method of interpreting life in the preceding paragraph, therefore there is no Christian-style resurrection and return. According to their beliefs, humans have not only this life, but also an afterlife and prior lives, making rebirth in this life unnecessary.

Galadriel is a character in *The Lord of the Rings* who is closely tied with both life and death. She resembles Bradley's Morgaine in that neither of them shows their fecundity by bearing offspring. Morgaine safeguarded the king by fashioning a scabbard for Arthur that prevented him from being badly wounded and bled to death. In Celtic culture, the fertility and longevity of the king represented and ensured the fertility of the land. Galadriel also indirectly contributed to the production of crops in Shire by providing Samwise Gamgee with rich soil. Yet it is certain that the phial she gave to Frodo saved his life, as he carried a significant responsibility for *Middle-earth*. In addition, Boromir's portrayal of Galadriel before entering Lothlórien gives us a glimpse of the prejudice of mortals against the elf.

Morrigan's name means "The Mighty Queen" in Irish, and readers readily identify the term "Queen" with Galadriel, despite the fact that Tolkien never really gave her that title. Tolkien emphasises in the *Unfinished Tales of Númenor and Middle-earth* that Galadriel and her husband Celeborn do not claim the throne. They are not the rulers of Lothlórien, but only its guardians.

Elrond, the spouse of Galadriel's daughter Celebran, also possesses certain druidic characteristics. He played the harp well and told the fellowship lost tales of the past. Elrond's wisdom and knowledge closely resemble the depiction of Merlin in *The Mists of Avalon*, and the sanctuary he created, Rivendell, shares with Lothlórien several characteristics of the Otherworld in Celtic mythology. As Marjorie Burns notes in *Perilous Realm*, in order to approach Rivendell and Lothlórien, outsiders would need to traverse several streams, and water is a highly valued element in Celtic culture [5].

Morgaine and Galadriel, as characters in contemporary fantasy fiction, are not defined solely by their belonging to a Celtic culture. In Letter 320 of the *Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*, Tolkien clearly acknowledges that his creation of Galadriel is in part based on his imagination of the Virgin Mary [6]. Tolkien, as a convert to Catholicism, has a good reason for such imagery, but strangely, it can recognise Christ in Bradley's Morgaine as well. Immediately after she completed embroidering the holy designs on Excalibur, she exclaimed, "It's done," much as Jesus did in the Book of Revelation[7].

From the moment Christianity invaded Britain until it governed the island, it interacted with and affected the Celtic cultures of Ireland and Wales, as well as Druidism. The most notable illustration of this is the mingling of languages. Anglo-Irish is the most well-known mixture of Celtic and Germanic languages[8]. Hence, Galadriel and Morgaine's identities are not so much a vehicle for the clashing and contending images of the two religions as they are the product of the blending of the two cultures.

3. Discussion

Reading the works of Tolkien and Bradley reveals that women are closely tied with the 'paganism' that Celtic culture represents. Ancient paganism is more closely associated with the fate of women than Christianity. Many of Christianity's most celebrated holidays have pagan roots, such as Halloween's Celtic ancestor, Samhain, or, as Frazer noted in *The Golden Bough*, Christmas, which was introduced by the Christian Church to commemorate the birth of the ancient pagan sun [9]. Elements derived from ancient faiths were absorbed by Christianity and incorporated into mainstream society, while the concept of "paganism" was rejected and lost. This has also been the experience of women throughout history, who have been unable to locate themselves in a male-dominated Religious discourse, therefore the emphasis on the exotic and the satanic might be deemed essential. Both *The Mists of Avalon* and *The Lord of the Rings* convey the notion that Celtic culture was not exclusive and that its tolerance of outside cultures, whether active or forced, enabled it to flourish through integration and influence in a society dominated by other cultures, even after it had lost its dominant position. This very inclusive society also enables us to interpret these works with additional possibilities and views.

4. Conclusion

After analysing these writings, the author concludes that the usage of Celtic culture in contemporary fantasy literature, as exemplified by Tolkien and Bradley, is a result of adaptation and fusion. The Celtic civilization depicted in these works has been inevitably influenced by many aspects of Christianity and Scandinavian culture, among others, and has been enriched with concepts that the authors, as scholars and modern individuals, have incorporated. In their adaptations of Celtic culture, however, both authors provide insight into an alternative type of feminism to the standard one. Even though the cultural circumstances utilised in their works are patriarchal, the valuing of femininity that is revealed is nevertheless of great value.

Clearly, the author needs to conduct additional research into this topic. In the future, the author plans to continue reading the relevant texts and observing the numerous other Celtic aspects and their distinctive position in the work. About the Otherworld and fairy kingdom depicted in *The Mists of Avalon* and *The Lord of the Rings*, there is still much to learn and study. These elements also bind the two pieces to Celtic culture more closely.

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