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Rimmo nín Bruinen dan in Ulaer!: Waters of Wisdom and Wonder in Tolkien's The Fellowship of the Ring (1954)

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Introduction

The intricate tapestry of myth and narrative that constitutes J.R.R. Tolkien's Middle-Earth emerges as a profound exploration of language, legend, and the human experience. Tolkien's oeuvre, encompassing *The Silmarillion* (1977), *The Hobbit* (1937), and *The Lord of the Rings* (1954-55)—the latter of which began its genesis in the mid-1940s—reveals a deep engagement with mythological traditions, particularly those of Celtic and Norse origins.

Yet, as noted by Burns (2000, 235), “the ways in which he did this are not always clear.” In a candid correspondence from 1937, Tolkien explicitly refuted any claims of Celtic influence, asserting, “Needless to say they are not Celtic” (*Letters*, 32).¹ Nonetheless, during an era marked by the decline of the British Empire and a profound identity crisis in England, Tolkien's ambition was to “create a mythology for England” (Carpenter 2000, 103). He articulated this vision in Letter 131 to Milton Waldman, expressing his desire to construct: “A body of more or less connected legend, ranging from the large and cosmogonic to the level of romantic fairy-story – the larger founded on the lesser in contact with the earth, the lesser drawing splendour from the vast backcloths – which I could dedicate simply: to England; to my country” (*Letters*, 168).

Despite his explicit rejection of the label “Celtic,” Tolkien acknowledged the aesthetic qualities associated with that tradition, noting the presence of “the fair elusive beauty that some call Celtic” (*Letters*, 168) in his work. This recognition underscores his complex relationship with mythological influences, as he sought to forge a distinct mythology while drawing upon elements of existing traditions. In this context, the symbolism of water assumes a vital role within his mythos, representing purity, healing, and serving as a bridge to the mystical realms. As Hostetter (2001, 256) articulates, water embodies an Earth element “with life corporeal,” manifesting in numerous springs throughout Elven landscapes. For instance, in Rivendell,² the flowing waters reinforce a sense of peace and renewal, while in Lothlórien³, the river Nimrodel enhances the otherworldly and ethereal nature of the realm. This interplay of water symbolism resonates with Tolkien's acknowledgment of the “fair elusive beauty that some call Celtic” (*Letters*, 168), aligning with the significance of water in Celtic mythology as a boundary between worlds imbued with spiritual meaning.

This article aims to explore the rich symbolism of water in Tolkien's works, particularly in relation to the Elven realms, as it contributes to the overall themes of his Secondary World. By examining how water serves as a symbol of purity, healing, and transition, we will uncover its deeper implications within the enchanting landscapes of Lothlórien and Rivendell. This analysis will highlight how Tolkien uses water not just as a physical element, but as a vital aspect of the faerie realms that enhances the mythical depth of his narratives.

1. Whispers of the Waters: Journeying to the Celtic ‘Secondary’ Otherworld

1.1. Tolkien and *faërie*

To comprehend Tolkien's conceptualization of the aqueous element within the realms of *faërie*, it is imperative for scholars to contextualize the terms *faërie*, Secondary World, and Otherworld. Although these concepts may not appear immediately relevant to the notion of ‘water,’ they are integral, constituting what could be conceptualised the “Genesis” of its mythos. The notion of faeries was not novel for Tolkien; rather, it is intricately connected to his seminal essay, *On Fairy-Stories*, initially presented in 1939 at the University of St Andrews

¹ The way of referencing the works of J.R.R. Tolkien

² Also known as *Imladris* in Sindarin, was an Elven settlement in Eastern Eriador founded by Elrond Half-elven. It served as a stronghold and refuge during the Elves' initial conflict with Sauron in the Second Age.

³ Also known as Lórien, this expansive woodland realm was inhabited by the Galadhrim Elves and situated near the lower Misty Mountains in northern Middle-earth.

and subsequently published in 1947. In his correspondence with Milton Waldman, Letter 131, Tolkien articulated his aspiration to forge a mythology of his own, incorporating the “fair elusive that some call Celtic” (*Letters* 144). This ambition extends to his portrayal of faeries and, by extension, to the elements present within their domains, including water.

The term *faërie*, originating from Middle English *faie*, meaning “possessing magical powers” (Oxford English Dictionary 2024, 1), and from Old French *fae*, connoting fairy, held profound significance for Tolkien. He interpreted *faërie* as a “Perilous Land, and in it are pitfalls for the unwary and dungeons for the overbold” (*On Fairy-Stories* 2014, 27). The editor’s commentary on “On Fairy-Stories” elucidates that *faërie* represents “the Otherworld beyond the five senses—a parallel reality tangential in time and space to the ordinary world” (Flieger and Anderson 2014, 16). The scholars further affirm that Tolkien “was perforce a traveller between two worlds—the Primary World in which he lived and worked and the Secondary World of Faerie” (Flieger and Anderson 2014, 16).

1.2. Celtic Otherworld’s Waters: The Hidden Pathways to Tolkien’s Secondary Universe

1.2.1. Of Celtic Waters

As McIntosh states, the Celts practiced an elemental religion since “they revered the spirits of lakes, rivers, wells, hills, mountains, and caves—the ‘thin places’ where mortals could communicate with the denizens of *Tir na n-Og*⁴, the spirit world” (McIntosh 2011, 13). In Celtic Folklore and mythology, sacred waters “were venerated and worshipped by the ancients and regarded as mysterious places where faerie were spotted in liminal hours” (Avalon 2019, 54).

Water in Celtic culture is not merely than imbued with mystic energies that contribute also to shape these Otherworldly realms. To this, I refer to magic. Avalon notes that in water magic “we exert our will and intent through our physical and energetic bodies to perform rituals and spells that can change the properties of water (2019, 18)”. It is through the magical power where we experience the Celtic waters and specially, the “wisdom of the Otherworld” (Wood 2012, 10). This, can be specially spotted in Irish tales such as *The Adventures of Comrac* or *The Well of Segais*, as will be analysed deeper in root in section .1 *The Mirror of Galadriel* (pp.8-10). Wood considers that water is a “natural environment for wise children” (2012, 10), just as it is the source of vitality for all living things. The same author sustains that water in Celtic culture is “an apt symbol of the truth beneath the surface of things — a kind of translucent veil between this world and the worlds beyond” (2012, 76).

1.2.2. Of The Celtic Otherworld

The concept of sacred spaces as gateways to the Otherworld is integral to Celtic spirituality. Inhabitants of the Otherworld were believed to possess the capacity to traverse between their realm and the human world, frequently encountering mortals in liminal, natural settings, particularly near water. Rather than an ending of life, the Otherworld of the Celts “is a gateway into another kind of life [...] like the one we experience daily - though it is generally transformed, made 'Other', by the beauty and everlasting quality of its nature” (Matthews 1998, 6). These liminal zones emerged as powerful symbols of divine connection, and interactions with Otherworld beings consistently evoked a sense of wonder and mystery.

Carey posits that in narratives concerning the Otherworld, “we are separated from the Otherworld by no barrier save concealment” (1987, 174). He further delineates the Otherworld

⁴ A mythical realm in Irish mythology inhabited by the Tuatha Dé Danann. It is depicted as a paradise of eternal youth and happiness, where time stands still and death is absent.

as “any place inhabited by supernatural beings and itself exhibiting supernatural characteristics” (1987, 1). The same scholar highlights the intrinsic qualities of the Otherworld, accentuating its defining attributes:

The Otherworld is nearby, perhaps indeed immediately present, but hidden and alien as well. The whole of the Otherworld may lie beneath a single well or hill; or a single Otherworld palace may be linked to points far distant from each other in the geography of mortals. All of these anomalies and contrasts point to the idea of a world which, although immanent everywhere and under certain circumstances accessible, nevertheless transcends and is incommensurate with our own (Carey 1987, 175).

1.2.3. *Of Tolkien's Secondary World*

Blamires asserts that “the physical part of the Otherworld overlaps with this world, and there are many places on Earth where the coexistence of the two worlds can be felt” (2005, 69). This view is corroborated by other scholars; for instance, Burns notes that the Celts “conceived instead a spirit world shared and magically juxtaposed with the primary, everyday world” (2005, 53). Similarly, the scholar observes that “the Irish concept considers the Otherworld to be no more than an extension of this world” (2005, 55), a perspective that resonates with Tolkien's discussion of the ‘Secondary World,’ where he emphasizes that in the Primary World, “Reality, of the elves and men is the same, if differently valued and perceived” (*On Fairy-Stories* 1947, 139). This theory of interconnected yet distinct realms is echoed in the scholarship of others who emphasize that the Otherworld's separation from our world—characterized by supernatural attributes, the inversion of mortal norms, and general inaccessibility—“coexists with its immediacy” (Carey 1987, 2). Tolkien demonstrated a lifelong preoccupation “with tales of mortal mariners who encountered blessed lands, from the *Lost Tales* of *Ælfwine* and *Eärendel* sketched out in the 1910s and 1920s, to *The Lost Road* and *The Notion Club Papers* in the 1930s and 1940s, to “Bilbo's Last Song,” discovered among his books in 1968.” (Swank 2015, 1). Tolkien's conceptualization of the ‘Secondary World’ is not merely theoretical; it is manifestly observable through the narrative experience of *LoTR*. The ‘Secondary’ realm is undeniably an Otherworld domain where magic and enchantment are fundamental, playing a crucial role in shaping the perception of the aqueous element within this universe.

2. *Elven Waters: Echoes of Tolkien's faërie realms*

In his 1955 O'Donnell Lecture⁵ on English and Welsh, delivered at Oxford on October 21, Tolkien characterized the Secondary World as being “wide and deep and high... its stars uncounted, its beauty an enchantment and its perils ever present; but its joy and sorrow are poignant as a sword” (Flieger and Anderson 2014, 15). The duality of ‘beauty as an enchantment’ and ‘perils’ aptly reflects the enigmatic ‘magic’ that imbues its rivers and the enchantment generated by the power of *Nenya*, particularly in the context of the *Mirror of Galadriel*. The Fellowship's journey into the beyond exposes them to “strange places and alien peoples, from the Elf-haven at Rivendell to the isolated beauty of Lothlórien” (Olsen 2014, 179). This portrayal of the watery element in Tolkien's oeuvre underscores the enduring influence of Celtic waters and its synthesis within his mythopoeic framework.

Whether the watery element is omnipresent in almost every landscape of Middle-earth, readers must highlight two key locations where the power of water is intrinsically noticeable and plays a significant role. Tolkien offers us “a depiction of landscapes, water [...] that

⁵ English and Welsh" was J.R.R. Tolkien's inaugural speech for the O'Donnell Lectures, delivered on October 21, 1955, at the University of Oxford. It was first published in *Angles and Britons* in 1963 and later reprinted in *The Monsters and the Critics and Other Essays* in 1983.

breathes a primary world reality into his secondary world frame” (Campbell 2014, 471). I refer specifically to Tolkien’s Elven realms of Rivendell and Lothlórien. As Shippey notes, “in the *Unfinished Tales*⁶, [...] the idea of water as a sanctity and an unfailing refuge from the Dark Lord” is evident (Shippey 1983, 172).

Schürer observes that water “is ubiquitous” (Schürer 2021, 4) in Tolkien’s *LotR*. The same author remarks that throughout the novel, readers encounter “flowing and standing bodies of all shapes and sizes” (Schürer 2021, 4), which include everything from clouds and storms to rivers and wells. This applies equally to Rivendell and Lothlórien. As mentioned earlier, water can take many shapes and forms, which can also be categorized within a spiritual dimension, as Auer suggests in his theory. Auer asserts that water is “treated in a more complex way” (Auer 2019, 238) and that this complexity affects the protagonists’ choices “as they venture across the water” (Auer 2019, 238). I agree with Markus Auer’s cognitive perspective regarding the watery element, affirming that water is “not just geographical nor purely metaphorical” (Auer 2019, 241).

However, I would prefer to categorize these Tolkenian depictions of water as ‘intentional’ and ‘mystical,’ combined rather than separately, as Robert Schürer does. I concur with Schürer’s assertions about the effect of what he calls “intentional representations of water,” referring to locations such as the Dead Marshes⁷ and Moria⁸. Nevertheless, I argue that in considering Tolkien’s work, which seldom introduces unresolved aspects, especially concerning water, one must acknowledge that each watery landscape or object imbued with meaning carries an ‘intentional’ representation. Consequently, Lothlórien and Rivendell also contribute to an intentional-mystical interpretation of water. Even the mystical aspects rely on the imagination and mythos—a mythos that Tolkien shaped with specific intentions.

Simultaneously, I support my convictions through the idea of Tolkien’s geographical landscape of the Secondary World, a world that can be seen as analogous to the realms of faërie, as analyzed in *On Fairy-Stories*, and thereby linked to the Celtic Otherworld. This ‘Secondary World’ models the fates of its races and peoples, who must adapt to “the specific requirements of their particular surroundings” (Auer 2019, 239). To reach the Elvish realms, the Fellowship must traverse rivers, which serve as conduits to Otherworldly realms. The further they follow these waterways, the deeper they are drawn into these mystical territories. Burns, in the chapter “Bridges, Gates and Doors,” draws a parallel between the Celtic Otherworld and Tolkien’s Elvish realms of Rivendell and Lothlórien. Burns observes that Tolkien’s settings are often marked by “water crossings” (Burns 2005, 54), emphasizing the symbolic transitions into these mystical spaces.

3. Rivendell

Rivendell, described as both a valley and a mystical site, is encircled by waterfalls, and serves as a liminal space where pivotal decisions must be made, offering travellers the choice to “turn away from their path, or to continue” (Auer 2019, 246). This dual nature of Rivendell as both a place of respite and a point of no return is most clearly depicted in two significant moments:

⁶ A posthumously published compilation of incomplete narratives, essays, and notes by J.R.R. Tolkien, released in 1980. It elaborates on the mythology of Middle-earth, offering detailed insights into characters and events in Arda.

⁷ Also referred to as the Mere of Dead Faces, this expansive region of dark, stagnant marshes was situated east of the Eryn Muil and adjacent to the Dagorlad plain, historically notable as the site of the Battle of Dagorlad during the War of the Last Alliance.

⁸ An underground kingdom beneath the Misty Mountains. This realm was the ancient home of Durin’s Folk and is known as the most famous of all Dwarven realms.

the arduous journey undertaken by the hobbits and Aragorn to reach it, and the Nazgûl's⁹ inability to cross its enchanted waters. Rivendell represents a boundary between the known world and the otherworldly, marked by both physical and metaphysical barriers. The journey there, particularly through treacherous rivers and narrow paths, symbolizes both a literal and spiritual crossing into a realm of wisdom and transformation.

3.1. The journey

The rivers encountered on the path to Rivendell—Mitheithel¹⁰, Loudwater, and the Bruinen¹¹—are more than geographical features; they serve as symbolic markers of entry into a liminal, mystical realm, resonating with ancient mythologies of the Celtic Otherworld. In Celtic tradition, water often signifies the boundary between worlds, representing portals to an otherworldly dimension that is simultaneously dangerous and enlightening. Tolkien's use of rivers in *LotR* aligns with this ancient concept, with water serving as both a guiding force and a mystical barrier. The crossing of rivers in the narrative represents not only the physical trials of the journey but also the transition into a different state of being, much like the hero's voyage into the Otherworld in Celtic mythology.

In *The Fellowship of the Ring*, the connection between rivers and the journey is underscored when the characters observe a distant river and ask, "What is that other river we can see far away there?" (*FR*, I, xii, 1954, 201). This seemingly innocuous observation carries profound symbolic weight. Rivers, in this context, are more than natural obstacles; they form the roadmap that guides the heroes deeper into the mystical world. The landscape through which they travel is not merely the backdrop to their adventure but a vital aspect of the narrative, shaping their decisions and fates. This symbolic connection between water and transformation is further emphasized when Aragorn comments on the Loudwater and the Bruinen, remarking that "The Road runs along the edge of the hills for many miles from the Bridge to the Ford of Bruinen" (*FR*, I, xii, 1954, 202). Here, Tolkien reinforces the idea that following rivers leads to a deeper, more profound journey—one that parallels the path to the Celtic Otherworld. In Celtic tradition, rivers often act as thresholds to the unknown, separating the mundane from the sacred, much as the Bruinen serves as a boundary that both guards Rivendell and challenges the travellers to reach it. Water, in this context, becomes a medium for transformation and initiation.

The river Bruinen holds a mystical significance, acting as a magical defence against the Nazgûl, preventing them from crossing its waters and penetrating Rivendell's boundaries. This scene evokes the ancient Celtic belief in the spiritual power of water to act as a barrier against evil forces. In Celtic mythology, rivers and bodies of water are frequently imbued with divine power, serving as protective boundaries between the physical world and the Otherworld, or as conduits to the divine. Similarly, the enchanted waters of the Bruinen are more than just a geographical defence; they are imbued with the mystical strength of the Elves, forming a protective boundary that the forces of darkness cannot penetrate. In broader terms, the rivers leading to Rivendell symbolize a path of initiation for the characters, much like the journey of the hero in Celtic mythology, who must cross over to the Otherworld to achieve transformation or gain deeper wisdom. This journey involves both physical challenges, such as the dangerous waters and treacherous paths, and metaphysical trials, as the characters must confront their fears and make critical decisions about their future paths. Tolkien's portrayal of water as both

⁹ Also known as the Black Riders or simply The Nine, these feared ring-servants of the Dark Lord Sauron existed in Middle-earth during the Second and Third Ages. By the later years of the Third Age, they resided in Minas Morgul and Dol Guldur.

¹⁰ It originated in the northern Misty Mountains, west of the Rhimdath River and approximately 100 miles north of Rivendell.

¹¹ Also known as 'Loudwater, was a river in the region of Eriador which fed into the Mitheithel.

a guiding and protective element speaks to its symbolic role in mythological traditions, particularly in its connection to themes of purification, transformation, and spiritual transition.

Ultimately, the interplay between the physical journey to Rivendell and the mythic significance of rivers reflects Tolkien's broader engagement with Celtic mythology and its conception of the Otherworld. Just as Celtic heroes crossed rivers to enter a realm of enchantment and revelation, so too do the characters in LoTR navigate through dangerous waters to reach Rivendell, a place where wisdom is imparted, and choices are made. The rivers that shape their journey symbolize both the peril and the promise of entering a mystical realm, reinforcing the idea that water serves not only as a natural element but as a vital, mystical force in their progression toward Rivendell and the Elven sanctuary it represents.

Tolkien's use of water as a transformative element mirrors its representation in Celtic mythology, where rivers are often seen as conduits between the mortal world and the divine or mystical realm. This connection is not merely coincidental but suggests an intentional layering of meaning by Tolkien. In Celtic culture, water is deeply intertwined with spiritual and mystical beliefs, often symbolizing thresholds between worlds—whether they are realms of life and death, the mundane and the sacred, or the natural and supernatural. Celtic mythology frequently portrays water as a protective and transformative force, guiding heroes across to the Otherworld—a place of heightened understanding, power, or enlightenment.

Thus, Tolkien's depiction of rivers as central to the journey to Rivendell reflects a deliberate and mystical meaning, drawing from the symbolic associations within Celtic tradition. The rivers that the characters must cross are not simply practical obstacles but represent a deeper, otherworldly passage. The idea of rivers serving as protective or sacred boundaries—preventing the Nazgûl from entering Rivendell—directly echoes the Celtic belief in water as a guardian between worlds, capable of warding off evil. Moreover, the path along rivers that the Fellowship follows echoes the Celtic conception of the hero's journey: a deliberate voyage through natural elements that signify mystical transitions, ensuring that only those who are ready for transformation may proceed.

3.2. The Nazgûl

Burns considers that water in Rivendell is a 'pure element' and that it "provides protection from the evil" (Burns 2005, 47). In the book, Frodo¹² is wounded by the Witch-King of Angmar¹³ and requires Elven assistance. It is through Glorfindel¹⁴ that we observe, once again, the power water inflicts on evil forces, this time on the edge of the Bruinen River: "Suddenly, the foremost Rider spurred his horse forward. It checked at the water and reared up" (*FR*, I, xii, 1954, 215). Here, the Bruinen River functions as a barrier to his sense of movement. Also, all the Nazgûl hate water and "they will not touch the Baranduin, for it rose in Nenuial, which elves still controlled" (Hostetter 2021, 319). This fact is further reinforced one page later when Glorfindel uses his 'magic' to cast a spell and remove the Nazgûl from Elven waters: "At that moment there came a roaring and a rushing: a noise of loud waters rolling many stones. Dimly Frodo saw the river below him rise, and down along its course there came a plumed cavalry of waves. White flames seemed to Frodo to flicker on their crests, and he half fancied that he saw amid the water white riders upon white horses with frothing manes" (*FR*, I, xii, 1954, 215–216). Here, the Bruinen River acts similarly, with the Elves wielding its power to repel the Nazgûl. The "plumed cavalry of waves" conjures an image of water as both a natural force and

¹² A key figure in the Quest of the Ring, he carried the One Ring to Mount Doom, where it was ultimately destroyed.

¹³ He was the leader of the Nazgûl and Sauron's most lethal servant during the Second and Third Ages of Middle-earth.

¹⁴ He was the lord of the House of the Golden Flower of Gondolin and perished while battling a Balrog. After his re-embodiment, he returned to Middle-earth in the Second Age as an emissary of the Valar.

a supernatural guardian, paralleling the role of water in Celtic myth as a conduit for otherworldly power and protection. At once, "white riders upon white horses with frothing manes" evokes the ethereal and protective nature of water spirits found in Celtic lore. The *Sídhe*,¹⁵ often associated with water, appearing as white horses or beings emerging from lakes or rivers, echo the "white riders" Frodo perceives within the river.

In Peter Jackson's adaptation, the same motif can be conceptualized through the character Arwen Evenstar¹⁶. Arwen rides to Rivendell with Frodo under her protection after the attack at Amon Sûl¹⁷. When the Nazgûl approach the edge of the river, they stop at the border. In *The Lord of the Rings*, Arwen's invocation of the river Bruinen, "Nîn o Chithaeglir lasto beth daer; Rimmo nín Bruinen dan in Ulaer!" (Jackson 2001, 01:35:20), occurs at a critical juncture when she summons the waters to protect Frodo from the pursuing Nazgûl. This moment emphasizes the powerful connection between the Elves and the natural world, where water becomes a dynamic agent of protection.

Similarly, this concept may be closely associated with druidism, wherein druids held a unique affinity for water; they possessed the ability to "cause rivers and lakes to dry up and can summon storms against their enemies." (Wood 2012, 101). By calling forth the river, Arwen channels these ancient beliefs, transforming Bruinen into a protective barrier that embodies the duality of water—its capacity to both nurture and defend. In a similar fashion, the image of the white horses emerging from the flood amplifies the theme of purity overcoming malevolence. In Celtic mythology, white horses are often seen as symbols of the Otherworld and are associated with divine intervention. Here, they serve as a visual manifestation of Arwen's will, embodying her strength and the protective nature of water.

4. Lothlórien

Tolkien's portrayal of water in Lothlórien is symbolically significant, particularly through the rivers Nimrodel¹⁸ and Silverlode¹⁹. According to Lyman-Thomas, "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" (2014, 280). This progression is described as a series of "initiatory steps" that enhance the sense of "perils" associated with water, symbolizing the transition into an "Otherworld." Similarly, Shippey explores the symbolic nature of these rivers, noting that Tolkien deliberately distinguishes between them by marking that: "Frodo and the Fellowship, cross two rivers, deliberately' described and distinguished. One is the Nimrodel, which consoles their grief and promises them partial security; as Frodo wades it 'he felt that the stain of travel and all weariness was washed from his limbs'. The next is, the Silverlode which they cannot ford but have to cross on ropes." (Shippey 1983, 165)

Despite being separated by several miles, the Fellowship first encounters the river Nimrodel, establishing it as the initial gateway into the Otherworld. Conceptually, Lothlórien could be interpreted as having three sequential entrances to the Otherworld: the Nimrodel, followed by the Silverlode—crossed via a bridge—and finally the Nimrodel once again, which

¹⁵ Supernatural beings in Irish mythology associated with the Otherworld and often linked to water and its elemental powers. They are depicted as ethereal entities residing in fairy mounds or near lakes and rivers, embodying a profound connection to nature and its mystical qualities.

¹⁶ One of the Half-elven. She was married to Aragorn II and was the daughter of Elrond and Celebrían

¹⁷ Amon Sul, or Weathertop, is a significant hill in Eriador featuring an ancient watchtower. It served as a strategic point during the War of the Last Alliance and was the site of a key encounter between the Hobbits and the Nazgûl in the *Quest of the Ring*.

¹⁸ Nimrodel is a river in Lothlórien, named after the Elven maiden associated with its banks. It is known for its clear waters and tranquil environment, serving as a notable geographical feature in the region.

¹⁹ The Silverlode, or Celebrant, is a river in Lothlórien, known for its shimmering waters. It flows through the Elven realm and is significant for its role in the region's geography and as a vital water source for the Galadhrim.

may represent the most hazardous, functioning as the third and ultimate threshold. The element of water here is of symbolic importance, as in both Irish and Welsh traditions, water holds sacred significance, often serving as a conduit to the Otherworld.

These transitions between worlds are notably reflected in certain characters, particularly Frodo. Upon reaching the far bank of the Silverlode, Frodo experiences “a strange feeling had come upon him, and it deepened as he walked on into the Naith,” culminating in the realization that he “was now walking in a world that was no more” (*FR*, II, vii, 349). Frodo's sensation of “a strange feeling” while progressing through the Naith means a liminal experience, where water functions as a boundary between the tangible world and the mythic Celtic Otherworld. His recognition of being “in a world that was no more” encapsulates the transient and elusive nature of Elven realms, which blur the boundaries between the mundane and the supernatural. This duality aligns with Tolkien’s conceptual framework of the “Secondary World,” where the beauty and timelessness of Elven realms underscore the inherent sorrow of mortality. In this context, water represents both the flow of life and the passage into a metaphysical realm beyond the physical world.

In Lothlórien, as the Fellowship approaches and prepares to cross the Nimrodel river, Legolas²⁰ expresses a desire to wash, stating, “I will bathe my feet for it is said that the water is healing to the weary” (*FR*, II, vi, 338). This statement is highly significant, as it illustrates the notion that water serves not only as a passage between two worlds but also as a sacred and restorative element for those who do not inhabit the land. Similarly, Frodo experiences a sense of healing when he stands near the riverbank, allowing the water to flow over his tired feet and feeling that “the stain of travel and all weariness was washed from his limbs” (*FR*, II, vi, 339).

Tolkien further evokes the mystical and supernatural qualities of the Nimrodel a few pages later, when Legolas recounts his experiences: “They heard my voice across the Nimrodel, and knew that I was one of their Northern kindred, and therefore they did not hinder our crossing; and afterwards they heard my song” (*FR*, II, vi, 342). In this passage, water symbolizes a mystical boundary and serves as a bridge between realms, emphasizing the sacred role of rivers within Tolkien’s legendarium. The Nimrodel is depicted as a liminal space, where Legolas is acknowledged by the Elves not through visual recognition but through auditory means—his voice and song. This notion of transcendent qualities resonates with Celtic traditions, where rivers act as conduits for spiritual connection and facilitate communication with the Otherworld.

4.1. The Mirror of Galadriel

The pursuit of knowledge is a fundamental and enduring theme in the Celtic spiritual tradition, often represented through the metaphor of a visit to the well of wisdom. As Avalon notes, “water witches are attracted to bottles, bowls, and other vessels” (2019, 12). This aligns seamlessly with Tolkien’s portrayal of Galadriel’s method when she pours water. In this context, wells serve as more than mere sources of water; they are viewed as “thin places,” gateways to other realms where individuals can experience magical healing (McIntosh 2011, 11). This association is deeply embedded in Celtic culture, where rituals, offerings, and prayers are directed toward such wells.

As Macleod (2012, 6) notes, this pursuit of wisdom is “often expressed in terms of the symbolism of a visit to the well of wisdom.” These wells are venerated as sites where mortals seek divine assistance, and their mythological significance connects them to the quest for higher knowledge. McIntosh, as interpreted by Macleod, concurs that in these wells, the Celts

²⁰ A Sindarin Elf of the Woodland Realm, known for his exceptional archery skills and keen senses. He is a member of the Fellowship of the Ring, representing the Elves and forming a close friendship with Gimli the Dwarf.

“sought physical and spiritual healing as well as revelation” (2011, 78). Even today, many wells retain their sacred status, with offerings and rituals continuing in specific locations.

The motif of the well of wisdom is prevalent in Celtic mythology, where numerous tales recount kings, queens, heroes, heroines, gods, and goddesses who, whether by fate or circumstance, gain the extraordinary opportunity to visit these sacred sites. As Macleod emphasizes, these figures “by choice or circumstance find themselves faced with an extraordinary opportunity to visit the well of wisdom” (MacLeod 2012, 6). Such visits transcend mere physical journeys; they symbolize spiritual and intellectual quests, encapsulating the aspirational nature of knowledge-seeking within the Celtic tradition. One of the earliest literary depictions of the well of wisdom is found in the Irish tale *Cormac's Adventures in the Land of Promise*, which “paints an enchanting picture of the magical realm in which the hero finds himself” (Matthews 1998, 7).

Cormac enters the fortress and sees a shining fountain with five streams flowing from it. There were nine hazel trees growing over the well which dropped their nuts into the water. The sound of the falling of the streams was more beautiful than any music that humans can create. A remarkable looking warrior appears to Cormac and takes him on a tour of his realm.[...] He tells Cormac that the fountain which he saw, with the five streams flowing from it was the Fountain of Knowledge. He goes on to tell Cormac that no one will have knowledge unless they drink from the fountain itself. (MacLeod 2012, 37)

In this narrative, *Cormac mac Art* is guided by a deity to the Otherworld, where he encounters a vision of a sacred well, a potent symbol of otherworldly wisdom and divine inspiration. This well is surrounded by nine hazel trees, which hold particular significance in Irish mythology as representations of the pursuit of knowledge and insight. The imagery of sacred trees and wells recurs throughout Celtic myths and is also evident in other narratives, such as the elven realms in J.R.R. Tolkien's *LotR*, where the well of wisdom evokes a similar sense of wonder and mystical understanding. This belief parallels the experiences of Frodo and Sam with Galadriel, where the well not only unveils hidden truths but also presents challenges that could lead to corruption. Thus, the interplay between water and wisdom in both Cormac's vision and Galadriel's well enhances our understanding of these mystical sources as gateways to profound insight, while simultaneously emphasizing the inherent risks associated with such revelations. The narrative threads converge to portray water as a powerful symbol of both enlightenment and peril, embodying the dual nature of knowledge itself.

Other Celtic myths concerning magical wells include the tale of Sinend and the Well of Knowledge. In this myth, the goddess Sinend, daughter of Lodan, son of Lir²¹, journeys to Connla's Well, situated in the Land of Youth, often referred to as “fairyland” (Rolleston 2003, 110). The poem derived from this myth highlights the well's properties as “immortal waters” (Rolleston 2003, 111), alluding not only to the enchanting location but also to the mystical qualities inherent within it.

Another significant well in Celtic culture is the Spring of Segais, which is also known as the Well of Knowledge. Located in the Land of Promise, it is traditionally regarded as “the source of the Rivers Boyne²² and Shannon²³, and the source of all knowledge” (Rolleston 2003, 112). In this myth, mortals approach the Well in search of wisdom, drawn by its reputed powers. The water of the well is characterized by “seven streams of whispering (*cocur*) and

²¹ A character in Irish mythology, recognized as the father of the children of Lir, who were cursed to become swans by their stepmother

²² A major river in Ireland, renowned for its historical and mythological significance, particularly in connection with the Tuatha Dé Danann.

²³ The longest river in Ireland, flowing through several counties and linked to numerous legends and folklore. It serves as a vital geographical feature, symbolizing life and abundance.

musical wisdom (*ceól-éicse*)” (MacLeod 2018, 214). In Celtic tradition, the term ‘*éicse*’ encompasses various meanings, including wisdom, revelation, and divination.

The *Well of Segais* and the *Well of Sinend* in Irish mythology are deeply intertwined with themes of wisdom and creativity, drawing parallels to Galadriel's Mirror in Tolkien's Middle-earth:

Down along flight of steps the Lady went into the deep ‘green hollow, through which ran murmuring the silver stream that issued from the fountain of the hill. At the bottom, upon a low pedestal carved like a branching tree, stood a basin of silver, wide and shallow, and beside it stood a silver ewer. With water from the stream Galadriel filled the basin to the brim, and breathed on it, and when the water was still again she spoke (*FR*, II, vii, 361-362)

Firstly, all three wells function as mystical reservoirs of knowledge, embodying the concept that water can unveil profound truths. The *Wells of Segais* and *Sinend* symbolize the continuous flow of inspiration and enlightenment. Similarly, Galadriel's Mirror serves a related purpose, revealing visions that connect the viewer to the broader narrative of fate and consequence “I know what it is you saw, for it is also in my mind. It is what will come to pass if you should fail”. (Jackson 2001, 02:43:29). This connection is evident in the interactions among Frodo, Sam, and Galadriel, which mirror the symbolic journey to the well of wisdom found in Celtic traditions: “Remember that the Mirror shows many things, and not all have yet 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). Engaging with a divine figure in these narratives yields both enlightenment and potential peril.

Secondly, each well acts as a gateway to the Otherworld or spiritual realm. The *Wells of Segais* and *Sinend* are directly linked to mystical realms, suggesting that interaction with these waters grants access to higher knowledge and understanding. In similar fashion, Galadriel's Mirror provides glimpses into the unseen, underscoring the notion that the quest for wisdom often necessitates traversing between different worlds “But come, you shall look and see what you may. Do not touch the water. (*FR*, II, vii, 362)”.

Thirdly, the reflective properties of Galadriel's Mirror correspond to the insights gained from the *Wells of Segais* and *Sinend*. Just as characters may drink from the wells to attain clarity and inspiration, they also peer into Galadriel's Mirror to reflect on their own journeys and choices. This mirroring effect highlights the importance of introspection, emphasizing that wisdom often emerges from a deep understanding of one's experiences and truths. The film adaptation further amplifies this symbolism, particularly through Frodo's encounter with Galadriel, underscoring the well's role as a portal to deeper truths and hidden knowledge “Will you look into the mirror?—said Galadriel. What will I see?—said Frodo. Even the wisest cannot tell, for the mirror shows many things. Things that were... Things that are... And some things... that have not yet come to pass” (Jackson 2001, 02:41:47).

This duality is crucial, as noted: these wells “possessed a dualistic attribute of being able to provide wisdom or cause harm” (MacLeod 2018, 217). This is also observed in *LoTR* with Galadriel's sentence “The Mirror is dangerous as a guide of deeds” (*FR*, II, vii, 363). Consequently, it can be argued that Tolkien's depiction of water in Galadriel's Mirror serves as a potent metaphor, illustrating the reflective nature of water as a medium for introspection and revelation “Many things I can command the Mirror to reveal’ she answered, ‘and to some I can show what they desire to see. But the mirror will also show things unbidden, and those are often stranger and more profitable than things we wish to behold”. (*FR*, II, vii, 362). In both Celtic culture and Tolkien's narratives, water is frequently associated with purification, transformation, and insight. The well's reflective surface invites those who gaze into it to confront their innermost thoughts and desires, thereby demonstrating the profound impact of this encounter.

4.1.1. *Nenya, The Ring of Waters*

Nenya, known as the Ring of Waters, is one of the three Elven Rings of Power within J.R.R. Tolkien's Middle-earth legendarium, and it serves as a pivotal artifact in the broader mythology surrounding the Elves. In *The Silmarillion* ²⁴(1977), specifically in the section "Of the Rings of Power and the Third Age," Tolkien provides a concise background on the Rings of Power: "In those days the smiths of Ost-in-Edhil ²⁵surpassed all that they had contrived before; and they took thought, and they made Rings of Power" (*Silmarillion*, 360). A page later, he further elaborates on the intrinsic nature of the Rings, underscoring the meticulous craftsmanship and the significance of their creation. This context establishes the Rings, including Nenya, as essential artifacts endowed with extraordinary properties, reflecting the Elves' profound connection to their environment and their role as guardians of its beauty.

Now these were the Three that had last been made, and they possessed the greatest powers. Narya, Nenya, and Vilya, they were named, the Rings of Fire, and of Water, and of Air, set with ruby and adamant and sapphire; and of all the Elven-rings Sauron most desired to possess them, for those who had them in their keeping could ward off the decays of time and postpone the weariness of the world. (*Silmarillion*, 361)

Nenya, in particular, is associated with the element of water, symbolizing the forces of life, renewal, and preservation in the face of encroaching darkness. Tolkien elaborates on this connection in a letter to Michael Straight, noting that Nenya "included the healing of the real damages of malice, as well as the mere arrest of change" (*Letters*, 254).

The symbolic significance of Nenya's association with water reflects a deeper metaphysical connection to life-giving and sustaining forces. MacLeod (2012, 11) supports this notion, stating that "Celtic goddesses were associated with rivers and other bodies of water," which is particularly relevant to the character of Galadriel. Furthermore, in Letter 131 to Milton Waldman, Tolkien emphasizes the nature of the Rings, asserting that "The Elves of Eregion made Three supremely beautiful and powerful rings, almost solely of their own imagination, and directed to the preservation of beauty: they did not confer invisibility" (*Letters*, 172). This perspective is reiterated in *The Unfinished Tales* (2010), where Tolkien remarks that "by its power the realm of Lórinand was strengthened and made beautiful; but its power upon her was great also and unforeseen" (*Unfinished Tales*, 174). This reinforces the notion of Nenya as a preserver of nature.

In Tolkien's narrative, Nenya is portrayed as a mean to preserve beauty and heal the natural world, reflecting the Elves' role as guardians of the environment. Galadriel's use of Nenya illustrates her nurturing function, as she protects the borders of Lothlórien and maintains its beauty against the corrupting influence of Sauron: "Verily it is in the land of Lórien upon the finger the Galadriel that one of the Three remains. This is Nenya, the Ring of Adamant, and I am its keeper" (*FR*, II, vii, 365).

The symbolic properties of Nenya can also be contextualized within broader mythological and cultural traditions, particularly those found in Celtic beliefs, which often attribute protective qualities and magical properties to rings and jewellery. In Celtic culture, rings were believed to channel spiritual energy, and sacred wells were considered conduits for divine power. Carpenter characterizes Nenya as the "White Ring" (*Letters* 445), a designation that connects it to Celtic symbolism, particularly in terms of purification and protection. As a

²⁴ A collection of mythopoeic stories by J.R.R. Tolkien, published posthumously in 1977. It chronicles the creation of Middle-earth and the history of the Elves, particularly focusing on the fate of the Silmarils.

²⁵ Was the chief city in the elven realm of Eregion in Eriador.

powerful artifact, Nenya embodies these cultural beliefs regarding the influence of objects on the natural world. Like sacred wells in Celtic mythology, which were thought to connect individuals with higher powers or provide prophetic insights, Nenya symbolizes a link between its bearer and the ethereal forces of nature.

Conclusion

Tolkien's integration of water in his Secondary World is intricately linked to Celtic and mythological traditions, serving as a symbol of the connection between the Primary World and the Otherworld. This liminal element embodies themes of magic, transformation, and hidden knowledge, reflecting Tolkien's aspiration to forge a distinct mythology. By examining water's role in *faërie*, we gain insight into how these elements enrich his narrative framework, illuminating the profound interplay between ancient beliefs and modern storytelling in his work.

Tolkien's depiction of water in Rivendell serves as a vital element for protection against evil, reflecting themes of druidism prevalent in Celtic mythology. The Bruinen River acts as a formidable barrier against the Nazgûl, illustrating water's protective capacity while also functioning as a conduit to the Otherworld. This duality underscores the importance of water in guiding characters through mystical landscapes and navigating transformative journeys. Consequently, the interplay of protection and guidance highlights water's significance in shaping the narrative dynamics of Tolkien's Secondary World. In examining the portrayal of water in Tolkien's Lothlórien, particularly through the rivers Nimrodel and Silverlode, it becomes evident that water serves as a multifaceted symbol deeply embedded in Celtic tradition, representing both a conduit to the Otherworld and a transformative element. This journey reflects the intersection of physical and metaphysical realms, reinforcing the notion that crossing water signifies a passage into realms of wisdom, beauty, and peril, mirroring the Celtic belief in sacred waters as gateways to enlightenment and divine knowledge.

The Mirror of Galadriel exemplifies this duality further. It embodies the concept of "thin places," where the boundaries between worlds blur and individuals encounter transformative wisdom. Through the lens of Celtic spirituality, Galadriel's Mirror functions not only as a source of insight but also as a potential source of corruption, emphasizing the inherent risks associated with the pursuit of knowledge. The parallels between Galadriel's well and mythological wells in Celtic tradition highlight a shared motif of water as both a nurturing and perilous force. These wells, revered for their properties of healing and revelation, echo through Tolkien's narrative, enriching the thematic complexity of the text. Central to this dynamic is Nenya, the Ring of Waters, which not only represents the Elves' ability to preserve beauty and protect Lothlórien but also exerts a direct influence over the well itself. Nenya symbolizes a deeper metaphysical connection to life-giving and sustaining forces, effectively controlling and enhancing the powers of the well. As Galadriel uses Nenya to maintain the well's beauty and sanctity, this relationship underscores the interconnectedness of the two symbols, illustrating how the ring acts as a conduit for the transformative properties of water. In this way, the well becomes an extension of Nenya's power, reflecting the idea that mastery over these elemental forces is intertwined with the quest for wisdom. The protective qualities attributed to Nenya and its parallels to sacred wells in Celtic mythology reinforce the Elves' role as guardians of beauty and nature against the encroaching darkness of Sauron.

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