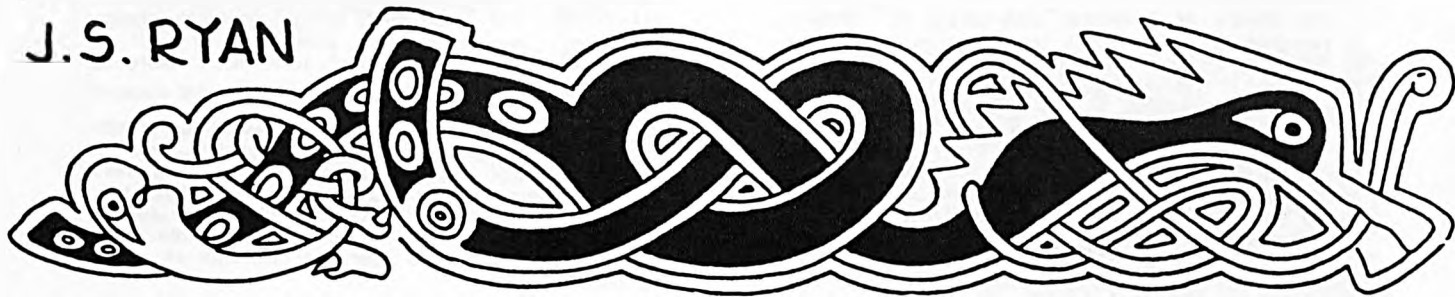




THE WILD HUNT, SIR ORFEO and J.R.R. TOLKIEN

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While it was *not* the prime concern of Michael Burgess in his article, 'Dromë and the Wild Hunt: the development of a myth' (*Mallorn* 22, pp. 5-11) to discuss either Tolkien's scholarship on the Wild Hunt, or his use of the theme in his creative writings, there are certain related points which might well be made in response to his article.

The first is his work on *Sir Orfeo*, the short fourteenth century poem in Middle English, the literary kind of which is the 'Breton lai'. Tolkien was taught the poem by Kenneth Sisam and it was a part of his own degree studies and final public examinations in the Summer of 1915. [n. 1] When at Leeds University, Tolkien provided the glossary to his former tutor's volume,

Fourteenth Century Verse and Prose (1922), in which the whole poem of 604 lines is included as piece II, (see pp. 13-31 and 207-212). Later Tolkien supervised the Litt. B thesis of A.J. Bliss who prepared an edition of the text for his own research degree and Tolkien, as the senior general editor of the *Oxford English Monographs*, was instrumental in having the work published in that series in 1954. In the 'Preface' (p. vi) Bliss refers, first among the 'debts-incurred', to -

Professor J.R.R. Tolkien, whose penetrating scholarship is an inspiration to all who have worked with him:

and again to the editors who 'agreed to include this volume in the series.'

In 1975 in his preface (p. 7) to J.R.R. Tolkien's translations of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, *Pearl and Sir Orfeo*, Christopher Tolkien said that his father's 'version of *Sir Orfeo* was - made many years ago, and had long ... laid aside', and also observing: 'I was not able to discover any writing by my father on the subject of *Sir Orfeo*' (p. 8). Accordingly he adds the brief note (p. 23) of introduction, stressing only the likelihood that the poem 'was composed ... in the south-east of England in the latter part of the thirteenth century, or early in the fourteenth' and 'translated from a French original'. Yet one may see much of Tolkien's thought in his own pupil's admirable edition.

The poem [n. 2] itself, describes how Heurodis, the wife to the lord *Sir Orfeo*, had in sleep been summoned by the fairy king, who, refused by her, had then appeared to her in person

then came their king himself with speed;
a hundred knights with him and more,
and damsels, too, were many a score,

all riding there on snow-white steeds,
and white as milk were all their weeds.
(11.142-46)

She is warned that, although with her husband for the present, she will be taken by the fairy king, willy-nilly on the morrow, and so it occurs, despite Orfeo's defending her 'and full ten hundred Knights with him' (1.183) -

And yet from midst of that array
the queen was sudden snatched away;
by magic was she from them caught
and none knew whither she was brought.
(11.191-4)

After this Orfeo becomes a hermit in the forest and

There often by him would he see
when noon was hot on leaf and tree,
the king of Faerie with his rout
came hunting in the woods about
with blowing far and crying dim.
(11.281-5)

These hosts are of the fairy sort [n.3] and cast in a courtly and gracious mould, as is the 'hunt' of elegant lady hunters from Faerie which he also sees:

And one fair day he at his side
saw sixty ladies on horses ride,
each fair and free as bird on spray,
and never a man with them that day.
(11.303-06)

In this they follow both the elegant Breton style of the poems of Marie de France and, presumably, of the lost Breton lai on the same theme (Bliss, pp. xxxii, ff.) and the Celtic mode of describing the fairy army and the fairy hunt, much as in the De Nugis Curialium of Walter Map. As Bliss goes on to illustrate (p.1), the story of Sir Orfeo passed into popular tradition and reappeared in Unst, Shetland, as the ballad of King Orfeo. [n.4]

But to return to the poem which Tolkien knew so well. As a variant on the hunting theme, or because they are 'dead' the male huntsmen observed by Orfeo take no kill:

[where]. There often by him would he see, ...
the king of Faerie with his rout
came hunting in the woods about
with blowing far and crying dim, ...
yet never a beast they took nor slew
and where they went he never knew.
(11.281 ff.)

Quite other is the next sight, the stern fairy host of warriors [n.5] in military order, -

At other times he would descry
a mighty host, it seemed, go by,
ten hundred knights all fair arrayed
with many a banner proud displayed.
Each free and mien was fierce and bold
each Knight a drawn sword did hold,
and all were armed in harness fair
and marching on he knew not where.
(11.289-96)

This is more traditional and akin to the classic analysis of the wild hunt by Stith Thomson in the Motif - Index of Folk - Literature. [n.6] Yet this major work contains the following intriguing examples of the subdivisions of the hunt possible in various folk-lore:

- E 501: 2.3. Witches in wild hunt;
- E 501: 2.6. Soldiers in wild hunt;
- E 501: 3. Wild huntsmen wandering because of sin;

- E 501: 3.4. Wild huntsman wanders because of unshriven death;
- E 501: 4.1.3. Dogs with fiery eyes in wild hunt;
- E 501: 4.2. Wild horseman's ghostly horse;
- E 501: 4.2.2. Black horse in wild hunt;
- E 501: 4.2.2. Horse in wild hunt breathes fire;
- E 501: 15.1. Wild huntsman blows horn;
- E 501: 17.3. Wild hunt powerless at crossroads;
- E 501: 17.4.2. Power of wild hunt evaded by silence;
- E 501: 17.5.4. Wild hunt avoided by throwing self to earth;
- E 501: 19.6. Effect of wild hunt remedied by prayer;
- etc., etc., etc.

All of these sub-categories and many others listed under E, 'The dead', may seem to have echoes in Norse folklore and sagas as well as in the more fragmentary literary remains of the Old English period. Thus the motif of the Wild Hunt Procession of the Dead (E.491), the Abode of the Dead (E.480), etc. would be very familiar to Tolkien from his life-long work in mediaeval language. In this connection, the sub-title of the Thomson compilations is peculiarly revealing:

A Classification of Narrative Elements in Folktales, Ballads, Myths, Fables, Metrical Romances, Exempla, Fabliaux, Text-books, and Local Legends.
* * * * *

While it would be too long to list the many echoes of the Wild Hunt, or Undead Army, in the Tolkien corpus, it may be noted that something of the movement of such fell armies on horse or foot is to be found in the Helm's Deep Sequence (TT) and at the Black Gate, or when describing the last ride from Rohan or the hastening Uruk-hai. The original Hunt notion of terror (in the skies) is largely reserved for accounts of the Black Riders, particularly when the Lord of the Nazgûl is later on the wing, as in the account of 'The passage of the Marshes':

a small cloud flying ... a black shadow ..., a vast shape winged and ominous. It scudded across the moon, and with a deadly cry went away westward, ... the shadow of horror wheeled and returned, passing lower now, right above them, sweeping the fen-reek with its ghastly wings. (TT, p.237)

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Appendix

Michael Burgess refers (p.9) to the motive of the 'furious host' crossing to America and wicked cow-boys condemned to 'spend eternity chasing a herd of unearthly cattle across the sky'. In Australia, towards the end of the 1964-66 drought in the eastern states, the American motif was extended in both art and music. Thus the image is of drovers in the sky, driving undead cattle who are literally skin and bone on and on in search of the non-existent flowing waterhole. Since they never find it, gaunt as their pathetic charges, they too are doomed to an eternity of urging on their faltering herds and mounts across dust-filled clouds strewn across the empyrean.

Notes

- n.1 See 'In Literis Anglicis' result for that year, p. 255 of the 'University Honours - for years 1900-1920' in The First Supplement to the Historical Register of 1900 (1921); (ie. of the University of Oxford).
- n.2 The translations are from the Tolkien 1975 collection, as cited in the text above.
- n.3 Some of these lines provide analogies to Tolkien's descriptions of both Galadriel and Arwen.
- n.4 See F.J. Child, English and Scottish Popular Ballads (1882), vol. i, pp. 217, ff.
- n.5 Compare Walter Map on the silent armies of Brittany, and Tolkien's Dead men at Dunharrow (RotK, p.53), and Burgess on this, (loc. cit., p.9).
- n.6 Vol Two, D-E (1955 third printing, 1975). Motif E. 500 (pp.463ff.) is 'Phantom Hosts'; E. 501 is 'The Wild Hunt'; and E. 502, 'the Sleeping Army'.