

Trees & transformations

The Urth list — 5 messages, 3 voices, 18 Dec 2002

<https://urth.darkrealm.vip/thread/urth/3690>

Exported from an unofficial mirror of a public mailing list. Copyright in each message remains with the person who wrote it. Email addresses are obscured as `user at host`, the form the original archive published. This file was rebuilt from parsed fields rather than retained headers, so it is faithful in content but not byte-exact.

Andrew Bollen — 18 Dec 2002, 17:13

I noticed Robert Graves mentioned on the list a while back. I do get a sense that Wolfe refers to Graves at times. Eg - in an interview somewhere, with reference to Soldier in the Mist, he gives an account of the tranformation of Delphi from an earth-goddess shrine, to a patriarchal Apollonian place: it reads like something straight out of "The Greek Myths". And some of the Moses and Odin/Hermes imagery in Short Sun/Long Sun is kind of Gravesian.

Anyway, fwiw I was catching up with Marc's rather beguiling tree theories, which made me think for some reason of all the Celtic tree stuff in "The White Goddess". And in particular, the story of Blodeuwedd, "Flower Face", the woman made from flowers as wife for the hero Llew:

Not of father nor of mother
Was my blood, was my body.

I was spellbound by Gwydion,
Prime enchanter of the Britons,
When he formed me from nine blossoms,
Nine buds of various kind;
From primrose of the mountain,
Broom, meadow-sweet and cockle,
Together intertwined,
From the bean in its shade bearing
A white spectral army
Of earth, of earthly kind,
From blossoms of the nettle,
Oak, thorn and bashful chestnut -
Nine powers of nine flowers,
Nine powers in me combined,
Nine buds of plant and tree.

Long and white are my fingers
As the ninth wave of the sea.

(Graves' translation from the Welsh.)

Josh Geller — 18 Dec 2002, 17:28 · follows Andrew Bollen

On Thu, 19 Dec 2002, Andrew Bollen wrote:
(Graves' translation from the Welsh.)

I may be mistaken about this, but I do not believe that Graves spoke or read Welsh. He worked from translations.

.

Andrew Bollen — 18 Dec 2002, 17:42 · follows Josh Geller

Josh Geller wrote:

(Graves' translation from the Welsh.)

I may be mistaken about this, but I do not believe that Graves spoke or read Welsh. He worked from translations.

No doubt you're right. I googled the text from this site:

http://www.unc.edu/~reddeer/white_goddess/00_white.goddess.robert.graves.htm l#hanes, which cites it as an RG translation, but maybe they're mistaken.

James Wynn — 18 Dec 2002, 19:36 · follows Andrew Bollen

Doh! I hoped to be the first to reveal this connection between Silk and Llew Llaw Gyffes. It's not the only connection between the two either. It goes on and on.

I've begun to wonder if Wolfe were not attempting in LS and SS to create a root of all myths as Tolkien said was his original attempt in the Silmarillion.

--Crush

-----Original Message-----

From: Andrew Bollen [mailto:abollen at internode.on.net] Sent: Wednesday, December 18, 2002 11:14 AM To: urth at urth.net Subject: (urth) Trees & transformations

I noticed Robert Graves mentioned on the list a while back. I do get a sense that Wolfe refers to Graves at times. Eg - in an interview somewhere, with reference to Soldier in the Mist, he gives an account of the tranformation of Delphi from an earth-goddess shrine, to a patriarchal Apollonian place: it reads like something straight out of "The Greek Myths". And some of the Moses and Odin/Hermes imagery in Short Sun/Long Sun is kind of Gravesian.

Anyway, fwiw I was catching up with Marc's rather beguiling tree theories, which made me think for some reason of all the Celtic tree stuff in "The White Goddess". And in particular, the story of Blodeuwedd, "Flower Face", the woman made from flowers as wife for the hero Llew:

Not of father nor of mother
Was my blood, was my body.

I was spellbound by Gwydion,
Prime enchanter of the Britons,
When he formed me from nine blossoms,
Nine buds of various kind;
From primrose of the mountain,
Broom, meadow-sweet and cockle,
Together intertwined,
From the bean in its shade bearing
A white spectral army
Of earth, of earthly kind,
From blossoms of the nettle,
Oak, thorn and bashful chestnut -
Nine powers of nine flowers,
Nine powers in me combined,
Nine buds of plant and tree.

Long and white are my fingers
As the ninth wave of the sea.

(Graves' translation from the Welsh.)

--

Andrew Bollen — 19 Dec 2002, 05:01 · follows James Wynn

Doh! I hoped to be the first to reveal this connection between Silk and Llew Llaw Gyffes. It's not the only connection between the two either. It goes on and on.

--Crush

Crush - I just came across your interesting site, and had a couple of questions. In the intro, you say: "[Wolfe has] recreated Gwydion's riddle as exegeted by Robert Graves in his The White Goddess.." I assume you mean "Gwion/Taliesin's" riddle, no? The one which goes:

"An impartial Chief Bard
Am I to Elphin.
My accustomed country
Is the land of the Cherubim.

Johannes the Diviner
I was called by Merddin,
At length every King
Will call me Taliesin.

I was nine months almost
In the belly of the hag Ceridwen;
I was at first little Gwion,
At length I am Taliesin."

etc.

Would love to hear more on this! As far as I can recall, RG's (rather tortured) exegesis is in terms of recreating the tree-alphabet from the answers to the sections of the riddle, and finally a holy-name-of-god. A fair amount of the imagery involved seems to correspond with Wolfe's imagery, but beyond that I am unclear on the connection. Ditto for the connection between Llew and Silk?

Other Wolfean tie-ins to Graves at random:

- Jesus as "Balaam the Lame". The corresponding laming of Llew, as I think you allude to.
- The primeval Adam as "Son of the terebrinth (tree)" and the earth mother, which should interest Marc.
- Gwydion the magician is Odin (and Mercury/Hermes, at least for RG and others), and hence maybe some connection to SilkHorn, particularly in his magician aspect. Also, I seem to recall RG conceived of Gwydion in his historical aspect as a major religious innovator, bound up with "The Battle of the Trees", which RG sees as a poetic record of a major shift in Celtic religious observance (whose details totally escape me - hopefully my google-assisted memories are not

too distorted). This would be fitting for SilkHorn, of course, and the tree-stuff continues to speak in a rather haunting way to Marc's thesis. Is there anything about SilkHorn which resonates with Gwydion's most remembered act - the creation of Bloedwedd from flowers? Dunno.

- The whole tension between the ambiguous, female deities and powers of the Sea & Wolfe's male heroes in the cycle, which is pretty damned Gravesian. Googling RG once again, from the conclusion of "The White Goddess" -

"... there can be no escape from the present more than usually miserable state of the world until a new Battle of the Trees is fought: "A renewal of conflict / Such as Gwydion made,..." and the supreme Godhead thereby redefined; until the repressed desire of the Western races, which is for some practical form of Goddess worship, with her love not limited to maternal benevolence and her afterworld not deprived of a Sea, finds satisfaction at last."

It's possible (for me, anyway) to see a Wolfean debate - a respectful debate - with that view, all through the work. Both SilkHorn and Severian (assuming they are not the same entity) are at least engaged with the female powers of the Sea; and the ambiguity of the relationship is kind of reminiscent of RG's Jesus' relationship with ancient female, sea-related deities; at once beloved and enemy.

It's obviously possible to make too much of this. Wolfe may borrow or allude to bits & pieces of imagery and thematic fragments, but I see them as mainly "chrome" on the important things - the narrative, the characterization, the moral issues bound up in them.