Middan-Geard

- and The Power of Mythological Tradition

By Tony Shell

In Old English the word **middan-geard** (middle earth) was often used as a poetic allusion to the mortal realm, and the battleground between the forces of good and evil. It is a reflection of the broader European mythology that describes the home of ordinary mortals – a sacred place between the spiritual domain of gods and goddesses, and the underworld of ancestral knowledge and power.

The name-place *middan-geard* shares an ancient heritage with other words of similar origin and usage, such as garden or orchard (from the Old English *ort-geard*) – that is, as a description of a special place, or enclosure, within a commonly recognised boundary or border.

Therefore *middan-geard* is used (here) to indicate a concern with current issues as they affect the lives of 'ordinary mortals' – with reference to ancestral folk-wisdom, common-sense and native spirituality, and to be found within the specific geographic and historic context of England and the English people.

The painters, poets, illustrators and designers of the 19th Century (such as **Lord Tennyson**, **Dante Gabriel Rossetti**, **William Holman Hunt** or **William Morris**) or the 20th Century authors (such as **C S Lewis**, **G K Chesterton** or **J R R Tolkien**) clearly had a purposeful intent to restore, re-invigorate, and embellish the mythology of England.

In the mythological tales of northern Europe there is an enduring tradition of the exemplary 'virtuous person' – somebody who unselfishly confronts a perilous situation, or even deadly evil, even though there may be no realistic prospect of personal success or reward (or even recognition). In particular there is the high status given to the selfless heroic act.

This ancient ethos is a truly extraordinary and admirable philosophy of life. This romantic notion of valour is woven into the very fabric of these traditional mythological tales – such as the virtuous warrior **Beowulf** valiantly battling underworld monsters, or of **Frodo Baggins** and his readiness to sacrifice his life to defend Middle Earth (and save the Shire).

There is an irony that these mythic tales – the heroic quests, epic poems, tragedies, and fairy stories – are nowadays presented as fanciful representations of some ultimately remote, almost idealized, fantasy world. In fact these ancient folk stories provide a true representation of people's characters, and the gritty reality of their lives. These stories provide, by narrative example, ways in which ordinary people can face their fears and, perhaps, come to terms with life's bitter experiences and profound challenges. In even simple stories such as the English folk-tales '**Cap O' Rushes**' or '**Love Like Salt**' we find strong underlying basic moral lessons (in these two examples the 'message' is that a genuinely loving relationship does not need to be tested, and that true love entails patience, trust and tolerance).

The heroes and heroines in these mythic tales have the frailties of real people. The interest is not in the super-hero, but in the 'ordinary' man or women. These are people who can be paralysed by fear and tormented by self-doubt – and which makes their valour all the more commendable. It enables us, the recipients of these tales, to personally identify with these principled mythic characters, to feel their inner torments, and to recognize the extraordinary worth of their actions.

This is at the very heart of the **romantic** ideal. We are shown the deep emotional and physical demands placed on our heroes and heroines and how, with exemplary fortitude, they are able to overcome their fears and doubts.

In this ethos there is no crude motive of selfish material gain - these are virtuous people. They have no expectation that their valour will be rewarded either here on Earth, or even in some idyllic after-life. They know that their brave deeds may not be even be recognised by their own contemporaries, or remembered by future generations. And they cannot even seek solace in the certain knowledge of a beneficent after-life (other than, perhaps, a reunion with their ancestors).

Nowadays the term 'myth' is commonly used to provide an attribution of untruth. It is used to discredit popularly inherited (and accepted) folk wisdom – on the basis that the tale in which this wisdom is embodied is (probably) factually untrue. The term 'myth' is used to discredit a people's inherited beliefs and values, and very often in an extremely derogatory manner. It is for this reason that mythological tales are frequently portrayed only as fantasy or escapism - simple folk stories for simple-minded folk.

Mythic tales, with their ancient themes, have enjoyed enormous popular success (but not always critical acclaim). This is indicative of the native community's natural inclination to be receptive to such story telling – and especially receptive to the traditional moral content. It is therefore very different from purposefully engineered cultural change, with its propensity for authoritarian instruction, re-education, coercion, and propagandising – and enforced (often as a weapon of *first* resort) by legislative compulsion.

However keeping a mythic tradition helps to maintain and reinforce social bonds. **A mythic tradition supports the notion of community roles and obligations, kinship and a common heritage, and provides meaning and purpose to our lives**. That it often does this by subtle means does not diminish the power that these mythological tales can have – nor the extent to which our lives are enhanced, enriched and (even) made tenable, by having reference to a common source of inherited wisdom.

Myth is therefore not crude fantasy or escapism. To be of any value to a community mythological tales must have applicability. These stories must have true social worth and be of contemporary relevance. If they don't have these qualities, then they are no more than simple fiction and of entertainment value only. Without proper applicability they cannot help communities, and the individuals within those communities, to endure and to develop.

END