10-15-2015

The Lost Letter: Seeking the Keys to William's Arthuriad

John D. Rateliff
Independent Scholar

Follow this and additional works at: https://dc.swosu.edu/mythlore

Part of the Children's and Young Adult Literature Commons

Recommended Citation
Available at: https://dc.swosu.edu/mythlore/vol34/iss1/4

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by SWOSU Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Mythlore: A Journal of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature by an authorized editor of SWOSU Digital Commons. An ADA compliant document is available upon request. For more information, please contact phillip.fitzsimmons@swosu.edu.
The Lost Letter: Seeking the Keys to William's Arthuriad

Abstract
Mythcon 47 Guest of Honor address. The Arthuriad is dense with allusion and the reader often has a sense of missing much that goes on below the surface; as it happens, the reader is not wrong to be confused. Rateliff finds the keys that unlock this poetic sequence à clef in a relatively unknown letter Williams wrote in answer to a list of questions on the Arthuriad from C.S. Lewis, in the “gynecomorphical map” drawn to Williams’s personal specifications which served as endpapers to the poetry, and in Williams’s private life as revealed in letters and memoirs, in particular to personae he ascribed to certain women in his life. Includes illustrations.

Additional Keywords
Charles Williams
The Lost Letter: Seeking the Keys to Williams's Arthuriad

John D. Rateliff

The sales of Charles Williams
Leapt up by millions,
When a reviewer surmised
He was only Lewis disguised.
—J.R.R. Tolkien, circa 1943 (Carpenter 187)

The story is well known how, upon the death of his friend and fellow Inkling Charles Williams, C.S. Lewis prepared two memorial volumes in his friend’s honor. The first was the essay collection Essays Presented to Charles Williams [1947], a festschrift said to have been already in the works at the time of Williams’s death, all but one of whose contributing authors were Inklings: Tolkien, Lewis, Barfield, Gervase Mathew, Warnie Lewis (his first publication), and Dorothy L. Sayers (the only non-Inkling)—although this near-Inkling-exclusivity was incidental and not by design, as is shown by the fact that T.S. Eliot was asked to contribute an essay on Williams’s drama but in the event was not able to complete it in time.¹ This volume is remembered today primarily as the first place of publication of Tolkien’s seminal essay On Fairy-stories, just as Williams is primarily remembered for his association with Lewis (and, to a lesser degree, Tolkien).

The second memorial is the monograph-length Williams and the Arthuriad, based on a lecture series of the same name delivered by Lewis at Oxford after Williams’s death, published together with The Figure of Arthur, Williams’s unfinished prose account of the Grail legend, as Arthurian Torso [1948]. So far as I know, this is the only time one Inkling taught a course on another Inkling.² In this work, Lewis sought both to champion and to explain Williams’s Arthurian cycle, as depicted in Taliessin Through Logres [1938] and

---

¹ Cf. Lewis’s letters inviting Eliot to participate (May 17th 1945; Collected Letters Vol. II page 630), agreeing on a choice of topic (June 1st 1945; II 658), worrying about the non-arrival of his essay (February 28th and March 11th 1946; II 704), and finally the decision to go ahead without Eliot’s contribution (May 17th 1946; II 710).
² I am grateful to Janice Coulter for drawing this point to my attention.
John D. Rateliff

The Region of the Summer Stars [1944]. Just as Tolkien’s On Fairy-stories essay is the most valuable part of Essays Presented to Charles Williams, so too the most valuable part of Williams and the Arthuriad are the excerpts it contains of a long letter by Williams himself explaining the symbolism in his poems: the ‘Lost Letter’ of my title. As Lewis tells the story:

Since I had heard nearly all of [Williams’s Arthurian cycle] read aloud and expounded by the author and had questioned him closely on his meaning I felt that I might be able to comment on it, though imperfectly, yet usefully. His most systematic exposition had been given to me in a long letter which (with that usual folly which forbids us to remember that our friends can die) I did not preserve; but fortunately I copied large extracts from it into the margin of my copy of Taliessin at the relevant passages. (Lewis, Torso 1)

I might say, as an aside, that this is entirely in keeping with Lewis’s disregard of manuscripts, his own and other people’s. After all, this is the man who, Tolkien said, destroyed the only copy of not one but two stories by Tolkien.3 Given such a straightforward account, it seemed that Williams’s careful explication of his symbolism was lost forever. Imagine my surprise, then, when reading Diana Pavlac Glyer’s The Company They Keep and finding among the endnotes (being myself a reader, and writer, of notes) the following bombshell:

Unbeknownst to Lewis, Williams kept a typescript of this commentary on his Arthurian work, and he distributed a number of copies of it […]. One of these typescripts is available to researchers at the Marion E. Wade Center. (Glyer 164n28)

It turns out that Lewis did indeed destroy the original, but Williams had kept a copy. Its survival seems to be largely unknown among Lewis and Inkling scholars, although Williams scholars are more cognizant of the fact.4

---

3 The source for this information is an unpublished ‘MS note by Tolkien’ cited by Carpenter:

Tolkien recalled: ‘He was indeed accustomed at intervals to throw away papers and books—and at such times he destroyed those that belonged to other people. He “lost” not only official documents sent to him by me, but sole MSS. of at least two stories.’ (The Inklings 48 & 268)

4 Glyer cites “Ridler 178” as her source: this alludes to a passage in Williams’s posthumous essay collection The Image of the City and other Essays, ed. Anne Ridler (1958, pages 178–179), in which Ridler prefaces her publication of the headnote from the Lost Letter with the following note (emphasis mine):

---

6 © Mythlore 127, Fall/Winter 2015
And thanks to Williams’s disciples Raymond Hunt⁵ and especially Margaret Douglas,⁶ best known in Tolkien circles as the woman who typed The Lord of the Rings (Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien 94), today we have, preserved at the Wade, no fewer than three different typescripts (CW MS-2, CW MS-166, CW MS-415) giving the full text of a document thought destroyed more than seventy years ago. This ‘lost letter’, I would argue, is the first of three keys needed to unlock Williams’s poetry, to find our way through what the Zaleskis, in their new book on the Inklings, call “a nearly impenetrable thicket of obscurities” (Zaleski 433). And I think the effort worthwhile because Lewis considered Williams one of the two or three greatest poets of the twentieth century, and his Taliessin cycle to be one of the greatest works of literature of the century. **And Williams thought so too.** Hence the importance of ‘the lost letter’ to help us see both Williams’s work as he saw it, or purported to see it, and perhaps also what Lewis saw in it that so many others have failed to see.

David Llewellyn Dodds, in his essay in *The Rhetoric of Vision*, also quotes from the Lost Letter and devotes a long note to it on (Dodds, “Co-inherence” 197). The full Letter had been published as far back as 1965 by Glen Cavaliero in the small-press journal *Gnomon*, but that piece is hardly accessible to Inklings scholars all these years later. I am grateful to Grevat Lindop (author of the forthcoming biography of Williams) and Stephen Barber (Treasurer of the Charles Williams Society), Williamsians extraordinaire, for information about this little-known publication (GL to JDR, email of October 12 2010; SB to JDR, email of October 13 2010).

Finally much, but not all, of the contents of the Lost Letter were incorporated into the Charles Williams Society booklet *The Taliessin Poems of Charles Williams, by Various Hands* [1991]. Unfortunately, its presentation there is both incomplete and interwoven with commentary by others (Hadfield, Riden, Shuttleworth, et al), so that it is sometimes difficult to identify which comments come from this particular source. In any case, such treatment tends to obscure the Lost Letter’s unique nature of having been written more or less at one sitting at a particular time and place and in response to specific stimuli (i.e., Lewis’s questions).

⁵ For more on Raymond Hunt, see Appendix B at the end of this paper.

⁶ Hadfield, Williams’s biographer, says of Douglas:

> A trained typist, she [...] saved armfuls of his verse by typing it and putting it in order as he showed her. Much that would have become illegible by age and bad treatment has been saved because she could ask him to decipher it. (Hadfield 180–181)
THE FIRST KEY: ANSWERS TO C.S. LEWIS (PRIVATE DEFINITIONS)

Comparing the full letter, as preserved by Douglas and Hunt, with those excerpts Lewis chose to preserve and use gives us a window into Lewis’s re-shaping of his friend’s legacy. For one thing, we discover how little of the original letter Lewis thought worth preserving: his quotes and paraphrase total only about 347 words out of an original total of about 3471, or a mere ten percent of the whole. Also, seeing the excerpts used in Williams and the Arthuriad within their original context highlights what aspects of the work Lewis focused attention upon and what aspects he ignored, misunderstood, or suppressed. Unfortunately, the form this Letter took does not readily make for presentation here: Answers to C.S. Lewis is not another Letter to Waldman, setting out at length a private mythology and the connections between its various parts.7 Rather, it’s clear that Lewis had written Williams a (lengthy) letter asking specific questions, poem by poem, that had arisen during his close reading of Taliessin through Logres, the middle of Williams’s three Arthurian collections. It’s important to note that this Letter has nothing to say about The Region of the Summer Stars, as yet unwritten, nor The Advent of Galahad, which remained unpublished, nor Heroes and Kings, the earliest of the three published books in the cycle, which curiously enough there is no evidence Lewis ever read. And, as a caveat, Lewis tells us in some cases that a particular note he reproduces is somewhat abridged or recast (e.g., Williams and the Arthuriad 99); this turns out to be quite true and reveals that Lewis is skilled at the art of paraphrase. However, passages Lewis represents as direct quotes are, on comparison with Williams’s original, sometimes revealed to be paraphrase as well.8 Thus it’s evident that Lewis valued (some of) the ideas, but not the exact

---

7 Tolkien’s lengthy letter to Milton Waldman, reproduced in part as the preface to the second edition of The Silmarillion.
8 Thus Lewis writes on p. 99 of Williams and the Arthuriad

A note in my own hand (but it is either transcribed or abridged from a letter of Williams’s) runs as follows: ‘Broceliande, West of Logres, off Cornwall; both a forest and a sea—a sea-wood. It joins the sea of the Antipodes. Beyond it (at least beyond a certain part of it) is Carbonë; then the open sea; then Sarra. A place of making, home of Nimue. From it the huge shapes emerge, the whole matter of the form of Byzantium—and all this is felt in the beloved.’

The passage as Williams wrote it runs as follows; I have highlighted the words and phrases picked up by Lewis in his paraphrase:

Broceliande is somewhere round Cornwall and Devon, to the west of Logres. It is regard both as a forest and as a sea—a sea-wood. It joins the sea of the Antipodes. Beyond it (at least beyond a certain part of it) is Carbonë; then the open sea; then Sarra. A place of making, home of Nimue. From it the huge shapes emerge, the whole matter of the form of Byzantium—and all this is felt in the beloved.’

Mystically it is the ‘making’ of things. Nimue is the Nature of Creation as the mother of Merlin (Time) and Brisen (Space); she is the source of movement and of

8 © Mythlore 127, Fall/Winter 2015
wording of Williams's glosses, and that all passages in Williams and the Arthuriad purportedly in Williams’s own words should be approached with caution by anyone without access to the original Letter: sometimes the reader is getting not Williams directly but Williams rephrased and refocused by Lewis—in the word of J.R.R. Tolkien, Lewisified (Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien 89).

The best way, I think, to convey some sense of Answers to C.S. Lewis is to give a few examples of its contents, both to emphasize its importance as a key to Williams’s thought and to highlight Lewis’s selectiveness. Aside from a general opening summarizing some major points, the bulk of the Letter takes the form of glosses. Each entry opens with a name or phrase and then expounds upon it: sometimes briefly, sometimes at length. Sometimes undue brevity renders the answer opaque, since we do not know the specific question Lewis was asking, merely the poem or passage concerned. Thus, whatever query Lewis posed about the poem “Mount Badon” (Taliessin through Logres [TtL] 16–18), Williams simply replied

Badon: yes.

It will be seen that Lewis's skillful paraphrase clarifies the natures and relative positions of various major sites, while the information about Williams’s idiosyncratic family tree of Nimue as the mother of Merlin and his invention of Brisen, Merlin’s sister, as well as these magical siblings’ embodiment of Space and Time, respectively, appears elsewhere in Lewis’s commentary (see Williams and the Arthuriad 102).

By contrast, Lewis presents the following as a direct quote from Williams’s letter (Williams and the Arthuriad 178):

According to Williams’s note ‘For them (i.e. Galahad and his companions) all that was Logres and the Empire has become this flight of doves. Galahad as a symbol of Christ now has necessity of being in himself.’

However, what Williams actually wrote is slightly different; again I have highlighted the parts taken verbatim from Williams’s Letter in Lewis’s version:

[...] from the point of view of the lords, Logres is dissolving behind them (although Bors is to return); all that was Logres & the Empire has become the flight of doves driving the ship on its way; at the point where Galahad is so united with Christ that he has almost a necessity of being in himself; doctrinally heretical, I fear (reprinted with only minor changes in Gnomon 45)

As will be seen, this is skillful paraphrase, but paraphrase nonetheless, and in this case wrongly presented as direct quotation. And, just as significantly, Lewis has quietly excised Williams’s cheerful admission of heresy.
—providing an answer that is brief, unambiguous, and unhelpful. There are a handful of such entries, whose main value is that they show Lewis did apparently apprehend a good deal of Williams’s symbolism on his own.

Usually, though, Williams expanded upon such affirmations. Thus in the entry on “The Star of Percivale” (TtL 46–47), Williams writes

yes, the same girl, & the same morning, I think, rather later. Or the next.

Clearly, Lewis had asked if the Caucasian slave-girl who falls in love with Taliessin (the figure in the poem-cycle who stands for Williams himself) in this poem is the same slave-girl whom Taliessin finds sitting in the stocks for striking a fellow servant in the next poem, “The Ascent of the Spear” (TtL 48–50). The two figures are certainly similar, but there’s no way we could have known for sure it was the same person, since poet-worshipping slave-girls are a recurrent motif moving through Williams’s Arthuriad; they appear in at least two other poems in this book, plus two more out of the eight in Region of the Summer Stars.9

Other times, Williams’s answers raise as many difficulties as they solve. Thus, he explains four different layers of symbolism represented by ‘Islam,’ which dominates the southern half of his gynecomorphical map, telling Lewis that

Islam is (a) Deism (b) Manichaenism (c) heavy morality (d) Islam 10

—Thus, Williams tells Lewis that his primary meaning for ‘Islam’ is to equate it with Deism; that is, the idea dominant during the 18th-century Enlightenment that our world was made by a remote creator-god who has entirely withdrawn and plays no part in our daily world (as opposed to The Emperor in Byzantium, who in Williams’s myth is God Himself, sending out

9 “The Sister of Percivale” (TIL 51–53), where Taliessin enjoys watching the body of a Caucasian slave-girl as she goes about her work drawing water; “The Coming of Galahad” (TIL 69–74), where a favored slave she asks an insightful question which Taliessin evasively answers; “The Departure of Dindrane” (RSS 29–33), in which the slave rejects freedom in order to choose a lifetime of slavery with Taliessin as her master; and “The Queen’s Servant” (Region of the Summer Stars [RSS] 39–42), in which a slave girl (it is unclear whether it is the same or another) is unwillingly freed and forced to leave Taliessin’s service. That Williams romanticized slavery is evident not just from these poems but from his expressing a wish, in a letter to his wife, that he could personally own a slave (To Michal from Serge 220).

10 Also reproduced almost verbatim in “The Arthurian Myth” 178 and in Gnomon 40, except that the latter substitutes “Theism” for “Deism”; the manuscripts differ as to which reading is correct.
‘logothetes’ [administrators] and ‘nuntii’ [envoys] who are not just messengers but literal angels). This helps explain Palomides’ logical and detached highly rational mind, and his expressing his passion for Isuelt in geometrical terms (“The Coming of Palomides,” TtL 33–37). But the equation of Islam and Deism would come as a surprise, to say the least, to most Muslims, or any non-Muslim student of that religion. Furthermore, it seems entirely at odds with the second layer of meaning, since Deism and Manichaenism are starkly different things. That Williams connects Islam with Manichaenism (the idea that our world is a battleground between two great powers, one good and the other evil) explains his otherwise baffling reference in “The Son of Lancelot” (TtL 57) to “iconoclastic heretical licentiates of Manes” preaching war against the Empire (that is, Christendom) from pulpits in Cordova. But again this identification bears no recognizable resemblance at all to real Islam, whose caliphs suppressed Manichaeism wherever they encountered it. The third layer of symbolism, using ‘Islam’ as shorthand for any repressive religion with a strict code of conduct, is more familiar, being alive and well in our time, unfortunately. And finally and fourthly, to paraphrase Dr. Freud, sometimes ‘Islam’ is just Islam—which is good to know, but unhelpful. The fourth meaning is the obvious one any reader would assume, and the third layer is not that hard to guess at simply through reading the poems. But those first and second layers are, I would say, difficult to tease out, and I doubt that it’s possible to combine all four into a coherent whole (though Lewis tries manfully, but I think unsuccessfully, in Williams and the Arthuriad, where he equates Williams’s Islam with ‘all religions that are afraid of matter and afraid of mystery’; 124).

For all practical purposes, I think the lesson we should take from this and similar glosses is that it’s best to think of ‘Islam’ as it appears in Williams’s Arthuriad as a composite fictional religion created to hold up in contrast to his own idealized Christianity, assuming chameleon-like whatever aspect of non-Christianity he needs at the time. The simple truth is that Williams has no interest in actual Islam (elsewhere he praises the crusades, likening them to the Allied liberation of France from Nazi control—The Figure of Arthur 60–61) any more than he cares about the actual history of the Byzantine Empire or Dark-Age Britain. The historical situation represented both by the map accompanying Taliesin through Logres and events in the poems are Williams’s mythic invention: aspects of his subcreated mythic world, and as such do not correspond to real-world history, any more than do the usual knights-in-armor in Malory et al. that we usually associate with the names Lancelot, Guinevere, and Galahad (in any case, a historical Arthur would have lived and died a century before Mohammed proclaimed Islam).
Or, to pick a simpler example, Williams at one point refers to Jupiter and its two moons ("The Coming of Galahad," TIL 74). Lewis simply remarks in passing "Williams seems to have forgotten that [Jupiter] has four" (171). But it’s far more likely that Williams knew and didn’t care: if the symbolism in the poem requires Jupiter to have only two moons, then in Williams’s world two moons Jupiter will have. Compared with this, it only seems oddly quirky that Williams would identify the Great Red Spot on Jupiter with the Dolorous Blow:

Pelles [the Fisher-King] bleeds
below Jupiter’s red-pierced planet.

Or, as Lewis helpfully explicates (a good example of his ability to elucidate Williams’s more obscure lines), "Jupiter, the planet of Kingship [...] becomes, like the wounded King Pelles, another ectype of the Divine King [Christ] wounded on Calvary" (Williams and the Arthuriad 150).

**The Second Key: The Gynecomorphical Map (Private Geography)**

And here we come upon one of the great difficulties in reading Williams’s Arthurian poems: when he seems most firmly grounded in the real world he may well be off in what C.S. Lewis called “privatism” (Williams and the Arthuriad 188). Thus references to real-world geography and history and astronomy are usually ways in which the reader gets a grounding in the world of a story, but here taken literally they create nothing but a hopeless muddle. Hence the importance of the ‘Lost Letter’ in explaining some of Williams’s private vocabulary. Another piece that like the Lost Letter is external to the verse-cycle but crucial to understanding it can be found in what J.R.R. Tolkien dubbed Williams’s ‘gynecomorphical’ map (“Our Dear Charles Williams,” line 30). Drawn by staff artist Lynton Lamb, a colleague of Williams’s at Amen House, it formed the endpapers of Taliessin through Logres; Hadfield tells us that it was drawn carefully to Williams’s specifications (“exact direction”) and that both Williams and Lamb were “very pleased at the result” (152).

The concept underlying this map was somewhat more subtle than its crude and unintentionally comical appearance would suggest. One of the cornerstones of Williams’s belief, as important to him as Escape, Recovery, and Consolation were to Tolkien’s thought, was what he called ‘Co-inherence.’ At its root this is the idea that we are all connected, so that all of humanity makes up a larger entity, almost like the Gaia theorem. Think of Donne’s “any man’s death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind” (Donne, Meditation XVII), but taken literally—except that, for Williams, the dead remain part of
the communion, able to act and be acted upon (e.g., in the poem “Taliessin on the Death of Virgil” [ThI 31–32] and the novel All Hallows’ Eve, one of whose main characters becomes a ghost just before the story starts).

All Christendom, as Williams conceives it, is a single entity, which he analogized as being parallel to a (female) human body.\(^1\) And since any complex organism may have specialized cells to deal with specialized functions, he assigned to various parts of the body what he saw as appropriate roles, so that Williams can allegorically use reference to those body parts as code for the thing symbolized. Thus, when he wants to talk about sex, he inserts a reference to the Caucuses, or Caucasian girls; we hear quite a lot in the poems about the rounded bottom or curved base of empire. On those surprisingly rare occasions when he wants to evoke theology (specifically Scholasticism and the great theological colleges of the High Middle Ages), he

\(^{11}\) Williams may have been inspired here by Thomas Hardy, who in a passage Williams quotes approvingly\(^{1}\) from The Dynasts compares the map of Europe to a human body:

> [...] Europe is disclosed as a prone and emaciated figure, the Alps shaping like a backbone, and the branching mountain-chains like ribs, the peninsular plateau of Spain forming a head. (Poetry at Present 15)

\(^1\)Williams says of the passage in which these lines occur that it “contains some of the greatest sentences that Hardy has written” (ibid.)
mentions the breasts of Gaul, I think on the principle that theology is the ‘mother’s milk’ that nourishes faith (from a more puckish allegorist I’d have suspected some private joke about France being the boobs of the empire, but such seems not to be the case with Williams). The hands are crossed at Rome because for Williams the most important function of hands (evoked repeatedly in the poems as “heart-breaking manual acts”) is to perform the sacrament of transforming bread and wine into Christ’s body and blood during the mass. Some of these identifications seem arbitrary—why the right elbow of the Empire is at Cordova, in Moorish Spain (from whence come attacks against the Empire), while the left elbow is at some undifferentiated point up north of the Black Sea, I have no idea, nor why he should have placed the bung-hole of the Empire, the point of defecation, in the great Persian city of Ispahan (Williams seems to have really hated dualism).

The most apparently arbitrary of them all, P’o-lu, court of the Headless Emperor, is also the most revealing, for we have two explanations for it: one, part of Williams’s mythic geography, which he shared with Lewis in the Lost Letter, and which is clearly specious, and the other deeply private, which Williams concealed from Lewis but which is essential to understanding Williams’s mythos; a point to which we’ll return.

If the map with its allegorized human body seems strange, I suspect it’s because here Williams is being strongly influenced by his occult antecedents—and by its very definition occultism is hidden, secret, deliberately impenetrable to the non-initiate. It’s easy to forget that Williams was not just knowledgeable about the occult but an occultist, a practicing ceremonial magician who owned, and used, ritual robes, wand, and ceremonial sword (Hadfield 29, 31, 106). While it is true that he never belonged to the original Golden Dawn (which had splintered in 1903, when Williams was just a teenager, following a power struggle between W.B. Yeats and Aleister Crowley over control of the group), he was deeply involved in one of its successor groups, A.E. Waite’s Fellowship of the Rosy Cross, an explicitly Christianized variant of the Golden Dawn focused more on mysticism than ceremonial magic.12 Indeed, Roma King in his notes to Williams’s letters tells us that Williams always referred to Waite’s group as “the Golden Dawn” (To Michal from Serge 276). Williams was a dedicated and devoted long-time member of Waite’s Fellowship; there are even hints in R.A. Gilbert’s biography of Waite (Gilbert, Waite 148–150) that the latter may have had Williams in mind as his ultimate successor, to eventually ascend to become Master of the

12 Waite is best remembered today, not as the founder of an occult order nor as the best friend of writer Arthur Machen, but for having created the modern tarot deck, best known as the ‘Rider-Waite’ Tarot.

14 *Mythlore* 127, Fall/Winter 2015
Fellowship. Instead, to Waite’s dismay Williams left Waite’s group in order to found his own Order, the Companions of the Co-inherence.13

Those who have written on Williams have, with the notable exception of Gavin Ashenden, been reluctant to acknowledge his deep and abiding interest in the occult. Yet it is self-evident that Williams drew directly on this knowledge in his Arthurian cycle. For example, he uses astrology, lightly in “The Coming of Galahad” (cf. *TtL* 74), “The Ascent of the Spear” (*TtL* 49), and “The Calling of Taliessin” (*RSS* 17), but much more deeply in “Taliessin in the Rose-Garden” (*RSS*, esp. 25-28). Kabalism (the Sephirotic tree) informs “The Death of Palomides” (*TtL* 78 & 96), while some kind of palm-magic employing geometric symbology underlies the fifth section of “The Vision of Empire” (*TtL* 9).14

13 Hadfield describes the founding of this Order in 1939, prints its Credo (173-174), and even names several members: Margaret Douglas, Ursula Grundy, Phyllis Potter, Charles Hadfield, Thelma Shuttleworth, and herself (217). Joan Walsh and Anne Renwick may also have been later-day members (Hadfield is vague on this point), while Lois Lang-Sims joined towards the end of Williams’s life and was expelled a few months later (in 1943-44). Note however that this is only the group’s formal (re)organization: it had existed in less formalized form for perhaps a decade and more by this point, very likely from the time he left Waite’s Fellowship of the Rosy Cross in 1928.

Although this is only speculation on my part, I suspect Williams’s reluctance to formalize the group (described by Hadfield, 173), derived from his wish to maintain absolute power and the greatest possible degree of secrecy. He had learned the lesson of MacGregor Mathers and Westcott, founders of the Golden Dawn, that to create a structure and organization was to risk losing control over said organization. So long as meetings between members were a one-on-one affair arranged entirely by Williams himself, he had absolute power; putting members in touch with one another risked their taking action on their own initiative.

14 Williams writes

the planes of palms, the mid-points of hid cones,
opened in Lombardy, the cone’s point in Rome […]
Finger-nails, weaklings of seedtime, scratched the soil
till by iron nails the toil was finished in the time of our need,
the sublime circle of the cone’s bottom […]
the heart-breaking manual acts of the Pope.

If this is difficult, then Williams’s gloss of this passage finds him at his most incoherent:

The cones are more difficult to explain. The delicate and sensitive palms are conceived as full of points from which cones flow down—into? into the *substance* of our being. The mass of the points makes up the activities and passivities of the hands, for which Rome stands; which is an image of Byzantium as the hands of the whole being. The nails are (i) evolutionary and agricultural (ii) amorous (iii) architectural. The ‘circle’ at the bottom of our substance is Christ; ‘seed-springing surrender’ the Fructiferous Passion. The nails then are the actual nails. (*Answers for C.S. Lewis, CW MS-2; rpt Gnomon 41 and in part in Various Hands 15*)

*Mythlore* 34.1, Fall/Winter 2015 15
The most prevalent form of magic appearing in the Taliessin poems is a kind of tantric magic. Williams seems particularly drawn to scenes which describe a female initiate stripping naked and being stroked with a hazel rod by the (male) magician, who remains fully clothed. We have two such descriptions of spells being cast in this manner, the first in "The Calling of Taliessin," in which it is Brisen, Merlin's sister, who becomes nude while both Merlin and Taliessin remain fully clothed (RSS 17). The scene is echoed by another in "The Queen's Servant," in which it is one of the slave girls discussed above who disrobes to provide the nude body and Taliessin, who again remains fully clothed, who performs the spell (RSS 40–41).

What are we to make of this? It's probably best to admit it up front that there's every reason to think Williams liked women's naked bodies (he would not be the first English poet of whom this could be said). They appear not just on the gynecomorphical map (which, it must be pointed out, would have worked just as well, for purposes of symbolism, if the human figure there had been fully clothed) but also in "The Queen's Servant" (RSS 40–41), "The Calling of Taliessin" (RSS 17ff), and "Lamoracke's Song to Morgause" (Heroes and Kings [H&K] [43]–[49]), the latter of which is illustrated. In particular, Williams shows a disconcerting interest in women's bottoms. This appears not just in his poetry but carries over into real life: Hadfield tells the story of one disciple, a faithful attendee of Williams's London night school lectures, whom he persuaded to come to his office before lectures, where he ordered her to bend over so that he could stroke her bottom with a ceremonial sword he kept in the office.¹⁵ When she objected, he replied "This is necessary for the poem." This activity continued for several years, even after Williams had shifted his base of operations to Oxford—Hadfield quotes from an unpublished Williams letter in which he orders the same disciple to come to Oxford, specifying the cause: "I am stuck in the poem, come on Friday, tell me the train" (Hadfield 106).

All this might be dismissed as an unreliable narrative if it were the only such account, but the anonymous disciple's story is not the only such testimony, being echoed by Lois Lang-Sims' account in Letters to Lalage of her own similar experiences (Lang-Sims 68). Both Lang-Sims and the other woman

¹⁵ At first glance, the incredible claim that Williams kept a ceremonial sword in his office would seem to cast doubt on this account. However, R.A. Gilbert's history of the Golden Dawn explains that while each initiate in that Order was required to consecrate his or her robe, wand, and sword, the 'sword' was typically the size of a knife (Gilbert 63). If we assume Waite carried this practice over into his Rectified Order and later Fellowship, then it's quite possible that Williams's 'sword' was no larger than a letter opener and might easily have been kept in a desk drawer.
describe these encounters as “a ritual,” and Lang-Sims explains their purpose: Williams found that he could sublimate sexual stimulation into poetry (69). Thus by summoning young women to his office he could fondle them in private, become aroused, send them away without consummating that arousal, and write.

This pattern is followed closely in “Lamoracke’s Song to Morgause,” perhaps Williams’s most surprising poem, found in the first book in his Arthurian cycle, *Heroes and Kings* [1930]. This little-known piece describes the bondage play between Arthur’s sister and Percivale’s brother; here is a representative excerpt:

I Lamoracke have bound to-day
the queen my mistress in our play.
    Though she contended, with white hands,
I have driven her courage into flight
    and made her body fast with bands,
doing her arrogance despite,
    till the queen, till the queen was fain
to pray to be released again […]

—*Heroes and Kings* [43]
I would say ‘and so forth’, but the most significant thing about the poem is that at this point, having stripped the queen naked and tied her down on the bed, helpless, her lover (still fully clothed, as we see from the woodcut) sits down, picks up his harp, and sings a song to his captive audience—a song inspired by her naked body and the foreplay they had just shared, whose consummation is deferred while the knight transforms that energy into composition. In short, here we are seeing in poetic form a ritual we know Williams frequently resorted to himself, albeit in more muted form in real life.

And, lest we think this is all metaphoric, like the naked woman’s body on the gyneecomorphic map, Williams chose to have this piece illustrated by an woodcut that shows the fully clad knight bending over the naked bound figure of the queen sprawled upon the bed.

There’s a lot I could say about this poem, and what it says about Williams, but I think the essential point is simply this: I would say that a man may either lay claim to being the great Christian theological poet of his time, writing an epic cycle about the failure of the Second Coming, when Arthur and his court missed their chance to transform the world via the Grail. Or he can write, and publish, illustrated bondage poetry. But not both.

**THE THIRD KEY: AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL (PRIVATE PERSONAE)**

And here I think we come up against the third and most important of all the ‘Keys’ to unlocking the meaning of Williams’s Arthurian poems: the autobiographical element. The Inklings may have had the habit (derived no doubt from English public schools) of giving each other nicknames (‘Tollers,’ ‘Humphrey,’ ‘Hugo’), but Williams (who was not so fortunately schooled) carried the practice to extremes, assigning a persona to accompany the name thus bestowed. Thus for him Humphrey Milford (later Sir Humphrey), his boss at Amen House (the London office of Oxford University Press), was ‘Caesar’ and, in the Arthurian poems, Arthur himself. Williams’s most loyal disciple (and one of the few men among the Company), Raymond Hunt, was ‘Dinadin,’ the court’s unofficial jester. Taliessin is Williams himself, and the love of Williams’s life, Phyllis Jones, whom Williams had earlier dubbed ‘Phillida’ (by which he probably meant ‘the Loved One’) and then ‘Celia’ (‘Heavenly One’), appears successively as Taliessin’s beloved: first as The Princess of Byzantium (H&K), and Blanchefleur (TtL)/Dindrane (RSS). At first glance it would seem as if Lang-Sims’s somewhat problematic relationship with Williams is recorded in “The Queen’s Servant,” the story of the slave-girl sent from Taliessin’s house against her will, but the chronology argues otherwise: Lang-Sims entered Williams’s inner circle just a little too late to have inspired the poem in The Region of the Summer Stars, and it seems
overwhelmingly probable that the poem “The Queen’s Servant” refers to some otherwise unrecorded events with yet another of his unnamed disciples.16

Despite this, Lang-Sims’s account offers us a rare first-name look at how Williams created one of these personae and inserted it into his Arthurian myth—not (and this is crucial) because the myth had a lack that was thus filled but instead to bring the events in his daily life and his myth into parallel, so that the myth could serve as a kind of encoded autobiography, a roman à clef. In Letters to Lalage, she traces the various steps by which she was invited to join The Companions of the Co-inherence, given a name within the myth (“Lalage”), and assigned a role to play. After several hints that he sees her as a slave-girl (e.g. 40, 42) and ripe for punishment (ibid), Williams bestows her with a name in a brief vignette: “Lalage heard her name called and looked up hastily” (52; letter of 22 December 1943). Her full back-story arrives prefaced with a quote from Horace: Dulce ridentam Lalagam amabo, dulce loquentam (Book I, Ode 22), which means roughly

Sweetly laughing, sweetly speaking,
Lalage I will love.

Williams continues

And since he [Horace] was chronologically before Taliessin, I suppose the King’s poet might have seen a manuscript in Byzantium where, no doubt, in the suburbs, he—bought? say so in the Myth—the Greek slave Lalage, whose particular work it was (they say) to see that all the candles in the house were lit at the proper time... though sometimes (they also say) she was lazy and lay on her pallet-bed or lounged in the court till the water-clocks had told an hour beyond the proper time; indeed, it is even said that occasionally the Lord Taliessin, wishing to

16 Williams’s first letter to Lang-Sims is dated September 9th 1943; less than two weeks later, on Sept. 20th, he invites her to join his Order and sends her its Credo on October 5th; they met for the first time on Thursday October 14th (Lang-Sims 24, 26, 28-30, 31). Yet he mentions proofs for the book having just arrived in a letter to his wife on October 7th and complains on October 13th that the book is supposed to be out but he has not yet seen any copies for sale (Michal 171, 226). Finally, he sends Lang-Sims a typescript of the poems on December 10th and makes no mention of any role she might have played in inspiring any of its contents, which we would expect him to have done if any of these poems did owe anything to their relationship (Lang-Sims 48-49). Thus the time-frame is simply too tight to allow time for Williams to have written a poem about Lang-Sims, gotten it typed (no doubt by the ever-faithful Douglas), added it to the typescript, gotten it typeset, and arrive. And, of course, her break with Williams did not come until much later, in April 1944 (Lang-Sims 80).
write verse, found his own room dark—after which (as might be expected) Lalage spent some time in general discomfort, though no one lost any joy. However . . . —CW to LLS, letter of 1 January 1944 (Lang-Sims 53).

It’s disconcerting to see that even as he creates the character, Williams prepares the ground for yet another slave girl to get a supposedly well-deserved beating (the ‘general discomfort’ casually alluded to).\(^{17}\) Yet it’s of greater interest that Lang-Sims reports how she thereafter felt under constant pressure to stay ‘in character’ (Lang-Sims 16). Even, apparently, to the extent of not being able to refuse corporal punishment, since that would be to step out of character as a slave girl before her lord and Master. And when she finally broke character and insisted on talking to Williams in her own persona as Lois, not ‘Lalage’, he promptly ended both relationship and correspondence then and there (Lang-Sims 79–80).

In the end Lalage’s story found its way into Williams’s poetry only through the sonnets he occasionally sent her alongside the letters (duly included in *Letters to Lalage*), which may represent a kind of halfway house between creating a persona and fully integrating it into the existing myth. Lalage’s absence from the published works is probably due less to their estrangement than to his early death before he had time to write more than a few scattered bits of what he hoped would be the next book in his Arthurian cycle, to be made up of “the great narrative poems which are to follow” (Michal 233, letter of 23 November 1944).\(^{18}\)

Other autobiographical elements abound; so much so that they dominate the entire myth-cycle. Even Lewis, who was inclined to take Williams at face value (cf. his various references to Williams’s perfect marriage), thought one poem autobiographical, calling “The Founding of the

---

\(^{17}\) It may be relevant to note that Williams once described himself as a sadist, albeit “a cerebralizing sadist.” He then immediately ordered the person to whom he was writing (who was not one of his disciples but instead the love of his life, the inspiration for Blanchfleur/Dindrane) not to look up the word in a dictionary because it would “give you the wrong idea of me” (Hadfield 104, quoting from an unpublished letter to Phyllis Jones).\(^{+}\)

\(^{18}\) The move towards longer, more narrative poems had begun with *The Region of the Summer Stars* and marks a distinct improvement in Williams’s verse. The fragments are printed by Dodds, in the section of *Arthurlian Poets: Charles Williams* devoted to “Poems after *Taliesin through Logres*” (Dodds 265–291), which includes only seven poems, most of them unfinished and fragmentary, and at least one of which (“Divites Dimisit”) is a draft for a poem that had appeared in *The Region of the Summer Stars* (the concluding piece, “The Prayers of the Pope”).

---

20  **Mythlore** 127, Fall/Winter 2015
Company” (RSS 34–38) “the most autobiographical element in the cycle” (Williams and the Arthurian 141)—and, incidentally, using it as his model for the community at St. Anne’s in That Hideous Strength, with his own series character Ransom, remade into an idealized portrait of Williams himself, appearing in place of Williams/Taliessin. Unfortunately so far as understanding his work goes, Williams would sometimes attempt subterfuge, giving a patently false identification meant to conceal, not reveal.

One good example of this is when he tells his wife that he and she are represented in the myth by the characters Bors and his wife Elayne (Michael 93, 152, 234). This may be true, so far as it goes, but it is deeply misleading, and no doubt intentionally so. Sir Bors is a relatively minor character in the myth as Williams tells it; his defining characteristic is his utter devotion to his wife. Declaring that everything he does is inspired by her, he endlessly praises all she does to provide a home, a safe place to return to from the wars (“Bors to Elayne: The Fish of Broceliande,” “Bors to Elayne: on the King’s Coins” (TtL 24–26 & 42–45))9—just as Williams repeatedly laments in his wartime letters home to his wife about being deprived of all the little comforts of domesticity (which he extravagantly romanticizes) due to their enforced separation during the war years.

All this is well enough. And yet it is self-evident to anyone reading the poems that Taliessin, the central figure in the entire cycle, is Williams himself—or at least Williams as he saw himself. This has been universally recognized by everyone from C.S. Lewis (see above) to Hadfield (“Charles was Taliessin the King’s poet”; 151), from Carpenter’s mild “Taliessin […] whose character and role had a relation to Williams’s own idea of himself” (108) to

19 We might have expected Bors to feature more prominently, given that he is one of only three knights who achieve the Grail (the others being Galahad, whom Williams sees as godlike,† and Percivale, whom Williams oddly enough makes less important than his own sister, Taliessin’s beloved). In addition to being an extravagantly devoted husband, Bors as a soldier plays a role in Arthur’s victories establishing his realm, albeit a less significant one than that rather improbably played by Taliessin himself (“The Calling of Arthur,” “Mount Badon”; TtL 14–15 & 16–18).

Bors appears in two more poems associated with the cycle but found outside the three published books. The first, “Bors’ Song of Galahad”, part of the unpublished Advent of Galahad, depicts him instead as a fond father (Dodds 214–217); Elayne is mentioned (here as Helayne) but much less prominently. The second, “The Return of Bors,” is a fragment that breaks off after just fifteen lines, describing Bors’s return from otherworldly bliss to the hell of Mordred’s war; its placement by Dodds suggests it might be Williams’s last Arthurian poem (Dodds 291).

†This is signaled by Williams’s applying to him the term ‘necessity of being,’ in his lexicon an attribute of the godhead not of created beings (who are ‘contingent’).
Lang-Sims’s observation about “Charles’s total identification of the King’s poet, Talissin, with himself” (Lang-Sims 38). Even Williams made this connection elsewhere in his letters to Florence (Michal 247). All in all, Williams’s purported identification with Bors smacks of cover story designed to allay suspicions of Florence Williams (which were, we know from Lang-Sims, Phyllis Jones, and others, thoroughly justified). I cannot avoid a suspicion that Williams created Bors as the ever-faithful, ever-loving husband in order to give himself what used to be called ‘plausible deniability.’

The second example is more telling, and closer to the core of Williams’s myth, its essence. When Lewis queried the significance of the name *P’o-lu*, the dark inverse of Byzantium, where on the far side of the world the Headless Emperor and his cephalopoid minions await their chance to unleash destruction upon the Empire and drive the Kingdom of God from this world, Williams’s explanation is a masterpiece of misdirection:

> P’o-lu is the Chinese name, of about the period, for the point of Java, — the extreme point (nobody knew New Zealand then). (Lost Letter, gloss on the next-to-last section of “The Vision of Empire”; rpt Gnomon 41 and Various Hands 18)

—That is, ‘P’o-lu’ represents not just the antipodes but ‘the ends of the earth,’ quite literally: the point on the other side of the world when land ceased and beyond which there was only empty ocean.

Except that it isn’t. Modern maps of Java show several places named *Palau* (which seems to be the modern spelling of the Javanese word for ‘island’): cf. Palau Panaitan, Palau Deli, Palau Tinjil, all off the western end of Java (not the eastern, or further, end, as we might expect); one, Palau Sertang, is within sight of Krakatoa. But beyond Java is not empty sea but, to the east, New Guinea and, to the south, Australia. Only by heading south and west into the Indian Ocean (that is, back towards Byzantium rather than away from it) is there emptiness of the sort Williams prescribes. This might just be geographical carelessness on Williams’s part, but is instead likely to be more myth-making, as with the moons of Jupiter, so that in his world there is no Australia or New Guinea or New Zealand, et al.: the world ends at Java.

Why Java, of all places? Because, Carpenter reveals (and Hadfield confirms), it was to Java that Phyllis Jones, his ‘Celia’, had gone after her marriage with her new husband, Billie Somervaille (an oil company executive), in September 1934 (Carpenter 108; Hadfield 117, 129). P’o-lu is thus of crucial, heart-breaking importance to Williams’s life, and hence was given commensurate significance within the myth: as Hadfield describes it, “[i]n the
far seas [...] the place of chosen, willed and operative evil, P'o-lu, an island towards Java” (152).

Thus, Williams was sometimes deliberately obscure, withholding information that would explain a poem, diverting attention elsewhere, because to do otherwise would reveal his most closely-held secrets. Yet such information is vital to understanding the poems; the autobiographical element in this cycle became more important to him than any internal cohesion of the story.20 The failure of Williams's Arthuriad lies not just in factors like its inversion of the Arthurian story to move the Grail from the periphery to its core or its remote and unsatisfactory Arthur but in precisely this: characters do things in the cycle not because that furthers the story Williams is purportedly trying to tell (and which Lewis was so diligent in trying to extract from the published poems) but because they are thus acting out their appointed roles in his private myth, recreating the events of his life as they should have been. Thus his fictional Blanchefleur does not have an affair, marry, have children, divorce, and remarry, as did her original, Amen House librarian Phyllis Jones; she enters a convent, from which she and Taliessin (the Williams figure) love each other chastely to the end of their days. The reason so many find Taliessin through Logres and The Region of the Summer Stars difficult to read lies not in any inherent inability to communicate on Williams's part but in the fact that it is a roman à clef autobiography with no key provided.

**LOST KEY, LOST LETTER: WILLIAM'S LEGACY**

In his final chapter of Williams and the Arthuriad, Lewis presents his argument that Williams was one of the great writers of his time. Lewis bases this claim on three factors, which he calls Wisdom (by which he means the degree to which a poem makes us think), Deliciousness (by which he means aesthetic pleasure—e.g., delight in its word music), and Strength of Incantation (by which he means world-building; the creation of a compelling secondary world [Torso 190–191]). Judged by these criteria, he believes that Williams’s Arthuriad “abounds and even excels” in the first category, ‘Wisdom’ (193); that although marred by too much sprung rhythm Williams “produced word music equalled by only two or three in this century and surpassed by none”

---

20 Williams did not limit his habit of arranging and re-arranging elements in his work to correlate with events in his own life, and vice versa, just to his Arthurian cycle. Lyle Dorsett, in his study of the six biographies of historical figures written by Williams (of Sir Francis Bacon, James I, the Earl of Rochester, Queen Elizabeth, Henry VII, and Rev. W.H. Flecker), discovered that Williams was apt to change biographical facts so that the lives of his subjects reflected the events of Williams’s own private inner life (Dorsett 36–37, 47). I am grateful to Dr. Dorsett for sharing his discovery and the Wade Center for providing me with a copy of his essay.
(194–195); and that he excels at ‘Strength of Incantation,’ so much so that like it or not, his explicitly Christian, Grail-centric Arthurian world is like a taste you can’t get out of your mouth (198)—an unfortunate analogy, I think, but Lewis’s point is that Williams’s conception of the grail is so compelling that even atheists reading these poems would find themselves deeply moved by Williams’s inclusive vision of Christianity therein. Such has not proved to be the case.

We should recognize that Lewis was, with great and characteristic generosity, staking his own reputation—which at that time was enormous from *Screwtape* and wartime broadcasts (he had even appeared on the cover of *Time!*)—on trying to make the case that his late friend was not just a good poet but a great one, in fact one of the greatest poets of his time. He reaffirmed this point in his Preface to *Essays Presented to Charles Williams*, in which he declared that

*Taliessin through Logres* and *The Region of the Summer Stars* […] *seem to me*, both for the soaring and gorgeous novelty of their technique and for their profound wisdom, *to be among the two or three most valuable books of verse produced in the century.* *(EPCW vi-vii; emphasis mine)*

History, as it turns out, has not agreed. Oscar Williams’s widely influential anthology *A Pocket Book of Modern Verse*, “from Walt Whitman to Dylan Thomas” as the tag-line puts it (1st publ. 1954, with many subsequent reprints), used in classrooms everywhere for decades, includes over a hundred poets, but you will not find Williams’s name among them. The same is true of *The Oxford Book of Twentieth Century English Verse* (1973), which was compiled by Philip Larkin, who had known and liked Williams. Larkin took great pains to make his anthology truly representative, seeking out new poems and poets rather than simply updating some earlier anthology—for example, he includes one of C.S. Lewis’s poems (“On a Vulgar Error”), which he found in the Hooper-edited collection. Yet there are no poems by Charles Williams anywhere to be seen. Far from being ranked among the top two or three, outside of Lewis alone he is never ranked in the top ten, or top twenty, or even top hundred. If Tolkien is today on the point of entering the Canon of Literature, then Williams signal failed to do so and is remembered today, seventy years after his death, only as a moderately obscure novelist of low-key supernatural thrillers and as a friend of Lewis and Tolkien.

There is much to admire in Williams’s career—he was a self-made man who worked his way up from proofreader to senior editor at one of the world’s most respected publishing companies. Like Lewis a fast writer, he produced the whole of his acclaimed Introduction to the World’s Classics...
edition of Milton in a single weekend, with time left over to review a few
detective novels as well (Michal 81; see also 76–77). He wrote one good play
(Terror of Light) and two or three interesting novels (War in Heaven and The
Greater Trumps the best among them). If he failed as a poet—and the evidence
is very good that he did so fail— it lies mainly in his wanting both to encode
his inner life into his poems and at the same time working to keep others from
finding out details about that life by withholding the key to that dark allegory.
I would argue that he belongs not on the same shelf as Tolkien and Lewis,
authors with whose works he had little in common, but rather alongside
Algernon Blackwood, Arthur Machen, and A.E. Waite. It seems unlikely he
will ever be remembered as more than a minor figure from the mid-twentieth
century, but he will not utterly vanish from view, thanks to his being known as
an Inkling, to his being selected as one of the Seven Authors whose papers
make up the Wade Center, and to his being singled out as one of the three key
authors to which this Mythopoeic Society is devoted. The choices, made
decades ago, by Humphrey Carpenter, Clyde Kilby, and Glen GoodKnight
have assured that Williams’s name will not wholly be forgotten.

---

21 When T.S. Eliot calls your work “some of the most obscure poetry that was ever
written” (Carpenter 109), it’s a pretty good sign that something’s gone seriously wrong
so far as communicating with your audience goes. I am grateful to Dr. Carol Zaleski for
sharing with me some pieces in which Eliot discusses Williams’s work, confirming
Carpenter’s summation.

22 The best evidence that Lewis and Tolkien ultimately had little influence on Williams,
although he enjoyed their company, is that no figure corresponding to Lewis or any
other Inkling was added to Williams’s Arthurian mythos between Taliessin through
Logres, published just as he was getting to know them, and The Region of the Summer
Stars, written during a five-year period when he was meeting with them weekly.
APPENDIX A: HOW TO READ WILLIAMS’S ARTHURIAD

For those who might want to read Williams’s poems but have been put off by their oft-repeated description as ‘obscure’ or ‘difficult’ or ‘impenetrable,’ I would like to offer the following advice.

First, the obscurity and difficulty of Williams’s poems have been much exaggerated, until they have reached legendary proportions. They’re no more difficult than reading Eliot or Pound, and a good deal easier than the later Joyce of Finnegans Wake. If you can read *The Cantos* or *The Waste Land*, then you can read this.

Second, I strongly recommend you not follow Lewis’s advice in *Williams & the Arthuriad* (96), where he advocated interweaving poems from the two main books (*Taliessin through Logres* and *The Region of the Summer Stars*) into the sequence of events in Arthur’s reign, its internal chronology. The problem with Lewis’s approach is that the two books are quite distinct in style, with the first comprised of a number of short lyric pieces from a lot of different points of view while the second is longer narrative pieces that expand upon major concerns within that tale. Most importantly, the opening poem of the first book, “Prelude” (*TtL* 1-2) presents a quick overview culminating in the failure of the Arthurian experiment and the withdrawal of mythic Britain (‘Logres’), leaving behind only England. This is bookended by the closing poem of the second volume, “The Prayers of the Pope” (*RSS* 46-55), which transforms that disaster into a eucatastrophe, with the forces of evil entrapped and forced to withdraw along with the supernatural forces of good. “The Prayers of the Pope,” especially the lines (53-54) concerning the defeat of the Headless Emperor (a sort of King in Yellow/Cthulhu figure) and his octopoidal minions, is by far the best of all Williams’s Arthurian writing, but it depends for its effect upon all that has preceded it.

As for trying to puzzle out all the symbolism and autobiographical allegorical elements, my advice would be to simply sit down and read, putting aside for now any worry about what stands for what in the overall allegory underlying the story.

Any good allegory (e.g., *The Faerie Queene*, Pilgrim’s Progress) should stand up on its own merits as a story. You can always look up the references afterwards to try to work out the referents, but to do so while reading takes you out of the story and breaks any secondary belief. Think of it as like coming across a word you don’t know while reading a story and, rather than stopping to look it up in a dictionary, making an educated guess from context and continuing to read, coming back at the end to try to work out the referent. Williams made this stage more difficult than it needs to be by not providing a clear gloss to explain who various characters in the poems stand for, but it’s
still possible to identify the main characters and grasp the main outlines of his story just by reading the poems.

Then read it again. A second reading will enable you to see some of the patterns and make some of the connections; you’ll then know what happens if not why. If you find you enjoy them, then press on and re-read as you would any other poetry you read for pleasure and not an assignment. If not, rest with a clear conscience that you gave it a fair trial and found it wanting.

APPENDIX B: RAYMOND HUNT

Hunt’s importance to Williams scholarship is so great that I would argue that to fully understand Charles Williams, you have to know who Raymond Hunt was, and the role he was appointed to play in Williams’s story.

Briefly, Lewis considered Williams one of the two or three greatest poets of the twentieth century, and his Taliessin cycle to be one of the greatest works of literature of the century, and Williams agreed with that assessment. Yet despite a few favorable mentions here and there, in the years leading up to his big breakthrough in 1938–39, Williams’s work had notably failed to attract any significant attention—so much so that at one point R.W. Chapman, the Secretary of Oxford University Press (e.g., the man in charge of its Oxford office) half-jokingly asked Humphrey Milford (the Publisher, or head of the London office, and Williams’s immediate boss) “How CAN we put CW over? Shall we try announcing him as the most unsaleable of all Oxford authors?” (Hadfield 79; earlier Hadfield had noted that one of his books of poems sold 198 copies; the next, 126 [Hadfield 31]). Given this lack of appreciation for his work, long before Lewis began championing it Williams had taken steps to remedy matters. Most significantly, he appointed his own biographer, Raymond Hunt, who was to produce an authorized critical biography after Williams’s death that would establish Williams’s importance as a major literary figure of his time. Accordingly, Williams passed along to Hunt any letters he received from literary figures, such as Yeats or Eliot. In fact, it is to Hunt that we owe the preservation of Lewis’s first letter to Williams, which contains the first known mention by name of The Inklings, this being one of the testimonials Williams passed along to Hunt for eventual use in the planned biography.23

In the event Hunt compiled all the necessary relevant materials—a massive archive of thousands of pages, including a transcription of virtually

23 Cf. Walter Hooper’s note to Lewis’s letter of 11 March 1936 (Collected Letters II 183), although Hooper there identifies the typist (mistakenly, I believe) as Williams himself.
every talk Williams ever gave and extensive notes taken at the many lecture-
series he taught in London night schools—but in the end failed to produce the
biography, possibly because the skills required to collect and preserve an
author’s works are different from those needed to write a biography.24
However, with the enthusiastic aid of Margaret Douglas, who turned out to be
indefatigable in pursuit of Williams material, he preserved a vast amount of
material that would otherwise have been irretrievably lost—including the
eight-page26 letter Answers to C.S. Lewis that Hunt was able to establish
Williams had written on December 3rd and/or 4th, 1938 (described by Hunt as
“a week-end job”), which comprises pages 3597 through 3606 of Volume XIX
of Hunt’s archive (Raymond Hunt to Margaret Douglas, letter of 2 March 1942;
Wade CW folder 299).

24 An additional complication might lie in the fact that control of Williams’s estate rested
in the hands of his widow, Florence† (‘Michal’), for whom any mention of her husband’s
infatuation with Phyllis Jones was anathema:

[T]here were certain areas into which it was perilous to trespass. […] [S]he felt
[…] the guardianship of her husband’s literary reputation had been stolen from
her by certain of his friends […] she could be both sorrowful and devastatingly
cautic on that topic. […] [W]hen stung into bitter recollections by the publication
of some reference, however delicate, to his other love, she […] was withering.
(Cavaliero 6-7)

[I]t could not be said that a great deal of love was lost between her and the group
of people whom she regarded as having connived at his love affair with someone
else. […] Total rage against Phillida burned in her most, but not all, of the time.
When it was not burning it was nonexistent. One never knew with Michal, from
one moment to the next, which Michal she was deciding to be. I used to say that,
with one exception, Charles was the strangest human being I had ever met in my
life: the one exception was Michal. (Lang-Sims 19)

This attitude must have placed Hunt in the unenviable position of being committed to
write a biography in which he would either be unable to refer to what Williams believed
the most important event in his life—his Beatrician moment of falling in love with
Phyllis Jones—or, if he did include this side of Williams’s life, be forbidden by the estate
from quoting anything Williams had written.

†Williams had named Florence his sole executrix in his will, dated 3 May 1927.

25 Hunt himself estimated his archive to contain “twenty five million recorded words”
(Hunt to Douglas, letter of 2nd March 1942; CW folder 299).

26 The surviving typed versions of this letter at Wheaton† range from seven (MS CW-2,
MS CW-415) to eight (MS CW-166) pages and bear varying titles, such as “Notes for C.S.
Lewis” (CW-166 and CW-415) or “Answers to Questions from C.S. Lewis” (CW-2).
Hunt, who had access to the twenty-page handwritten original,†† titles his transcription
Answers to C.S. Lewis, which I have accordingly adopted.

††Hunt to Douglas, letter of 2 March 1942. Cf. Lewis’s account of the “extremely small,
loose sheets” upon which Williams liked to compose, which Lewis describes as coming
from “a twopenny pad” (Torso 2).
APPENDIX C: WILLIAMS AS HE APPEARED TO OTHERS

C.S. Lewis compared Charles Williams to an angel, while T.S. Eliot said meeting him was like being in the presence of a living saint. I think, in view of the evidence that has emerged through letters and memoirs in the years since his death, some of which has been highlighted in this paper, that this characterization is, in the words of Lewis Carroll, “a sentiment open to doubt.”

Clearly Williams had some sort of personal magnetism that tremendously impressed some people: Lewis, Sayers, Auden, Wain. But whatever it was, it does not survive him; no trace of it carries over onto the printed page of his works. Perhaps it lay in the fact that Williams was filled with a sense that his life was significant, that what happened to him was terribly important. Thoreau may have thought most of us lead lives of quiet desperation, but such was not the case with Charles Williams, who sincerely believed he was the greatest poet since Dante, as well as a major Christian thinker who had found a way to set right what he saw as an imbalance in Christian thought and practice (between what he called ‘the Way of Affirmation’ and ‘the Way of Negation’) dating back almost two millennium. Then too there was his habit of referring to himself using the royal We (“The restoration of Milton criticism to its proper balance is but a side-accident of Our existence; not Our chief affair”), usually reserved for kings, archbishops, or God Himself. And something of that enormous inner confidence seems to have greatly impressed some who met him, especially those who got drawn in and became part of his Company, while others remained unswayed and simply thought him pleasant company for an afternoon in a pub.

Perhaps Humphrey Havard put his finger on it when he described Williams as ‘a charming man’ (Havard interview 24) who listened to you with complete attention: “you were . . . attracted to him because he was so receptive to what you had to say” (ibid. 35). And just as clearly some people were immune to the spell: Havard himself, who called Williams’s poetry “of an

27 “not a feminine angel in the debased tradition of some religious art, but a masculine angel, a spirit burning with intelligence and charity” (EPCW ix).
28 “He seemed to me to approximate, more nearly than any man I have known familiarly, to the saint” (Carpenter 107). That statement was written in 1945 as part of a posthumous tribute (ibid 271) but Eliot had expressed the same opinion during Williams’s lifetime: in a 1940 letter to his wife Williams reports that Eliot had written him saying he thought Williams was “in a direct course towards beatification” (letter of 17 December 1940; Michal 101).
29 Williams to Raymond Hunt, letter of 29 March 1941, cited in Carpenter (181, 274). Lang-Sims says that Williams used the royal We only when speaking as the head of the Order (Lang-Sims 37), but this is not altogether the case, as any reader of To Michal from Serge will discover.
obscurity beyond belief” (Havard, “Philia” 216); Tolkien (whose opinion of Williams changed greatly over the years);30 and Warnie Lewis, all of whom enjoyed Williams’s company without having a high opinion of his work.

Lewis rhapsodizes about how rapt Oxford’s undergrads were at Williams’s lectures and how they hung on his every word (e.g. Collected Letters II.345–346), where what he sees as receptive fascination might just as easily be stunned incredulity. As it happens, we have a contemporary account from one of those students which gives a more plausible portrait of Williams than that projected by Lewis. Philip Larkin, who would eventually emerge as the great poet of his generation but was then an Oxford undergraduate, knew and liked Williams as a pub pal but had a very low opinion of his work. In Larkin’s words,

we [Larkin and his friend Bruce Montgomery, author of the famous quote ‘there goes C.S. Lewis; it must be Tuesday’]31 had lunch in the King’s Arms with Charles Williams, who drank and wheezed and talked and beamed and produced proofs of his new poems and handed them round. I admire Charles Williams a good deal as a literary critic, and as a ‘Pillar of the Swiss’, as Dylan Thomas would spoonerise, but I don’t give a [expletive] for his poetry. This I endeavoured to conceal.
(letter of 19 October 1943 to Kingsley Amis; Larkin Letters 79)

We can add to this contemporary account another from many years later, when Larkin came to read Carpenter’s The Inklings:

I have just got round to The Inklings, as it has come out in pbac. Funny lot they were — Chas Wms crazy as a coot, bit gamey too. His lectures were always full of the wildest misquotations; the one

30 I have written elsewhere of Tolkien’s and Williams’s friendship, in my essay “‘And Something Yet Remains to be Said’: Tolkien and Williams,” first delivered at Mythcon XVI in Wheaton (July 1985), included in the Proceedings of said conference, and later published in Mythlore #45.
31 Their reason for seeking out Williams was that each had written a first novel† and each hoped that Williams, who worked for a publisher, might read and recommend it (Larkin Letters 86–87). Montgomery’s The Case of the Gilded Fly was published, under the pseudonym of ‘Edmund Crispin,’ the next year (1944), while Larkin’s Jill was published the year after (1945). It is not known if Williams played any role in their publication, but presumably not, since Larkin makes no mention of any such aid.

†The famous quote appears in the fourth novel in the series, Swan Song (1947), p. 60
‘Tis chastity, my brother, chastity,
That fortress build by Nature herself
Against infection, and the hand of war . . . †

may be apocryphal, but I have personally heard him declaim ‘Oh, blind,
blind, blind, amid the blaze of noon’.‡ (letter of 13th March 1981; Larkin
Letters 643)

† as Thwaite, editor of Larkin’s collected letters, points out, the first line here
comes from Milton’s Comus, while the second and third lines are from
Shakespeare’s Richard II; Williams has run them all together as if a single quote
from a single source.
‡ again, Thwaite gives the correct reading as ‘Oh dark, dark, dark,’ again from
Milton (Samson Agonistes).

From this emerges the idea of Williams as a somewhat comic figure: a
funny little man who constantly misquotes poetry; good company over a drink
but a terrible poet. This portrait is so different from that promulgated by Lewis
et al. that the question arises whether any evidence exists to support it. And, as
it turns out, the answer is an unqualified yes. For one thing, we also have to
remember that Williams was not just an outsider at Oxford, a lover of poetry
rather than an academician or scholar, but spoke in a Cockney accent, very
much out of keeping with the usual Oxford manner. Carpenter briefly
mentions “his curious accent” (Carpenter 102) and Lang-Sims “his odd accent”
(Lang-Sims 31) but neither elaborates. Lewis calls it “rather a cockney voice”
(Collected Letters II 501). E.L. Mascall is more specific in ‘Charles Williams as I
Remember Him,’ in which he says as Williams read them the opening lines of
Paradise Lost came out something like this:

Of that forbidden tree, ‘ose moral tiste
Brort death into the world and all our wow . . .
Sing, ‘eavenly muse, that on the sicred top (Mascall 2, emphasis mine)

while Wordsworth, as filtered through Wms, came out as

my heart leapt up when I be’eld a rinebow in the sky (ibid 3)

The accusation of constantly misquoting is curious, given that both Lewis and
Eliot lay stress upon Williams’s facility with spontaneous and accurate
quotation. In Lewis’s words, “Before he came I had passed for our best conduit
of quotations: but he easily outstripped me” (EPCW xi), while Eliot even
emphasizes the accuracy of such quotes: “he could declaim long quotations
from one or another of his favourite poets, for his memory for poetry was
prodigious and accurate” (Eliot, Introduction to All Hallows’ Eve xii; emphasis
mine). But support for Larkin’s description of this personality quirk exists as well: in one of his last letters to Lang-Sims Williams quotes Shakespeare but again gets it wrong.32

APPENDIX D: AMONG THE GREATS?
When Lewis says that he ranks Williams’s Arthuriad (by which he means both Taliessin through Logres and The Region of the Summer Stars considered together as one work) among the “two or three” best books of poetry of the century, the phrasing implies, to me at any rate, that Lewis had specific works in mind and, if asked, could readily have named them. As it turns out, we can identify one of the other works Lewis rated as highly as he did Williams’s Arthuriad, because he uses almost exactly the same terminology of praise to describe it: Edith Sitwell’s Sleeping Beauty (1924). Lewis wrote in 1955

I must read the Taliessin cycle again. I hope I shall still put it easily top of the only three modern long poems that I admire. The other two are Edith Sitwell’s Sleeping Beauty and W. Penn Warren’s (an American) Brother to Dragons. The Sitwell is v. fantastic and musical, the Warren grim and realistic.33 (CSL, letter of 27/9/55; Collected Letters III 650)

That would seem to be that, except that Robert Penn Warren’s book was first published in 1953, and thus Lewis could not have been thinking of it when writing his praise of Williams in 1947. Other possible contenders, predating the Penn Warren, might be Robert Frost, whom we know Lewis greatly admired34

32 Williams writes, in his letter of 31 August 1944,

Shakespeare defined our proper limits when he wrote ‘no more than with a pure blush thou mayst come off withal’ (Lang-Sims 81)

Glen Cavaliero, in his endnotes to Lang-Sims’s little book (Lang-Sims 89), provides the actual quotation:

Williams is presumably (mis) quoting Shakespeare’s Celia. “. . . love no man in good earnest; nor no further in sport neither, than with safety of a pure blush thou mayst in honour come off again.” (As You Like It, act I, sc. 2, lines 27–29)

33 Robert Penn Warren, whose first name Lewis seems not to have known despite his avowed admiration for his verse, is better known as the author of All the King’s Men (1946) and for his participation in the anti-Civil Rights manifesto I’ll Take My Stand (1930). Brother to Dragons tells the story of a lurid murder of a slave by a cousin of Meriwether Lewis (and nephew of Thomas Jefferson) and its consequences. The work was heavily revised in 1979, but it would have been the original version, published in 1953, which Lewis praises so highly.

34 Not only do Lewis’s letters make occasional appreciative comments about Frost (e.g., Collected Letters III.462, 469, 1224), but Lewis expressed deep regret when, owing to a slipped disk, he missed a chance to see Frost in person:
but whose work can hardly be thought of as a 'modern long poem,' or perhaps W.B. Yeats, the poet who influenced him the most (Spirits in Bondage, Lewis's first book, being quite a good imitation of Yeats, in manner if not in message)—but again, someone not known for working in the long poem form.

Reading the Sitwell, however, raises doubts, because far from a hidden masterpiece it turns out to be word-salad: page after page of doggerel worthy of the great William McGonagall himself (he of 'the bridge of the silvery Tay').

Like crystal-clear wysteria
After the storm's hysteria . . .

The farm-pond, fruitish-soft and ripe
Was smooth as a daguerreotype (36)

Individual lines are likewise remarkable for their inanity:

Wanders a little cold pig-snouted breeze (50)

The crude pink stalactites of rain (91)

stars like empty wooden nuts (93)

If Lewis is putting this forward as the stuff of greatness, and ranking it with Williams's work, then we are left with two possibilities.

The first is that Lewis was an absolutely hopeless judge of poetry, savoring Sitwell's gibberish and the "thicket of obscurities" (to again borrow the Zaleskis's apt phrase; Fellowship 433) that make up the Taliessin poems while querulously denouncing the great poets of his era like Eliot, or Pound, or Dylan Thomas, or Auden. If I may be heretical for a moment, given Lewis's implacable opposition to Modernism and disdain for most of the great poets of his lifetime, it is perhaps fortunate after all that he never gained the chair of Professor of Poetry. Although it would have raised his prestige within the university and increased his income, it would also have given him a platform from which to denounce modern poetry in favor of writers like Sitwell and

I am most disappointed. He is one of the few living poets for whom I feel something like reverence (855)

Furthermore, as Jason Fisher recently discovered (Lingue, post of 8 April 2015), when Lewis had the chance to propose two authors for the Nobel Prize, the two he chose were Tolkien and Frost. Given the high regard in which he is known to have held his old friend Tolkien, this confirms his high opinion of Frost as well.
Williams, which in turn I believe would have done serious damage to Lewis's own standing as a critic.

The second possibility is that Lewis is putting us on: that praising Sitwell and Williams is like declaring McGonagall the greatest poet of his time. We know that Lewis savored unreadable authors precisely for their ineptitude (most famously Amanda McKittrick Ros and her Irene Idesleigh), but I have to say if he anywhere gives any hint that he is ever less than sincere in his admiration for Williams, both as a person and as a writer, I missed it.

**Works Cited**


—. Answers for C.S. Lewis. Unpublished. Wade Center, Charles Williams manuscript collection, CW MS-2.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

John D. Rateliff is an independent scholar of Inklings and Tolkien studies who won the 2009 Mythopoeic Scholarship Award in Inklings Studies for his The History of the Hobbit Part One: Mr. Baggins; Part Two: Return to Bag End. He posts regularly on mythopoeic topics in his blog Sacnoth’s Scriptorium. John currently lives in Seattle, and in addition to his literary work he is a longtime editor and designer for roleplaying games with a history of work for TSR, Wizards of the Coast, and Hasbro/WotC. Rateliff was the Scholar Guest of Honor at Mythcon 46 in Colorado Springs, Colorado.