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Contemporary Medieval Authors

Abstract

Discusses works of the “contemporary medieval” genre, a sub-genre of twentieth-century romance, including T.H. White’s Arthurian cycle, and more briefly, Lewis’s Narnia books and Space Trilogy and Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings*.

Additional Keywords

Genre; Lewis, C.S. Chronicles of Narnia—Genre; Lewis, C.S. Space Trilogy—Genre; Tolkien, J.R.R. The Lord of the Rings—Genre; White, T.H. The Once and Future King—Genre

by Richard C. West

The work of Professor J. R. R. Tolkien usually suffers when current genre theory is applied to it, since, while a long prose narrative like *The Lord of the Rings* can only be categorized as a novel, its fantastic nature fits ill into the traditional idea of the novel as "a reflection of real life." This is dismaying for critics who assume that the inadequacy is in the book rather than the theory; but so many people have found this book both "plesaute to rede in" and "for our doctryne"¹ that it is more reasonable to attempt to establish a new genre that more accurately limns the outlines of this type of narrative. This would have to be distinct from a realistic genre like the novel, and so provide for the imagining of new and perhaps radically different "worlds" rather than for the selective representation of this one, and reverse the stress of the novel and place greater emphasis on story than on character. I believe that there is an existing contemporary tradition of a genre with these characteristics, which I will call "the twentieth-century romance," and Tolkien is only one, although one of the finest, of its practitioners.

The chronological limitation in the term is not an absolute statement of essence but a matter of focus, for the roots of this genre extend far back in time from the twentieth century, back to classical and Anglo-Saxon epic, classical and medieval romance, and Old Icelandic Edda and saga. Many nineteenth-century forebears are easily recognized: in the historical romances of Sir Walter Scott and Robert Louis Stevenson, the exotic adventure tales of Rudyard Kipling and H. Rider Haggard, the medievalism of William Morris in verse and prose romances, and the Christian fantasy of George MacDonald. Yet the genre does seem to have flourished even in the "realistic" twentieth century. Many writers of the Irish Literary Revival were preoccupied with Celtic mythology (consider William Butler Yeats, AE, Lord Dunsany, Austin Clarke, and especially James Stephens). E. R. Eddison, British civil servant in Ireland in the first part of this century, wrote heroic fantasy in his Zimiamvian tetralogy, in which, in C. S. Lewis's phrase, he blended Renaissance luxury with Northern hardness.² Many science-fiction writers fit into the genre quite comfortably: think of the weird fantasy of H. P. Lovecraft, the hero-wins-princess tales of Edgar Rice Burroughs, the "incomplete enchanter" series of L. Sprague de Camp and Fletcher Pratt, some of Poul Anderson's work (such as *Three Hearts and Three Lions*), or the dark fantasy of Michael Moorcock, to name only a few of the most popular writers. Some of the best examples in this kind are among children's authors who are worthwhile enough to retain their following into adulthood: George

MacDonald again, his friend Lewis Carroll, Kenneth Grahame's beast fables, the "secondary worlds" of E. Nesbit's fictional children, the extravaganzas of A. A. Milne and P. L. Travers, Carol Kendall's Minnipin books, and the Celtic-inspired mythologies of Alan Garner and Lloyd Alexander.

It is a long litany of authors, and this and my deliberate inclusion of writers who vary a great deal in literary skill and imaginative power should make it apparent why I would prefer to spend years studying this proposed genre before I could feel comfortable in discussing it or its many practitioners. What I offer here is a preliminary study of one aspect of this genre, an examination of the work of three men whose writings I do feel that I know well enough to say something about them, the three whom I am calling "contemporary medieval authors": T. H. White, C. S. Lewis, and J. R. R. Tolkien.

I hope that a smile was the typical reaction upon reading my title, for, of course, it is, in part, a joke; but how I also mean it in all soberness will, I trust, become progressively clearer.

Terence Hanbury White, born an Anglo-Indian of Anglo-Irish lineage, is best known for what is generally considered his masterpiece, *The Once and Future King* (1958). The title is taken from an epithet applied to Arthur Pendragon in a number of medieval texts: *rex quondam, rexque futurus* (king formerly, and future king). He first published a novel (or, rather, a romance) about the boyhood of King Arthur, entitled *The Sword in the Stone* (1938). In the absence of any medieval source detailing this period, the book had to be nearly all of White's own invention. But he does make use of the "education of a prince" theme whereby a young aristocrat is prepared by good counsel and training to rule with wisdom, mercy, and justice; and he relates to this the convention of rearing one of noble blood in the country away from the corruptions of the court, thus getting the best of both worlds. In two sequels, *The Witch in the Wood* (1939) and *The Ill-Made Knight* (1940), White portrayed the chivalric world he found in the work of Sir Thomas Malory from the establishment of the Arthurian kingdom through the Grail Quest; and when he decided to combine his books into a vast modern Arthuriad he wrote two more sections to complete the story. "Candle in the Wind" brings the tragedy of the Round Table to the eve of the final battle with Mordred, and in "The Book of Merlyn" Arthur's truce with his nephew in a last attempt to establish a just society fails because of human distrust. This last section was later discarded,



except for the two chapters recounting Arthur's experiences with the ants and with the geese, which were used to replace, respectively, the lecture of the grass snake and the visit to Athene in the initial section. White also excised Madam Mim and the giant Golapap from the final version of "Sword in the Stone" for the completed book, drastically reduced The Witch in the Wood and changed its title to "Queen of Air and Darkness," and, judging from his numerous revisions, seems to have carefully re-read his every sentence before he was satisfied with his Arthurian epic. These are matters that deserve a fuller discussion than the theme of this paper permits. The main point I want to make about White's *Arthurian* now is what he said himself, that he was trying "to write of an imaginary world which was imagined in the fifteenth century."³ He writes as if Alfred of Wessex and the Plantagenets are the stuff of legend, and Malory's stories of Lancelot and Guinevere and Gawain the matter of history. He became one in a long line of continuators of the Arthurian story, in the medieval tradition of an author as one who adds to and re-works extant matter. His chief addition to his sources may be his marvelous sense of humor, or it may be his characteristic method of giving to the characters he borrowed from Malory a psychological depth palatable to modern readers.⁴ White had an encyclopedic cast of mind that liked to include all kinds of information in his work, and he was blessed with a remarkable empathy for other ages and other living creatures, so that his Arthurian writings in either their early or final form make an admirable introduction to the life of the Middle Ages.



Even so brief a discussion as this shows that T. H. White used medieval materials to address a modern audience. Similarly, the imaginative writings of C. S. Lewis have clearly been influenced by his studies as a scholar and critic of the literature of the Middle Ages. Ransom, the space traveller of the *Deep Heaven* trilogy, finds a solar system modeled as much on medieval as on modern cosmology: vibrant with radiance and life, with each planet having its tutelary spirit to guide it. This depiction, obviously, is not made for astronomical "realism" but for its imaginative potency (Lewis's shining and bracing "heavens" are much more attractive than the dead, cold blackness of outer space in much other science fiction) and its thematic relevance. The medieval theory (derived from Aristotle) that Earth alone is corrupt because of Original Sin while all creation else is perfect beyond the orbit of the Moon, is used in Out of the Silent Planet (1938) to contrast, in the best tradition of the traveller's tale (parts of *Mandeville* as well as *Swift*) the unfallen world of Malacandra with our "bent" or evil one. The mystically ecstatic conclusion of Perelandra (1943) makes highly effective use of the Great Dance, a medieval symbol for cosmic harmony and union. The Arthurian legend, and especially Merlin in his Malorian role of strategist in battle, informs much of That Hideous Strength (1945), and another feature of this book is the theme of the "descent of the planets" in Chapter 15, in which each has the "influence" (in the original sense) on the terrestrial sphere that is proper to its astrological character.⁵ The *Chronicles of Narnia*, full of single combats, enchantments, and quests by land and sea, read much like many medieval romances of the ilk of Chaucer's *Squire's Tale*.⁶ The witty and penetrating Screwtape Letters (1942) have proved a popular entry in the medieval genre of the Christian moral fable.

With Lewis's friend J. R. R. Tolkien, another medievalist of note, we have a man so thoroughly immersed in the literature of the Middle Ages that he wrote a sequel to an Old English poem, The Battle of Maldon; his verse play, "The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth Beorhthelm's Son" (1953). He also wrote many other poems in the alliterative meter used by Anglo-Saxon *scops*. "The Lay of Aotrou and Itroun" (1945) is his own example of that medieval genre dealing with love and the supernatural, the Breton lay. His Lord of the Rings (1954-55) is as thoroughly medieval in spirit as, one would think, any modern work could be, and has been called with some justice and more wit "the last literary masterpiece of the Middle Ages."⁷ It is informed by medieval conventions like courtly love, *courtioisie* generally, fealty to one's lord, and the quest. Names are borrowed from medieval texts and languages; the Old Norse *Elfheim* becomes *Elvenhome*, for example, and the Old English adjective "frod" (applied to one who has gained wisdom and experience through age) is chosen as the basis for the name of Frodo, who in the course of the story changes from a hobbit in his irresponsible *tweens* (I, 44) to a halfling who has grown very much (III, 369).⁸ Even the medieval convention of inventing a source in order to lend authority to a tale one has created oneself (for medieval people had no "originality" fetish and thought what was worth repeating must be valuable) is made good use of in the fiction of the Red Book of Westmarch which the author humbly claims to be translating. Magical aids, battle tactics, social structure and runic inscriptions are all borrowed from the Middle Ages and transformed into the stuff of a gripping modern fantasy.

There is an anecdote about Tolkien (one which I am perhaps overly fond of repeating, but one which fascinates me) which sheds light on his impregnation with medievalism. I was told, by one who was present, on an occasion on which Tolkien was to present a philological paper at Oxford. When he appeared, he expressed regret that he had not finished the announced study, but would instead read a poem he had composed, and proceeded to do so. The audience was a trifle nonplussed; though I don't know if this had anything to do with whether or not they liked the poem. In explanation, Tolkien told his colleagues that his immediate reaction upon reading a work of medieval literature was not a desire to analyze its language nor to study it from a critical point of view, but rather to write a new work in the same tradition. His impulse, then, is to make literature himself rather than to write about it. I believe that Mr. Lewis and Mr. White also shared this sort of living response to old art.

Perhaps after all this medievalism you will see why I have preferred to use the term "romance" with its medieval associations, rather than just "fantasy" for this genre. I would not claim too much, however. My own chief interests are medieval and modern literature, and so perhaps I am biased in favor of

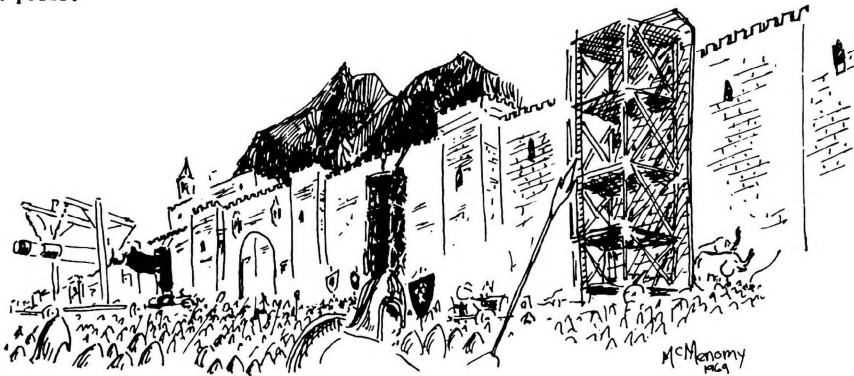
dispossessing of Sharkey from his illgot holdings requires nothing at all the reader cannot conceive of himself as doing. Hobbits turn out to be very human. Gollum too is a hobbit.

I may have seemed to imply that there are not intelligent, literate readers who find hobbits silly, or even hate them. This is certainly not the case. Condemnations of Tolkien's work range in tone from the shrill to the supercilious. Astonishingly, one frequently hears a note of anger, sounded early by Edmund Wilson in "Oo, Those Awful Orcs." *The Nation* magazine went so far some time ago as to equate hobbitism and AMERICAN-IMPERIALIST-AGGRESSION in Vietnam.⁵ Sometimes it seems as if something very important were being threatened by Tolkien. He asserts the value of honor, bravery, justice—the reality of free will and responsibility—the existence of a benevolent and watchful deity—the necessity and relevance of moral absolutes. It is as if we were felt to be in danger of losing our new found sophistication and freedom. In danger of sliding back through the age of disillusion, to the age of reason, to the age of belief. That danger is hardly lessened, apparently, even if such unsophisticated assertions as Tolkien makes are enclosed in a "fairy story" written by an aging English philologist. Most of my "practical" friends find Tolkien unreadable. There are undoubtedly thorough-going new-leftists who understand Tolkien and approve of him—I have met none. Responses to *The Lord of the Rings* are remarkable. It might even be that an examination of the reasons for its popularity would tell us as much about the bumping forces in our chaotic national dark as any number of public opinion polls.

It is relatively easy to create a secondary universe. One need only change the sun from red to green and all else will follow. But it is quite another thing to make that universe ring true. The problem is particularly difficult if the secondary universe is heroic. Heroism is not very fashionable. Tolkien hit upon a brilliant solution to the problem of bridging the gap between the two worlds when he created the hobbits. In their solid-down-to-earth childishness, in their wonder, delight, fear, and terror, the 20th century reader finds a guide who makes middle earth accessible without the necessity of suspension, or of disbelief. It is the hobbits who take us there and back again.

NOTES

- ¹ John Crowe Ransom, "Philomela," *Poems and Essays* (New York, 1955), page 30.
- ² E. R. Eddison, *The Worm Ouroboros* (New York, 1962).
- ³ J. R. R. Tolkien, "On Fairy-Stories," *Tree and Leaf* (Boston, 1965).
- ⁴ J. R. R. Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings* (Boston, 1954-55).
- ⁵ *The Nation*, CCV (October 9, 1967), pages 332-334.



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seeing a disproportionate medieval element in contemporary romancers. Nevertheless, I do think a medieval impulse can legitimately be detected in the writers I have named in my opening list, even if only absorbed at second-hand from Scott and Morris,⁹ but I would not underrate other roots and influences which are also operative. Indeed, I mean my title to apply only to those three writers of twentieth-century romance whom I have discussed in this paper. I don't want to suggest that they be regarded as transplanted medieval authors, for they are part of our age however uncomfortable they often felt in it, and they speak directly to us. Rather I would submit that their imaginations are inspired by their reading of medieval literature so that they re-shape and re-write medieval material and conventions for the pleasure and profit of a contemporary audience.

ENDNOTES

¹Besides a host of popular articles, see the Tolkien number of *Mankato State College Studies* (February, 1967), and the critical anthology edited by Neil D. Isaacs and Rose A. Zimbardo, *Tolkien and the Critics* (Notre Dame Press, 1968).

²In his essay, "On Stories," in C. S. Lewis, ed. *Essays Presented to Charles Williams* (Oxford, 1947; William B. Eerdmans, 1966), p. 104. Eddison's four romances, in the order in which I recommend they be read, are: *The Worm Ouroboros* (1926), *A Fish Dinner in Memison* (1941), the posthumous *Mezentian Gate* (1958), and *Mistress of Mistresses* (1935). All have recently been reprinted in paperback by Ballantine Books.

³Sylvia Townsend Warner, *T. H. White* (Viking Press, 1968),

p. 133; the italics are White's. This biography quotes liberally from White's diaries and letters and from the unpublished "Book of Merlyn."

⁴For White's psychoanalysis of Lancelot and Guenever, see Warner, op. cit., pp. 148-152.

⁵Compare Robert Henryson's fifteenth-century poem, *The Testament of Cresseid*, ll. 141-270.

⁶There are seven of these Narnia stories: *The Magician's Nephew* (1955); *The Lion, The Witch, and the Wardrobe* (1950); *Prince Caspian* (1951); *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader* (1952); *The Silver Chair* (1953); *The Horse and His Boy* (1954); and *The Last Battle* (1956).

⁷William Blissett, "Despots of the Rings," *South Atlantic Quarterly* Vol. 58 (Summer, 1959), p. 449.

⁸Reference is made parenthetically to J. R. R. Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings* (Ballantine, 1965); Roman numerals refer to the individual volumes of the romance: I, *Fellowship of the Ring*; II, *The Two Towers*; III, *The Return of the King*. Also see John Tinkler's article, "Old English in Rohan," in Isaacs and Zimbardo, op. cit., pp. 164-169. Many readers have noticed that the list of dwarf names in the *Poetic Edda* (and quoted by Snorri Sturluson in his *Prose Edda*) has supplied the name for numerous Tolkien characters, including Gandalf.

⁹What counts, of course, is the medieval inspiration, not necessarily accuracy of medieval scholarship. C. S. Lewis, for example, considered Scott's medieval books his weakest efforts.