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Fantastical Fact, Home, or Other? The Imagined 'Medieval' in C.S. Lewis

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Abstract

Examines the imagined medievalism of Lewis's *That Hideous Strength* and the Narnia books, and shows how it reaches the integrated level of myth in the latter while remaining on a more allegorical level in the former.

Additional Keywords

Lewis, C.S.—Knowledge—Medieval period; Lewis, C.S. *Chronicles of Narnia*; Lewis, C.S. *That Hideous Strength*

FANTASTICAL FACT, HOME, OR OTHER? THE IMAGINED 'MEDIEVAL' IN C. S. LEWIS

ALISON SEARLE

FANTASY and reality, imagination and reason, desire and holiness, romanticism and apologetics: these and other analogous pairings are often conceived as diametric opposites psychologically, spiritually, cognitively and experientially in contemporary Western culture (a superannuated legacy of Enlightenment rationalism and the full-blown Romantic reaction). C. S. Lewis experienced and explored these tensions at a very personal level, through essays into the genres of autobiography, fiction, criticism, theology and apologetics, ultimately fusing them in a vision simultaneously literary and spiritual (Schakel, *Reason*). This paper will focus on Lewis's use of 'the medieval' in *That Hideous Strength* and *The Chronicles of Narnia*. His particular characterization of this concept provides an intriguing example of the ways in which it has been appropriated and utilized by modern authors. It also enables a focused investigation of Lewis's understanding of the role of imagination in apprehending dimensions of human existence denied by naturalistic rationalism, but nonetheless equally 'real.' He defined this in critical terminology as 'myth' and attempted to create a 'taste' of the 'real' through the medium of fiction, drawing heavily upon his imaginative acquaintance with 'the medieval' as well as his scholarly knowledge in order to do so (Lewis, "Myth Became Fact"; "Fairy Stories"; Evans).

The medieval period, of course, formed the primary area of Lewis's expertise as an academic. He was prepared to define it in comprehensive terms, as characterized by a unified world view that incorporated animals, humans, society, earth, heaven, spiritual beings and God within a single, all-encompassing framework. This is described succinctly in his posthumous publication, *The Discarded Image*. Furthermore, his most influential scholarly text, *The Allegory of Love*, traces what he saw as one of the primary features of medieval literature, chivalric love, through the course of its development in European culture. These texts essentially define his understanding of the medieval world and its values, recreating it in broad brushstrokes for a twentieth-century audience, and providing a fuller background to the various guises it assumes within his fiction.

The 'medieval' is important to Lewis's artistic creation at a number of levels. In the most pedestrian manner it provides the stage-props and

atmosphere for his imagined landscapes, whether this is the chivalric dress and speech of knights, kings and dwarves in *The Chronicles of Narnia*, or the material for a spiritual conceptualization of England in *That Hideous Strength*, such as the presence of Merlin, references to Arthur, Logres and so on. This positions his work within the tradition of revived medievalism initiated in Victorian Britain, perpetuated largely through the visual and verbal creations of the Pre-Raphaelites and Tennyson. But it does far more than this. The medieval code of ethics and chivalry operates as an idealized standard to which characters aspire, and against which the values of the contemporary world are measured and found wanting. It is this combination of a consciousness unifying the temporal and spiritual, with rich concrete otherness, and a firm code of Christian ethics and social mores that renders the medieval so useful to Lewis. It enables the creation of a realized "secondary world," to adopt the terminology of his friend J.R.R. Tolkien (46), which is instantly 'other' for the reader, yet in a very real sense feels like 'home.' Simultaneously, through this imaginative engagement with the medieval world that is at once past and figuratively present, Lewis invokes its associated hermeneutic, thereby unraveling the oppositions established by the naturalistic presuppositions of Enlightenment thought, inviting the reader to a vision of reality where the natural is penetrated by the supernatural, the finite tapers into a heady infinite, and a sense of mystery beyond the limitations of human intellect fosters humility.

The rapid progression of the previous paragraph makes clear the impossibility of sustaining traditional disciplinary distinctions when discussing Lewis's fiction. He explicitly intended that his 'fairy tales' (a term he uses interchangeably with 'fantasy') operate as Christian apologetic to a post-Christian world, smuggling in spiritual dimensions of reality pejoratively dismissed as 'myth' by a generation fed upon 'scientism' and 'evolutionism' ("Fairy Stories"). His literary theory generally envisaged literature as providing 'windows' to other worlds (*Chronicles* 760; *Experiment* 137-9), and he longed to create fairy-tales with the quality of 'myth' (intended positively as a means of accessing truth at the level of experience, rather than abstraction) that would enable such readers to freshly 'taste' the Christian message, thus seeing 'further up' and 'further in' (Evans 390-7; Schakel, *Reading* 1-18). Like John Bunyan, it is a hermeneutic that invites the reader to lay "my book, thy head, and heart together" (37), or in the words of the psalmist, "to taste and see" (Psalm 34:8). The imagination is a crucial component of this experience. One possible way of reading Lewis's *oeuvre* as a unity is to see the various writings as a concerted attempt to appeal to both the reason and imagination in order that he might "by all means save some" (1 Corinthians 9:22). It is important to qualify this though with the recognition that Lewis firmly eschewed the Romantic doctrine that imagination is the *means by which* one gains access to the spiritual. While he

appeals to it as an organ of apprehension, inviting his readers to visualize deeper elements of reality, he does not believe that a vivid imaginative experience constitutes spiritual conversion; this necessarily involves the will and a moral transformation initiated by the Holy Spirit: "For some it is a good beginning. For others it is not; culture is not everyone's road into Jerusalem, and for some it is a road out" ("Christianity and Culture" 81).

Central to this link between apologetics, imagination and Lewis's use of the medieval in his fantasies is the concept of 'joy.' It is difficult to separate 'joy' as Lewis deploys it from 'desire' and indeed 'imagination.' He describes it with some detail in sermons, the introduction to his allegory *The Pilgrim's Regress*, and in his spiritual autobiography, *Surprised by Joy*, where it forms the central motif. His entire apologetic method could be aptly described as a theology of desire, the consistent pursuit of a longing that no earthly object can satisfy, which ultimately will lead the true seeker to the Object correlate to their longing, God himself (Kreeft). It is heavily inflected with Platonic and Augustinian overtones and pertinent to the concerns of this article only insofar as it informs Lewis's understanding of imagination, his practice of fiction, and construction of 'the medieval.' In fact, his use of the medieval at the various levels explored above is one of the primary means he deploys in order to construct his own 'myths'; fantasies that resonate with an element of deeper reality that are thus true to the facts of the universe in a more holistic sense. The 'otherness' of the medieval, with its openness to incorporating the spiritual dimensions of experience, simultaneously domesticating the transcendent, and de-familiarizing the ordinary aspects of daily life, is crucial to his fiction. It is an appeal to the imagination, an attempt to evoke that hunger, or desire, which will propel the reader beyond a simple vicarious aesthetic experience to a serious search for truth (Lewis, "Myth Became Fact").

So far, the discussion has been conducted in general and abstract terms. It is possible to explore these ideas concretely, through a closer attention to the way medieval elements are used in *That Hideous Strength* and *The Chronicles of Narnia*, assessing their relative importance to Lewis's understanding of imagination, and how successfully or otherwise they further his apologetic aims in writing these fictional works. *That Hideous Strength* (1945) is the final book in what is often designated a science-fiction trilogy. Lewis, however, in his subtitle explicitly categorizes it as "a modern fairy-tale for grown-ups" (303). This makes his critical essay "Sometimes Fairy Stories May Say Best What's to be Said" and Tolkien's "On Fairy-Stories" (which he refers to approvingly in his own) suggestive avenues for approaching this complex, highly variegated novel (Lewis, "Fairy Stories" 528):

I wrote fairy tales because the Fairy Tale seemed the ideal Form for the stuff I had to say. [...] I thought I saw how stories of this kind could steal past a certain inhibition which had paralysed much of my own religion in childhood. [...] [S]upposing that by casting all these things into an imaginary world [...] one could make them for the first time appear in their real potency? Could not one thus steal past those watchful dragons? [...] The Fantastic or Mythical is a Mode available at all ages for some readers. [...] [I]f it is well used by the author [...] it has the same power: to generalise while remaining concrete, to present in palpable form not concepts or even experiences but whole classes of experience [...]. But at its best it can do more; it can give us experiences we have never had and thus, instead of 'commenting on life', can add to it. (527-8)

This raises the question as to whether *That Hideous Strength* succeeds in creating "an imaginary world" in which the basic truths of Christianity "for the first time appear in their real potency," or in other words achieves the level of myth in Lewis's highly specialized use of the term. As mentioned earlier, one of the primary ways in which Lewis attempts to do this is through an invocation of the medieval in his "secondary world" (Tolkien 46). In *That Hideous Strength*, the medieval elements are not clearly segregated from the contemporary landscape of the scientific institute N.I.C.E and the academic college in Belbury. Rather, Merlin's Well and Merlin himself are carefully integrated into mid-twentieth-century Britain. In a manner quite consistent with medieval narrative, the landscape is symbolically (even allegorically) charged. Not only does Belbury ultimately prove to be in direct communication with diabolical spirits, but the manor at St. Anne's is situated in a rural village upon a hill, the focus of heavenly visitations, and subject to especially intense changes in atmosphere as a result of the influence of the seven medieval planets. Such daring juxtapositions as the figure of Merlin in a kitchen, or apocalyptic judgment within the dining room of N.I.C.E., separate this text from the others in the trilogy, where the 'other' worlds are clearly located apart from earth on Malacandra (Mars) and Perelandra (Venus) respectively.

This was a deliberate decision on Lewis's part, in order to demonstrate the spiritual dimensions of seemingly naturalistic events. So, the unlikely Ransom is really a direct successor of Arthur, the Pendragon whom Merlin awaited, and for whom he had so high a respect (*That Hideous Strength* 550-2). In a typical Platonic echo the 'real' spiritual Britain is figured as 'Logres,' rigorously opposed to the forces of the secular Britain that continually threatens to overcome it (639-41). Like Tolkien in *The Lord of the Rings*, Lewis portrays time as both linear (in biblical fashion) looking to the ultimate eschatological fulfillment of the Last Judgment, and cyclical at the level of individual human experience. Evil has to be fought afresh each generation; every human being has to choose. The

juxtaposition occurs at the level of personal relationships also: the main characters, Mark and Jane Studdock, are a modern couple, self-centered; each determined to pursue their own careers and interests, unwilling to sacrifice their own independence in order to attain a true mutuality in marriage. Alongside the realistic description of their daily lives at home or work, Lewis creates a transcendent gender distinction that is defined as of far greater importance than sexual differences at the biological level (588-90), whilst medieval notions of hierarchy and deference that are discussed in abstract terms, are given obvious symbolic representation in the dress-rehearsal with which the novel concludes. Here, animals, humans, and the planetary beings are incorporated in a scene of harmony heavily dependent upon the medieval model of the universe as Lewis had depicted it in *The Discarded Image* (*That Hideous Strength* 594-600, 631-5, 644-51). The medieval is valorized as an ideal, particularly in contrast to the scientific chaos and confusion of N.I.C.E., which turns out to be a modern incarnation of Babel (615-23).

There is no question concerning the breadth of learning, ambition, and quality of writing that informs and characterizes *That Hideous Strength*. In fact, even in the most seemingly tenuous of its artistic merits, the unity of the various plot elements, a good case can be made that Lewis intended it to be read according to the four levels of biblical interpretation that comprised medieval exegesis: the literal level (Jane and Mark Studdock's marriage problems and their eventual re-union); the allegorical, a divine resolution to the cosmic contest between good and evil (in the dramatic Babel scene at Belbury); thirdly, the moral, the progress of the individual soul (moving from estrangement to reconciliation with God); finally, the eschatological (or anagogical), denoted by a consummation of ultimate bliss or destruction (Belbury is reduced to ruins and St Anne's becomes numinous with divine and planetary presences).¹ Similarly, as a 'theological thriller' of the kind written by his friend Charles Williams, it very much follows the medieval concept of the Platonic ladder leading one to God. Such allegories of love were well-known to Lewis, the classic example being Dante's pursuit of Beatrice, which led to the ultimate vision of beauty, God himself. This again shows the affinity of medieval hermeneutics and theology to Lewis's apologetic purposes, although it sits somewhat uneasily alongside his continual emphasis on the need for all earthly loves to be made subservient to love for God, argued most cogently perhaps in *The Great Divorce* and *The Four Loves* (Meilaender 8-44, 135-78).

But, even when the most sophisticated defense has been made, the story falls short of achieving the status of 'myth.' Certain passages, such as the initial description of the garden in which Merlin's Well stands (317-20), or moments at the end, as the planets descend upon St Anne's, can evoke the quality of wonder

¹ I am indebted to Alex Jones for suggesting this connection.

or joy (594-600, 631-5, 644-51). Overall, though, the eclectic collection of competing modes that Lewis draws upon undercuts the simplicity, unity, and coherence of detail, which Tolkien identified as necessary to the creation of a secondary world (46-52). Lewis pre-empts this objection in his "Preface," observing:

If you ask why—intending to write about magicians, devils, pantomime animals, and planetary angels—I nevertheless begin with such hum-drum scenes and persons, I reply that I am following the traditional fairy-tale. We do not always notice its method, because the cottages, castles, woodcutters, and petty kings with which a fairy-tale opens have become for us as remote as the witches and ogres with which it proceeds. But they were not remote at all to the men who made and first enjoyed the stories. They were, indeed, more realistic and commonplace than Bracton College is to me [...]. (437-9)

The disorientating shift between genres remains too obvious, however, despite the manifold medieval trappings and occasional evocation of wonder or joy, as when Jane returns from her encounter with the Director (437-9). Ultimately, *That Hideous Strength* falls short, failing to convince the imagination of the truthfulness of its vision. The power of the text as a moral tale remains, but it is that: an allegorical expression of certain theological premises, rather than a successful artistic adaptation of the medieval (and other elements) that transports the reader, providing a eucatastrophic experience that acts as an imaginative analogue, in Tolkien's phrase, to the Christian Story, "giving a fleeting glimpse of Joy, Joy beyond the walls of the world, poignant as grief" (62).

Some five years after publishing his "modern fairy-tale for grown-ups," Lewis began his classic series of fairy-tales for children. *The Chronicles of Narnia* have remained the most popular of his many works, and are the primary foundation of his posthumous reputation. They are clearly positioned within the same genre as *That Hideous Strength* and, although Lewis is explicitly writing this series for children as opposed to 'grown-ups,' his observation on the age of readers in relation to fairy-tales is worthy of note:

I was [...] writing 'for children' only in the sense that I excluded what I thought they would not like or understand; not in the sense of writing what I intended to be below adult attention. [...] [I]t is certainly my opinion that a book worth reading only in childhood is not worth reading even then. The inhibitions which I hoped my stories would overcome in a child's mind may exist in a grown-up's mind too, and may perhaps be overcome by the same means. ("Fairy Stories" 528)

There is the same emphasis on the unique quality of the tale and a gesture towards the apologetic purpose that underlies his fantasies. Also, like *That Hideous Strength*, *The Chronicles of Narnia* are heavily indebted to Lewis's scholarly knowledge and love of all things medieval, similarly fusing magic, battles, chivalry and planets with elements from English folklore and Greek myth. This repelled Tolkien, who felt that it interfered with the consistency of the secondary world, compromising its imaginative integrity and otherness (Carpenter 201). Unlike his practice in the adult tale, though, Lewis does clearly separate the 'ordinary' world from the 'magical' world. It is perhaps this distinction that enables the series to gradually assume the 'mythic' quality, consistency, and power which his adult novel lacks.

Instead of the magical world interpenetrating and transforming a contemporary English landscape, as in the recognizable Belbury of *That Hideous Strength*, the rambling old country house, the London terraces, the Experimental School with its obnoxious children, the home of Eustace's parents in Cambridge, or the railway platform are all left far behind in *The Chronicles of Narnia*. Magic and wonder, largely evoked by a medieval 'otherness,' are confined at the narrative level to Narnia, the secondary world on the other side of the wardrobe. The *Chronicles* individually and collectively follow the familiar pattern of medieval romance: structured around a quest; situated in a landscape redolent of Western Christendom, where the royalty of Narnia and Archenland are depicted as chivalrous knights, riding against the dark-skinned Calormenes (who bear a clear affinity to the fearful Saracens that haunt the tales of Charlemagne's court). Even the domestication of magic in Narnia, the way it is synthesized with the supernatural or transcendent, without the kind of uneasy tension that marked its imaginative presence following the Renaissance, is typically 'medieval' and adds to the credible 'fantastic' quality of Lewis's secondary world.

The tension between the empirically verifiable present and a magical space that is continually foregrounded in *That Hideous Strength*, through the juxtaposition of Britain and Logres, is avoided in Narnia. Paradoxically, this enables Lewis to explore the unacknowledged significance of ordinary existence more effectively; the analogical relationship between Narnia and the 'real world' works by allusive implication, rather than bold, didactic statement, and appeals directly to the imagination.² To this extent, the *Chronicles*, despite their eclecticism, do manage to 'realize' the alternative space, or other reality, that Tolkien explores in his essay "On Fairy-Stories," allowing the reader to 'escape' the humdrum pressures of the familiar, in order to perceive through the elliptical angle of fantasy the mythic reality that holds together and underlies the seemingly

² Lewis was, of course, quite irritated by attempts to read *The Chronicles of Narnia* as a simple allegory, in the manner of say *The Pilgrim's Regress* (Lewis, "Fairy Stories").

authentic detail and responsibilities of which daily life consists. The medieval worldview, as delineated in Lewis's non-fiction text, *The Discarded Image*, provides and sustains this imaginative credibility. Lewis comments in the aforementioned text that though the medieval world view proved to be false, it was *in toto* immensely satisfying to the imagination (13-21, 202-5, 214-5). While a false sentimental attachment to its grand synthesis would have immobilized scientific endeavor, this is irrelevant when one turns to the realm of fantasy. There the crucial factor consists in the credibility of the whole to the imagination. Such coherence grants the fantastic a holistic vision, enabling it to unearth, or render palpable, dimensions of fact which analytic discourse deliberately and inevitably suppresses. Wordsworth, of course, provides the classic formulation: "We murder to dissect" (Wordsworth, l. 28); like many fantasy authors, Lewis, in *The Chronicles of Narnia*, resurrects in order to suggest.

It has only recently been recognized how thoroughly this medieval worldview informs the structure of Lewis's tales. Each Chronicle is carefully crafted to fit the characteristics of the seven medieval 'planets.' Thus the eerie, nocturnal quality of *The Silver Chair* renders the Moon its astrological patron; whilst the spring warmth and jovial festivities of *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* point to the Sun (Ward). This is juxtaposed, with a typical medieval synthesis, alongside the pervasive use of biblical symbolism and narrative structure. The list could be prolonged indefinitely, but to note some of the most obvious in order to establish the point: there are seven tales, the number in Revelation which indicates perfection; and the *Chronicles* as a whole mimic biblical historiography, beginning with Creation, the Fall, Redemption, Sanctification, and ultimately the Apocalypse, Judgment and the Resurrection. Many medieval tales similarly fuse astrology and magic with biblical themes or structures; there is no sense of discrepancy, the two are held together with an imaginative generosity that facilitates the kind of fantastic exploration of possibility that provided Lewis with the space to probe beyond the limitations of a secular mindset, to "smuggle" transcendence, spirituality and moral absolutes in by the back door ("Fairy Stories").

The 'medieval' in this sense functions as both a narrative and ideological device, defining a space that through its exotic unfamiliarity invites the reader into a realm beyond a contemporary drabness; yet, simultaneously, through the use of parallel worlds and consistent allusions, suggestively returns one to the familiar with a different perspective; perhaps the other is truly 'home'? Or, to put it another way, flights of fantasy are necessary to a full understanding of reality; imagination must complement reason if truth is to be realized (Lewis, "Myth Became Fact"). Tolkien explores this through the metaphor of waking and sleeping, turning contemptuous dismissals of the fairy and fantastic on their head:

The consolation of fairy-stories, the joy of the happy ending [...] is not essentially "escapist," nor "fugitive." In its fairy-tale—or otherworld—setting, it is a sudden and miraculous grace [...]. [I]t denies (in the face of much evidence, if you will) universal final defeat and in so far is *evangelium*, giving a glimpse of Joy, Joy beyond the walls of the world, poignant as grief. (62)

He is picking up on a theme that Lewis, in his autobiography *Surprised by Joy*, defines as the central experience of his life: a sense of desire, or yearning that lies beyond the capacity of any earthly object to satisfy or fulfill. In *The Pilgrim's Regress*, which details allegorically the conversion of a modern pilgrim, this becomes the crux of Lewis's apologetic argument in support of Christianity (Kreeft).

Imagination, as it is exercised and engaged by the genre of fantasy, is an important element of this desire, although Lewis distinguishes himself from the Romantics, never making imagination of itself a means by which human beings can establish true union with the Divine (*The Pilgrim's Regress*). The role of the 'medieval' in facilitating the creation of an 'other' world that is nevertheless oddly familiar in its basic structure: in terms of good and evil, the quality of 'lived' experience, and so on, is integral to Lewis's artistic and apologetic purpose in *The Chronicles of Narnia*. This becomes overt at certain points, as when Aslan comments that the Pevensie children were originally brought to Narnia in order that they might know him better in the real world, where he goes by another name (540-1). The fantastic is designed to awaken longing, to find the echo of sweet desire that Lewis believed haunts the heart of every individual ("Weight of Glory" 98), which renders the familiar world alien and unreal, a mere shadow; it is the other which is truly home. This palpable spirituality, or union of emotion and intellect, thought and experience, which he defined as 'myth' is powerfully achieved in certain passages in the *Chronicles*; perhaps no more so than in the descriptions of life beyond death at the end of *The Last Battle* (756-67).

However, it is in a sermon (again illustrating the common thread that informs Lewis's work in every genre) that the link between the primary and secondary worlds, temporal and spiritual reality, the seen and the unseen, the factual and the fantastic, is most clearly encapsulated:

In speaking of this desire for our own far-off country [...] I am almost committing an indecency. I am trying to rip open the inconsolable secret in each one of you [...]. [G]ood images [...] are not the thing itself; they are only the scent of a flower we have not found, the echo of a tune we have not heard, news from a country we have never yet visited. Do you think I am trying to weave a spell? Perhaps I am; but remember your fairy tales.

Spells are used for breaking enchantments as well as for inducing them. And you and I have need of the strongest spell that can be found to wake us from the evil enchantment of worldliness [...]. What we feel [...] has been well described by Keats as "the journey homeward to habitual self". [...] [W]e pine. The sense that in this universe we are treated as strangers, the longing to be acknowledged [...] to bridge some chasm that yawns between us and reality, is part of our inconsolable secret [...]. The door on which we have been knocking all our lives will open at last. ("Weight of Glory" 98-99, 103)

In a rather disorientating inversion, rational empiricism is categorized as an "evil enchantment"; the real world is a place of exile, where we exist in alienation from "home." Desire, or imagination as stirred by fantastical visions, provides an index to crucial depths in our temporal and eternal existence that cannot be apprehended in any other way. Even the metaphors are familiar, there is the "door," the sound of music, unknown scents, tangible markers of the unseen:³ a commitment to the sensual pleasures of creation informs Lewis's prose, integral to both his artistic creation and religious apologetic (Meilaender 8-12).

So, where does this leave us? The 'medieval,' whether figured as background, trope, pervasive worldview, or hermeneutic device, is crucial to Lewis's construction of fantastic worlds in *That Hideous Strength* and *The Chronicles of Narnia*. It is not the only resource drawn upon in order to create a sense of 'otherness' or 'myth' and evoke the experience of 'sweet desire,' but it is primary. The holistic vision developed and enriched over the centuries in Western Christendom, incorporating the natural and supernatural, the corporeal and incorporeal, emotion and reason, intuition and intelligence, fact and fantasy, was absolutely essential to Lewis's attempt to awaken a generation fed upon secular rationalism (or its polarized partner, a subjective and groundless romanticism) to the transcendent depths of ordinary life, eternity beyond time; the true images beyond the shadows. By the fantastic paths of inter-planetary travel, or secondary worlds with times of their own, he longed to plunge his readers into a place at one level completely other, but which when focalized through a medieval hermeneutic and sensitivity to myth, offers also an imaginative taste of 'home.'

³ Cf. C. S. Lewis, *The Chronicles of Narnia*, pp. 141, 196, 662, 753.

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