



Mythopoeic Society

mythLORE

A Journal of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis,
Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature

Volume 25
Number 1

Article 3

10-15-2006

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Recommended Citation

Wriglesworth, Chad (2006) "Myth Maker, Unicorn Maker: C.S. Lewis and the Reshaping of Medieval Thought," *Mythlore: A Journal of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature*: Vol. 25: No. 1, Article 3.

Available at: <https://dc.swosu.edu/mythlore/vol25/iss1/3>

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Abstract

Deals with Lewis's use of medieval legends and religious symbolism of the unicorn in two versions of a poem about the Ark and in *The Last Battle* and *The Great Divorce*.

Additional Keywords

Lewis, C.S. "The Ark"; Lewis, C.S. The Great Divorce; Lewis, C.S. The Last Battle; Lewis, C.S. "The Late Passenger"; Unicorns

Myth Maker, Unicorn Maker: C.S. Lewis and the Reshaping of Medieval Thought

Chad Wriglesworth

In *The Achievement of C.S. Lewis*, Thomas Howard discusses some of the problems tied to reading Lewis's Narnia stories allegorically. He explains that instead of chasing "symbols up and down the landscapes of Narnia [...] [i]t is much better to read these tales for what they are, namely fairy tales. We blunder sadly if we try to read them as anything else—as cryptograms or anagrams or acrostics for Christian theology and morals" (26). While Howard delivers a valid point to evangelicals who are prone to reading Christian symbolism into almost any unsuspecting text, his generalization overlooks the influence of allegory in Lewis's work and steers readers away from the rich medieval context within which Lewis often chose to work.

C.S. Lewis was more than a medieval scholar. He was something of a medievalist at heart. This is particularly evident in the epilogue of *The Discarded Image* where Lewis states: "I have made no serious effort to hide the fact that the old [medieval and Renaissance] Model delights me as I believe it delighted our ancestors" (216). It is not surprising, then, that Lewis writes much like a medievalist. In the tradition of theologians and artists of the Middle Ages who Christianized pagan symbols into biblical narrative, so too, Lewis reenacts this imaginative-theological process by reshaping medieval thought into his fiction and poetry. Although Lewis is by no means offering a full replication of these earlier paradigms, his work remains heavily dependent upon images and structural patterns found in medieval allegory. Like a medieval compiler, Lewis gathers and grafts these images into a new state of being, reshaping pagan signs and medieval lore into an imaginative and highly accessible Christian context. While numerous examples of this process may be discussed, this article focuses on Lewis's portrayal of the medieval unicorn. In works such as "The Late Passenger" and *The Last Battle*, Lewis's unicorn is far more than a horned beast of the imagination; it is also a theological sign of divinity created to

conjure a sense of longing that pulls readers “further up and further in[to]” a biblical story that has no end (*The Last Battle* 206).

Before taking a discussion of Lewis’s unicorns further, it is helpful to synthesize medieval interpretations of the creature, particularly ways in which the animal was read theologically. Although scholars suspect unicorn legends were known throughout the West at least four centuries before the birth of Christ, it was the anonymous scribe-compilers of *Physiologus* who “infused these venerable pagan tales with the spirit of Christian moral and mystical teaching” (ix).¹ Many of the tales in *Physiologus* were widely circulated throughout the Middle Ages and became culturally embedded into scripture. In the case of the unicorn, the creature became read as a type of Christ while still retaining previous marks of pagan lore.² According to *Physiologus*, the unicorn is an allegorical mirror of Christ, an animal “totally set apart” in the medieval bestiary (Callois 3). As legend has it, the unicorn was given one horn because “[I / the unicorn] and the Father are one” (John 10:30). Echoing Romans 8:38, *Physiologus* also affirms that, like Christ, the unicorn is fierce and shrewd, “since neither principalities, powers, thrones, nor dominations can comprehend him, nor can hold him” (51). In many ways, *Physiologus* functioned as a popularized extension of church doctrine, as church fathers also used the unicorn to appeal to the divinity of Christ. For instance, in *Contra Iudaeos*, Tertullian provides a commentary on the unicorn and suggests that the animal’s horn is a constant reminder of the atonement, as it represents the upright beam of the Holy Cross pointing towards heaven (Shepard 282). Saint Ambrose writes that the unicorn is “the only-begotten Son of God.” In a similar pattern, Saint Basil suggests that “The unconquerable nature of God is likened to that of a unicorn” (Shepard 81).

¹ It is estimated that the original Greek *Physiologus* was translated into Latin between the second and fourth centuries.

² *Physiologus* provides seven allusions to the unicorn as Christ: Deut. 33:17; John 10:30; Lk. 1:69; Ps. 22:21; Matt. 11:29; John 1:14; and Rom.8:38. In *Mythical and Fabulous Creatures: A Source Book and Reference Guide*, Malcolm South provides a historical-linguistic account of how the Hebrew word *re'em* was originally translated as “monoceros” in the Septuagint. In the Vulgate the word was rendered as “unicornis,” eventually leading to eight references to unicorn in the King James Bible. As South states, “The inclusion of the unicorn in the Bible was sufficient proof to most Christians that he must exist, and helped give him important symbolic meaning” (13).

Translations of *Physiologus* differ in their description of the unicorn, but all versions “agree on the essential significance of the unicorn story for the people of the Christian faith. The unicorn is Christ” (Freeman 21). The unicorn’s horn unites him with the father and establishes him as a fierce warrior who cannot be captured by the powers of man or weapons. As tradition suggests, his holy tenacity may only be harnessed through his obedience to a virgin. Teresa Noelle Roberts states, “As the proudest and most aloof of beasts was tamed by a virgin, God Himself became the little child of the Virgin” (39). Once tamed, the unicorn is killed by awaiting hunters, only to be mystically resurrected, still bearing the marks of his wounds. In *The Discarded Image* Lewis actually summarizes these popularized interpretations of the unicorn, as he explains how the creature was theologically bound to the person of Christ:

[T]he unicorn is a beast too strong for any hunter to take; but if you set a virgin before him he loses all his ferocity, lays down his head in her lap, and sleeps. Then we can kill him. It is hard to believe that any Christian can think for long about this exquisite myth without seeing in it an allegory of the Incarnation and Crucifixion. (149-150)

With the divinity of the unicorn established and validated through the church fathers and the teaching of *Physiologus*, the myth reaches its peak in the late Middle Ages, but extends toward the present. As Callois states, “At the end of the twelfth or beginning of the thirteenth century, and then during the Renaissance and up to the dawning of the nineteenth century, the unicorn was a favorite theme for sculpture and tapestry in the Christian world” (2). In the case of C.S. Lewis, the unicorn remained a favorite well into the twentieth century.

When Owen Barfield met C.S. Lewis in the early 1920’s, he remembers that Lewis possessed a “ruling ambition to become a great poet [...] if you thought of Lewis, you automatically thought of poetry” (5). Most scholars still overlook Lewis’s poetry; however, even a brief examination reveals his keen ability to reshape pagan myths by pressing them into a Christianized context.³ “The Late Passenger” illustrates this imaginative ingenuity, as Lewis uses the image of the unicorn to explore the depth of

³ Don W. King’s, *C.S. Lewis, Poet: The Legacy of His Poetic Impulse* is the only comprehensive monograph concerning Lewis’s poetry.

biblical narrative.⁴ Don W. King suggests that “The Late Passenger” is particularly unusual, for it is one of Lewis’s few poems that is explicitly tied to biblical narrative (215). However, on a first reading much of this is missed, for Lewis diverts readers’ attention through moments of absurdity and humor. Moving forward, we are met with an unexpected conclusion that evokes a deep sense of longing. The result is a jolt to the physical-spiritual system.

“The Late Passenger” opens with the rains of the flood approaching. Despite the “falling dense and dark” horizon, Lewis conjures a comic atmosphere, as readers witness a retelling of the flood that includes the bumbling of Noah and his sons, exposing their impatience, deception, and flat out crankiness (1). In the midst of a divine plan, there is a human blunder that is typical of Genesis narratives. The ark cannot set sail, for humanity has botched the instructions given by God. Lewis sets the scene with Japheth, the son who takes roll for the disembarking ark. It is assumed that all “the beasts were in,” but to Japheth’s surprise, another stranger arrives a bit late (3). In an echo reminiscent of Edgar Allan Poe’s “The Raven,” Japheth announces, “I see one creature more / Belated and unmated there come knocking at the door” (3-4).

The knocking continues with violent persistence, eliciting a series of allegorical responses from Noah and his sons. Something must be done with the unicorn; something must be done with Christ. Japheth remains indifferent. He recognizes a creature is at the door, yet fails to genuinely “see” its divine identity (3). Ham rejects the animal and is content to “let him drown.” In contrast to their ambivalence and belligerence, Shem is sensitive to the beast. Despite being tormented by its “terrible knocking,” Shem finds himself in a position of longing and possibility. Finally, there is Noah, the one who “walked with God” (Gen. 6:9). With such intimate knowledge of the sacred, Noah is the only figure able to recognize the divine nature of the unicorn. With the basics intact, these allegorical responses are worth pursuing further. Ham, in accordance with biblical narrative, proves to be impatient and self-seeking, worthy of being cursed

⁴ C.S. Lewis’s “The Late Passenger” appears in *Poems*, edited by Walter Hooper. The poem was originally titled “The Sailing of the Ark,” and appeared in *Punch* in 1948. Lewis made significant revisions between these publications; some of these are noted throughout the article.

by his father.⁵ Through this rejection, Lewis offers an allusion to scripture that proves to be both haunting and convicting. Ham is not only content to “let him drown,” but ironically speaks the words of an innkeeper who would unknowingly reject the birth of the savior. Ham states, “We’re overcrowded as it is; we’ve got no room for him” (6, compare with Luke 2:7).⁶

While Ham is content to let the creature perish in the waters of a rising chaos, Shem longs for something behind the “terrible” knocking. Through Shem’s desire for the unicorn, Lewis makes two distinct allusions to medieval thought. In the 1948 version of the poem titled “The Sailing of the Ark,” Shem states that the unicorn’s “feet / Are hard as *horns*” (emph. added). In the later version, “The Late Passenger,” Lewis tightens the allusion, making the “horn” singular—foreshadowing the late passenger’s divine identity. The second allusion requires further investigation into medieval allegory. Medieval scholars suggest that theological readings of the unicorn became popularized not only through manuscripts and oral accounts, but through tapestries that allegorically depicted the passion of Christ. The most significant of these is *The Unicorn Tapestries*, a seven panel series that tells the “whole divine plan for the redemption of sinful man” (Freeman 25). The legends attached to *The Unicorn Tapestries* surface through Shem’s desire in “The Late Passenger.” According to medieval lore, the capture of the unicorn requires the sensuous and seductive aroma of a virgin. As Malcolm South states:

Many people believed that some natural cause must be behind the capture. According to one explanation, the unicorn is attracted to the lady by a scent that only virgins are supposed to possess; and this scent—it was often described as “sweet”—helps charm the unicorn after he has come to the lady. (18)

⁵ Don W. King notes that Lewis’s portrayal of Ham is consistent with the Genesis narrative. Lewis reshapes the events of the account, yet still conforms to the tradition of Ham being cursed (215).

⁶ This line also suggests that Lewis may have been reshaping Jewish Talmud teachings concerning the extinction of the unicorn due to lack of space. Roger Callois states: “According to the Talmud, the unicorn is [...] a colossal animal. It could not fit in the ark and escaped the Flood by being tied to the outside of the vessel” (4). However, since the unicorn of Lewis’s poem flees to eventually “stable” and “manger” with us, it is clear that his primary concern is the doctrine of the incarnation.

Poets of the late Middle Ages began using appeals to virginal scent in courtly love poetry as well. For example, in the thirteenth century, Richard de Fournival wrote a *Bestiaire d'Amour* that was addressed to his "beautiful very sweet beloved." In the chapter on the unicorn he tells his lover: "I have been drawn to you by your *sweet* odor . . . as the unicorn falls asleep under the influences of a maiden's fragrance" (emph. added, Freeman 30). In a similar way, Lewis grafts fragments of these medieval legends into Shem's longing for the beast. Despite the terrible knocking, Shem states that "oh the air that comes from it is *sweet*" (8, emph. added). In this case, Lewis uses "sweet" in the tradition of the courtly love poem and *The Unicorn Tapestries*. Shem is seduced by the lover of his soul, smelling the sweet aroma of his beloved who knocks at the door of his ark-like heart.

As the poem continues, Ham attempts to silence his brother's longings, fearful that their sleeping father will awaken and put them to work. Noah stirs. However, his awakening has nothing to do with noise from his clamoring sons. Intuitively, Noah jumps from sleep, keenly aware of the unicorn's presence. Like one of the harnessed animals in the bowels of the ark, Noah's voice comes "roaring from the darkness down below," demanding that his sons "Take it in before we go" (11)⁷ Ham attempts to dismiss the noise, but Noah recognizes the sacred presence and states: "I hear a noise that's like a horse's hoof" (15). He seeks to confirm the beast's identity by looking out a window. What he sees causes his face to turn "grey." The unicorn fades into the distance, while Noah frantically tears at his beard and speaks the tragedy of humanity's dilemma: "It would not wait. It turns away. It takes its flight. [. . .] [T]he Ark must sail without the Unicorn" (19, 32).

At this point, Lewis inserts an additional couplet not present in the 1948 version. In the revised version, Noah makes a statement which emphasizes the providential plan of God juxtaposed against the finite limitations of man. Noah states, "Even if I could outrun it now, it would not turn again / —Not now. Our great discourtesy has earned its high disdain" (21-22). In repentance, Noah offers a prayer to the unicorn, but he is fearful the beast will not find a "stable" or "manger" on such a stormy night. He

⁷ In the 1948 version, "The Sailing of the Ark," Lewis originally used the verb "Let" in place of "Take." The revision may suggest that Lewis desired a less passive approach to receiving Christ—one must "take" him, rather than "let" him in. Although both are volitional terms, "take" implies a stronger sense of human agency.

praises the “golden hoofs” and “lovely pride” of the beast, yet somehow knows the unicorn will not return for many years. As the one remaining righteous man, Noah understands the punishment for collective rejection and echoes the curse of Eden to his sons: “Oh long shall be the furrows ploughed across the hearts of men” (27). Then, in an imaginative move that straddles the entire Old Testament, Lewis pulls the curse forward, reconciling humanity through the Annunciation of Christ, the One who will come to “stable” and “manger once again” (27-28).

In the closing lines of “The Last Passenger,” Lewis calls upon medieval lore once more, linking an image of life-giving fertility to the presence of the unicorn. Longing for fecundity in the midst of an encroaching watery death, Noah professes that all humanity will walk a “dark and crooked” path, resulting in a “shrivelled [...] manhood like a flower with a broken stalk” (29-30). In the seventh portrait of *The Unicorn Tapestries*, the unicorn is portrayed as being resurrected, “stabled” and tied to a pomegranate tree. In this image, the pomegranate, a symbol that frequently appears in descriptions of God’s temple, functions as an Edenic sign of both immortality and fertility. As Freeman states:

The unicorn here may be interpreted as the risen Christ in a paradise garden. [...] However, since the unicorn is fenced, collared, and chained to a tree, he appears to be more significantly an image of the lover-bridegroom entrapped by his beloved lady, his bride, and the pomegranates, as symbols of fertility, probably express the hope of a married pair for many children. This tapestry, more than the others, appears to signify earthly love and marriage and the desire for progeny. (143)

By reshaping this medieval legend, Lewis uses the image of the broken stalk to emphasize the squelched possibilities of fertility and life that have been lost through the departure of the unicorn. Perhaps Lewis had this in mind when he revised the poem from its first edition. In “The Sailing of the Ark” Lewis states that Noah’s face “grew white” when he saw the unicorn leaving. The later version indicates that Lewis changed the adjective from “white” to “grey,” offering connotations of age and degeneration of the body, rather than life-giving fertility—the presence that has fled the ark.

The overall effect of “The Late Passenger” is stunning, as readers are confronted with a longing for something lost. When Noah curses Ham

on behalf of the entire world, readers participate in a collective remorse, for “all” of humanity is guilty of rejecting the unicorn-Christ (20). The implications become weighty, as a once comic poem transforms into the weight of longing. Although the unicorn takes “flight,” the beast remains unmated, isolated, and wingless, destined to be exterminated by the rising flood. Collective rejection has caused innocent death. However, there is the suggestion that Noah somehow knows the end of a larger story, the point where myth fuses with reality. In this sense, death will not defeat the unicorn-Christ, but will be conquered in the moment of “eucatastrophe,” the good turn that will summon “a catch of the breath, a beat and lifting of the heart, near to (or indeed accompanied by) tears” (Tolkien 69). The unicorn, once swallowed by the de-creating seas of chaos, will surface again to “stable” among us. As Revelation suggests, the sacred presence will continue to knock on doors of ark-like hearts: “Here I am! I stand at the door and knock!” (Rev. 3:20).

Ultimately, “The Late Passenger” creates a longing for reconciliation, as readers desire the sacred presence of a fantastic and truly unique being. For those who seek union with the ineffable, the unicorn pulls them forward, deeper into the infinite heart of a God of whom they have only caught glimpses. In this way, the fleeing unicorn represents a sign, an image or being that draws us “further up and further in[to]” the garden-paradise of the New Jerusalem (*The Last Battle* [LB] 206). In *The Problem of Pain* Lewis explains how such signs draw us deeper into a sacred reality:

All things that have ever deeply possessed your soul have been but hints of [desire for God]—tantalising glimpses, promises never quite fulfilled, echoes that died away just as they caught your ear. But if it should really become manifest—if there ever came an echo that did not die away but swelled into the sound itself—you would know it. Beyond all possibility of doubt you would say ‘Here at last is the thing I was made for.’ (146)

Appropriately it is Jewel, the loyal unicorn in *The Last Battle*, who echoes Lewis’s words to those who enter the New World on the other side of Narnia. Treading on this new ground of realized possibility, Jewel states, “I have come home at last! This is my real country! I belong here. This is the land I have been looking for all my life, though I never knew it till now” (LB 213). A few scholars recognize divine qualities in the actions and words of

Jewel. As Paul F. Ford states, "The Narnia of [*The Last Battle*] is notable for the absence of Aslan. In some ways, Jewel takes over one of Aslan's roles in the other books: keeping the travelers on the right path" (172). However, Jewel is not without sin; his passionate loyalty to both Aslan and Tirian cause him to murder a Calormene. For this reason, Ford suspects that Jewel "may mirror Aslan in much the same way as, in Christian angelology, Michael is 'one like God'" (172). While Ford's speculations are thought provoking, it is also worth considering how Lewis uses medieval thought in order to present Jewel as the defender of Narnia's historical narrative.

Jewel is fierce, both in battle and in the pursuit of truth. In medieval culture, the most concrete portrayal of the warring unicorn is found in *The Unicorn Tapestries*. When spied by the spear-carrying hunters, the unicorn's speed and tenacity forces the men to remain distant. The hunting dogs are sent to subdue the creature, but the unicorn rears back and gores the animals that seek to restrain him. Lewis incorporates this aspect of the unicorn's reputation by explaining that "no man, except with arrows or a long spear, can match a Unicorn, for it rears on its hind legs as it falls upon you and then you have its hoofs and its horn and its teeth to deal with all at once" (LB 143). And, as the medieval unicorn proves faithful to the beloved virgin who captures him, Jewel is bound to Tirian for "they loved each other like brothers and each had saved the other's life in the wars" (LB 16).

Jewel guards the stories of Narnia with the same vigilance. Apart from Aslan, Jewel's loyalty to Narnian history makes him the most reliable source for truth that the children encounter. When others grow suspicious of Aslan's motives, Jewel reminds Tirian of "the old stories," and that Aslan "is not a tame lion" (LB 19). In this context, Jewel is a fierce guide, preserving the physical welfare of the children as well as the sacred-storied past. As a source of collective memory, Jewel takes time to recount the entire history of Narnia, noting that this place was established for peace, until evil entered through the power of the White Witch. By telling characters like Jill of the "old Queens and heroes whom she had never heard of," Jewel provides such children access to a larger history that is framed within Narnia's epic past (LB 109-110).

Jewel's intuitive gift of discernment is bound to medieval thought as well. As legend suggests, "The unicorn had the gift of detecting whatever had been altered, was impure, defiled or harmful" (Callois 8). Jewel puts this gift to use when Emeth enters the death sentence of the stable. At this

moment, Jewel senses the true nature of Emeth's heart and swears "by the Lion's Mane" Emeth "is worthy of a better god than Tash" (LB 141). As Jewel is learned in the ways of Aslan, he perceives the consequences of good and evil. He knows what will come to pass: Emeth may profess to serve Tash, yet his affections align with Aslan—the holy ideal. Jewel's premonition is fulfilled when the children encounter Emeth on the other side of the stable. While even the dogs appear shocked and eager to hear Emeth's story, Jewel is the only member of the crowd who remains unsurprised. As Lewis explains, the children gathered and sat with Emeth, while the dogs sat "bolt upright, panting, with their tongues hanging out of their heads a little on one side, to hear the story. But Jewel remained standing, polishing his horn against his side" (LB 200).

As a protective guide to the new world, Jewel leads the faithful "further up and further in[to]" the infinite depths of Aslan's awaiting home.⁸ Before the children enter the stable, fearful of its murderous reputation, Jewel's discerning voice speaks the truth plainly: "[The stable] may be for us the door to Aslan's country and we shall sup at his table tonight" (LB 161). At the threshold of this paradise-banquet, Jewel reenacts a final fracture of medieval lore. *Physiologus* indicates that the discerning unicorn was gifted with the ability to seek out and purify water that was poisoned due to a wandering serpent. The unicorn was believed to seek this water out at dawn. As portrayed in the second scene of *The Unicorn Tapestries*, the unicorn would dip its horn into the water, purifying the stain of the night traveling serpent. Margaret Freeman summarizes the theological implications of the allegory, stating that "The serpent is the devil, who brought the poison of sin into the world, and the unicorn, of course, is Christ, who redeemed the world from sin by the power of his horn, 'the horn of salvation'" (Freeman 27).⁹

Jewel's horn leads the followers to a pool at the base of the waterfall. Lewis states that as they climbed the rocks and the falls, "the point of [Jewel's] horn divided the water just above his head, and it cascaded out in

⁸ Pauline Baynes has emphasized the guide-like quality of Jewel. In her illustration of the animals passing the door of judgment, Jewel stands as the central, leading figure, guiding all Aslan's followers behind him (192).

⁹ The second tapestry in *The Unicorn Tapestries* depicts the unicorn purifying the waters for animals outside the castle. Hunters then discover him and proceed to pursue him towards the virgin.

two rainbow-colored streams all around his shoulders" (LB 217). Although these waters are pure with the "delicious foam of coolness," Lewis reshapes this medieval legend by reframing the myth into the fulfillment of biblical covenant. Jewel leads Aslan's faithful through their final Exodus, parting the waters with his horn. As the waters divide on each side, a covenantal is revealed; rainbows gather on each side of the beast's shoulders, signifying the fulfillment of God's eternal covenant with creation and his people. Behind this horn of salvation, the children are guided into a fantastic promised land, pulled deeper into a Great Story "which goes on forever" and where "every chapter is better than the one before" (LB 228). It is a place where imagination runs wild.

Paul Ricoeur makes the suggestion that through the imagination "new realities become open to us and old worlds are made new" (135). C.S. Lewis's reshaping of medieval thought illustrates the possibilities lurking in Ricoeur's statement. Lewis's treatment of the unicorn opens new possibilities for the imagination, as, like a medievalist, he reshapes medieval lore into the Great Story of truth. And, as we know, Lewis was not opposed to placing himself in such imaginative stories. In *The Great Divorce* we find him tangled in a dream-like herd of unicorns. He explains that with their approach "the earth seemed to shake: the whole wood trembled and dindled at the sound" of thrashing hoofs. Before he could find safety "A herd of unicorns came thundering through the glades: twenty-seven hands high the smallest of them and white as swans but for the red gleam in eyes and nostrils and the flashing indigo of their horns" (62-63). But, certainly, like *The Great Divorce*, all of this is merely just a dream, an imaginative legend for the child at heart. There are no such things as unicorns. Or, are there? If the person of Christ has truly absorbed myth into historical reality, we might one day find ourselves on the other side of a Great Story. In this story, which has no end, we should not be surprised to find Lewis among the unicorns. And when we find him, we will be free to join him.

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