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Three Views of Faerie in C.S. Lewis's "The Queen of Drum"

Abstract

Notes "The Queen of Drum" is nearly unique among Lewis's works in offering a third choice—Heaven, Hell, and Elfland—rather than a strict either/or choice between heaven and hell.

Additional Keywords

Lewis, C.S. "The Queen of Drum"

Three Views of Faerie in C. S. Lewis's "The Queen of Drum"

Joe R. Christopher

I begin with a lengthy excerpt (stanzas 8-14) from the folk ballad "Thomas Rymer" (Childe Ballad No. 37) about the thirteenth-century Scottish poet Thomas Rymer of Erledoune:

O they rade on, and farther on,
Until they came to a garden green:
"Light down, light down, ye ladie free,
Some of that fruit let me pull to thee."

"O no, O no, True Thomas," she says,
That fruit maun not be touched by thee,
For a' the plagues that are in hell
Light on the fruit of this countrie.

"But I have a loaf here in my lap,
Likewise a bottle of claret wine,
And now ere we go farther on,
We'll rest a while, and ye may dine."

When he had eaten and drunk his fill,
"Lay down your head upon my knee,"
The lady said, "ere we climb yon hill,
And I will show you ferlies three.

"O see not ye yon narrow road,
So thick beset wi' thorns and briers?
That is the path of righteousness,
Tho after it but few enquires.

"And see not ye yon braid, braid road,
That lies across yon lilly leven?
That is the path of wickedness,
Tho' some call the road to heaven.

"And see not ye that bonny road,
Which winds about the fernie brae?

That is the road to fair Elfland,
Whe[re] you and I this night maun gae.["]

I turn now to C. S. Lewis's "The Queen of Drum." In the last of the five cantos, the Queen has fled Drumland, has reached the far hills, and in them

She found a valley like a cup
With moonshine to the brim filled up
[.....]
Down into it, and straight ahead,
A single path before her led,
—A mossy way; and two ways more
There met it on the valley floor;
From left and right they came, and right
And left ran on out of the light. (V.155-56, 163-68)

She sees a figure which at first seems to be a giant's head protruding from the ground, then a thornbush, and finally a horse and rider. The rider speaks to her:

'Keep, keep,' he bade her, 'On the midmost moss-way,
Seek past the cross-way to the land you long for.
Eat, eat,' he gave her of the loaves of faerie.
'Eat the brave honey of bees no man enslaveth.
Heed not the road upon the right—'twill lead you
To heaven's height and the yoke whence I have freed you;
Nor seek not to the left, that so you come not
Through the world's cleft into that world I name not.
Keep, keep the centre!' (V.199-207)

The rider's speech continues, but this excerpt is enough to show the similarity of theological geography in the two works. The three roads are those to Heaven, Hell, and Elfland, (or, in Lewis's poem, the "elfin country" [III.62] and the "fairy land" [V.293]). I should note that what I have identified is not original with me: Carol Ann Brown first pointed out Lewis's use of "Thomas Rymer" over twenty years ago.

But Lewis's choice of the three ways is interesting. As readers of Lewis know, he is a great one for setting up either/or arguments—disjunctive syllogisms, to be more formal. He normally sees the world in black or white terms; he is not one, ordinarily, for shades of gray. But here the Queen is

offered a third way. Admittedly, she is told that every tenth year the fairies must offer a tithe of their folk to Hell (V.257-258; cp. V.293-95), but nonetheless a third way—which she chooses. Lewis does not offer the ghosts in *The Great Divorce* a choice of a third way.

Two fairly obvious comments need to be made about this third way. First, a historical comment. Lewis wrote the earliest surviving fragment of this poem, which Don W. King titles “The Silence of the Night,” in 1918; under the title “The King of Drum” he worked on it in 1927; and, according to Walter Hooper, he completed “The Queen of Drum” in 1933-34 (xii-xiii). This is simply a way of indicating that Lewis began the poem when he was not a Christian but completed it after his conversion; *The Pilgrim’s Regress* was published in 1933, the same time as Hooper’s dating of this poem’s final version. Some of the touches, such as the tithe paid to Hell, which Lewis borrowed and modified from another Scottish ballad, “Tam Lin” (Childe No. 39), show the Christian influence. (The martyrdom of the Archbishop and the poem’s Dantean imagery are other Christian aspects, but they will not be pursued here.) Allowing the Queen a third choice, a third way, is no doubt a pre-Christian element in Lewis’s writing. One may compare it to such an early poem as Lewis’s “Night” (*Spirits in Bondage* No. 29), in which the speaker desires to join the fairies, “the windy folk” (even at the cost of salvation, the last line hints). This, then, is the historical explanation of the poem’s basic plot.

But, second, a psychological comment is needed to answer the question, “What did the fairy land mean to Lewis when he wrote this poem?” The only way this can be answered with fair security is to rephrase the question, “What does fairy land stand for in this poem?” If Lewis wrote well, he will have said in the poem what he intended to say. Thus, the second question answers the first.

Since Lewis wrote the poem during both his atheistic and his Christian years, what it says about fairy land is complicated. It makes three different but related statements, the first complicated in itself. *Primo*, then, one may consider the Queen of Drum in the early parts of the poem. Her first appearance is in a hallway of the palace where the king, upon seeing her, charges her with having “[. . .] been abroad by night—not known your bed / More than an hour!” (I.ii.39-40). “Is it true?” he asks, trying to check his charges (I.iii.40). Lewis’s description of her shows that it is true:

She [...] was tired, the blood
Drained from her quiet cheek. Wind-blown skies
Had havocked in her hair, and in her eyes
Printed their reckless image. (I.iii.45-48)

Later, in the meeting of the Drummian council, the chancellor raises the question of the Queen's nocturnal adventures. He indicates that the Queen leaves the low land of Drum (I.vi.144) and goes toward the hills (I.iii.150); a younger member of the council suggests she goes beyond the hills, to the far mountains at night (I.vi.174-75).

The student of Lewis will remember that he wrote in *Surprised by Joy* that the sight of the Castlereagh Hills from his nursery window made him from an early age a devotee of the Blue Flower of German Romanticism, of the search for the unattainable, often using the image of far hills or mountains (*Surprised* 14; cf. Christopher). Thus, one's natural suspicion is that Lewis is depicting the same idea here, but in a pre-Christian version where this longing, this *Sehnsucht*, does not lead to God. This will be even clearer when one reaches the third thing that faerie means.

The Queen's later description of the place she goes, when she is addressing the council, is brief and impressionistic:

['...] that song, those giant words,
Louder than woods that thundered, scattering birds
Like leaves along the sky, and [...] the throats
Louder than cedars there whipt flat as oats . . .
Birds tumbled . . . the sky dipped . . .' (I.vii.293-97)

The song and the throats singing it are obviously powerful and impressive. Perhaps in these days of electronically-amplified rock concerts, Lewis's image does not create the magical strangeness that was his intention; but a historically-aware reading still allows a recipient to see the power of the fairies or other creatures in their land.

The Archbishop, later, recalls other details of what the Queen said to the council: a "wild tale . . . of storm and laughter / And hunting on the hills" (III.34-35). But that belongs to some of the specifics of fairy land that will be mentioned below with imagery of the fairies roaming their "holy hills"—

although *holy* probably simply indicates that the fairies are supernatural, not that they are, in any common sense, divine.

In the Queen's debate with the Archbishop in the afternoon, following the council meeting in the morning, as she describes her desire for the far mountains, her language reflects that Romantic longing: "What mockery is this[?]" she asks the prelate, who has suggested that life in this world is good and satisfying—

[']What jailor's pittance offered in the prison of earth,
 To that unbounded appetite for larger bliss
 Not born with me, but older than my mortal birth? . . .
 When shall I be at home? When shall I find my rest?
 [.]
 [. .] if this threadbare vanity of days, this lean
 And never-ceasing world were all—if I must lose
 The air that breathes across it from the land I've seen,
 About my neck tonight I'd slip the noose
 And end the longing.['] (III.73-77, 81-85)

"The air . . . from the [far-off] land" is a typical Romantic notion, perhaps with the traditional pun of *wind* (here *air*) and *spirit* that is found in the Hebrew *ru'ah*, the Greek *pneuma*, and the Latin *spiritus*. Here the call of the spirit is not that of the Holy Spirit, of course, but of the elven spirits. In this discussion with the Archbishop, the Queen is also more forthcoming about what she has experienced at night: "[']Where is my home / Save where the immortals in their exultation, / Moon-led, their holy hills forever roam?[']" (III.190-92).

She goes on to say that

['. . .] beauty called me into lonely places,
 Where dark Remembrance haunts me with eternal smart,
 Remembrance, the unmerciful, the well of love,
 Recalling the far dances, the far-distant faces,
 Whispering me 'What does this—and this—remind you of?' (III.196-200)

Although Remembrance, with a capital R, is not usually listed among Lewis's terms for *Sehnsucht*—along with Romanticism, Joy, Glory, Heaven,

Desirable, and the rest (*Surprised* 158, 160, 167)— still he seems to be using it in the same way.

Technically, a reader might object, “If the Queen can remember directly the immortals on their hills, why does she need to have things of this world, the ‘this—and this’ of her speech—that remind her indirectly of that other realm? Does not the use of ‘dark Remembrance’ seem Platonic, with an individual recovering the idea of the Beautiful, for example, that was experienced directly before birth in this world but now has to be regained from the imperfect imitations of it in this world?” Logically, this is an objection hard to answer. Perhaps the best way to avoid the objection’s full force is to say that fairy land is a magical, shifting place, hard to pin down. It takes all the remembering one can do, direct and indirect, to keep it in consciousness.

But if one applies this objection to Lewis’s beliefs, it does not seem valid. A reader of *Surprised by Joy* notes that *Sehnsucht* calls to Lewis from both nature and Norse myth (14, 22-23, 74-75); Lewis eventually decides the image through which the longing comes is not as important as the longing itself as a hint of something outside of this world (206-09, 223-24). The Queen is not this philosophical. They both find reminders in this world—equivalent to Lewis looking at an Arthur Rackham illustration for Wagner’s Ring cycle (74)—and she has direct experiences of the thing she desires. Probably these direct experiences are not an indication she is a mystic, for she journeys to the mountains physically; they are as if Lewis had walked across the rainbow bridge to Asgard and watched Odin, Thor, and Freya.

Can people have direct experiences of the supernatural? While Lewis can create such journeys for the Queen in this poem, he did not claim such journeys himself. John Keats, in “Ode to a Nightingale,” imagines a joining with “the Queen-Moon” and “her starry Fays”; but the experience is not successful. On the other hand, many people, in various cultural traditions, have claimed direct, basically physical experiences of their gods and of supernatural realms. The Queen’s physical journey to elfin mountains is no stranger than the Bible’s accounts of persons physically lifted up to a Heaven above the sky, literally considered.

There is, in the poem, a further tie to the early Lewis. The Queen says, “beauty called me” (III.196). Lewis, in a 23 May 1918 letter to Arthur Greeves, wrote “[. . .] I have formulated my equation Matter = Nature = Satan. And on

the other side Beauty, the only spiritual & not-natural thing that I have yet found" (*They Stand Together* 214).

In some of his poems in *Spirits in Bondage*, Lewis saw beauty in much the same way, in contrast to this world, especially to the front lines of World War I ("De Profundis" [No. 12], the second "Satan Speaks" [No. 13], and especially "Dungeon Grates" [No. 15]). If fairy land is taken as a symbol for beauty, as the Queen's phrase suggests, then it is an important concern of the young Lewis.

But the Queen's concern for fairy land is only the first of three views of the realm that need to be considered. *Secundo*, the poem suggests that fairy land is the realm of dreams. It opens with a parenthetical section about a return to the palace and a waking up (I.i.1-8). When the Queen interrupts the council meeting, she accuses the King, her husband, and the General of also wandering at night in their dreams.

[']Five hours ago
Where were you?—and with whom?—how far away?
Borrowing what wings of speed when break of day
Recalled you, to be ready, here, to rise
In the nick of time, and with your formal eyes
And grave talk, to belie that other face
And voice you've shown us in a different place?['] (I.vii.225-231)

After no one will respond to her at the council, it is revealed in the conversation that afternoon between the King and his Chancellor that they suspect what she says may be true. The King says that the clergy

['. . .] keep one eye shut just because they know—
Don't we all know?
At bottom?—that this World in which we draw
Our salaries, make our bows, and keep the law,
This legible, plain universe we use
For waking business, is a thing men choose
By leaving out . . . well, much; our editing,
(With expurgations) of some larger thing?['] (II.122-29)

The Chancellor's experiences add to the situation; he is not quite certain his dreams are entirely dreams. When the King says that the Queen goes to the mountains in person, the Chancellor asks:

'Didn't we?

I put a bold face on while she was making
Her speech this morning: but a knee-cap aching
And a bruised shin kept running in my head.
The devil!—how should knees get knocks in bed?' (II.151-54)

The King thinks they may respond psychosomatically to their dream experiences (II.155-56), but the point is made both that the land of dreams and the land of fairies are in some way identical and that what happens in this dual realm affects the dreamer.

The Queen and the Archbishop discuss dreams in their conversation, but only briefly: they do not develop the concept of dreams further (III.21-30), turning instead to a Christian either/or statement on the Archbishop's part, which excludes fairy land.

But what does this identification of the elfin country and dreamland mean? I tentatively offer two related answers. First, however, a disclaimer. I doubt that, for Lewis, all dreams were created equal. For example, after World War I, Lewis had a recurring nightmare about the war for years (Sayer 139, quoting from the unpublished *Lewis Papers*). Lewis no doubt understood exactly why that dream came and did not see it as anything tied to beauty, to other-worldly mysteries, or to numinous dreams. That being said, there are two reasons to connect dreamland and fairyland for the pre-Christian Lewis.

First, Carl Jung had indicated that dreams and the unconscious generally were a realm of archetypes. (Sigmund Freud does not apply here, although mentioned in one line [IV.ii.48]; his work is in a general way parallel, but "The Queen of Drum" would have to be more sexual than it is—unless I am missing the symbolism—for Freud to have significance.) Are the fairies archetypal? Certainly the imagery Lewis employs for them is generalized. Theirs is a world of storm and laughter and hunting; they are moon-led, roaming their hills. More significantly, theirs is a world of beauty; theirs is a realm of almost equal appeal as Heaven and Hell—the moral, the immoral, and the aesthetic, one might say. *Almost* equal, because the tithe given to Hell is an inequality. But is a realm of archetypal beauty Jungian? Is it not more a Platonic dreamland than one of analytic psychology? It does not have quite the same type of resonance as an anima figure or the wise woman archetype; but perhaps, in fairy land's changeableness—a giant's head, a thornbush, a horse and rider—

and its tenth-year rupture, faerie can be seen as equivalent of a gifted but unstable personality.

That was the first tentative answer. The second is related. Jung found psychological truths in dreams, but truths of one sort or another have been found in dreams for ages. I am not thinking of Biblical dreams of fat cattle and lean cattle, for Lewis of this part of the poem was presumably not yet Christian. But I am thinking of dreams and visions in the *Aeneid* and the *Metamorphoses*, of dreams in Chaucer, of dreams in almost all the traditional literature that Lewis read and studied.

Thus dreams are for revealing the truth, whether in a psychological way, a loosely Jungian way, or in a traditional, pagan, and medieval way. In the poem, the dreams are of the more intense life of far mountains; but most people of Drum, that low-lying, foggy place, forget their dreams on waking. (Lewis wrote equally of the mist of Ireland fogging the people's minds in his "Irish Nocturne" [*Spirits in Bondage* No. 5].)

This is the second of the three comments the poem makes about fairy land, that it is the equivalent to the world of dreams. For the final comment, *tertio*, I turn to two speeches near the end of the poem. The elvish rider on the horse who appears to the Queen in the moonlit valley says to her:

[']Find the portals
That chosen mortals at the world's edge enter.
Isles untrampled by the warring legions
Of Heaven and Darkness—the unreckoned regions
That only as fable in His world appear
Who seals man's ear as much as He is able . . .
Many are the ancient mansions,
Isles His wars defile not,
Woods and land unwounding
The want whereof did haunt you;
Asked for long with anguish,
They open now past hoping
—All you craved, incarnate[,]
Come like dream to Drum-land.' (V.207-220)

The problem with this speech is that Lewis, or at any rate the narrator of the poem, implies and then states that this speech to the Queen contains lies: the fairy is "smiling to beguile her," he says (V.191), and "poignant [. . .] was

his words' deceiving" (V.196-197). Within the context of the poem, it is difficult to say precisely what this warning means. Obviously, the realm of fairy is not, according to tradition, entirely veracious. It never has been.

But what is the lie or lies in this speech? Is it that there are realms not involved in the conflict of good and evil? Or is it that God tries to keep news of these realms from humanity? Or is it that the realm of fairy land is open to the Queen? Or is it that the Queen or any mortal can come dreamlike to stay in those far hills? Or is the lie something not said, something omitted—that the Queen can stay forever in fairy land, when she cannot? This latter will be suggested by the second speech to be considered.

Obviously, two biographical readings of this speech with its lying assurance are possible. If Lewis wrote this substantially before he became a Christian, this reflects the period when he thought the physical world was all that existed and the myths he cared for most were lies (*Surprised by Joy* 161). Lewis then would have loved the mythic land of fairie, of beauty—but he could not believe in it. On the other hand, if these lines were added after Lewis became a Christian, then their purpose may well be to introduce Lewis's either/or. In this case, Heaven or Hell, with fairy land, at least for mortals, an uncertainty. From the present knowledge of the manuscript tradition, there seems no way to decide between these possibilities.

Perhaps it is appropriate that there be uncertainty about the message that comes from fairy land. On the other hand, there is a third statement about the fairy's invitation, given by the slain Archbishop, which in addition sets up the tithe surrendered to Hell. The spirit of the Archbishop says to the Queen, in part:

[']Believe not the seducing elf.

Daughter, turn back, have pity yet upon yourself[.]

Go not to the unwintering land where they who dwell

Pay each tenth year the tenth soul of their tribe to Hell.

Hear not the voice that promises, but rather hear

His who commands, and fear.['] (V.255-260)

Earlier it was mentioned that this tithing process comes from the ballad "Tam Lin." What was not said was that this is also a ballad about one who has gone to fairy land. Tam Lin, a human taken by the queen of fairies, is rescued by Janet, a woman on whom he has fathered a child. This ballad says the tithe

is paid to Hell every seven years, rather than Lewis's ten, but another aspect is important in this twenty-fourth stanza:

'And pleasant is the fairy land,
But, an eerie tale to tell,
Ay at the end of seven years
We pay a tiend to hell;
I am sae fair and fu o flesh,
I'm feared it be mysel.['] (ll. 102-07)

This is said by Tam Lin to Janet before his rescue from faerie. The implication is that the fairies take mortals to their realm; but at the end of seven (or ten) years, they use their humans to pay their tithe.

However, Lewis does not pick up this implication that humans, "sae fair and fu o flesh," are used for the payment. The Archbishop simply mentions a tithe. The narrative voice reaffirms this about the Queen at the end:

And so, the story tells, she passed away
Out of the world: but if she dreams to-day
In fairy land, or if she wakes in Hell,
(The chance being one in ten) it doesn't tell. (V.291-94)

For Lewis, however, these odds would not have been appealing. He comments in *Surprised by Joy* that the impulse to gamble had been left out of his personality (101). If one imagines the fairies gathering every ten years to draw lots, rather as in Shirley Jackson's "Lottery," one can understand their recruiting of new members to their community to increase the chance of surviving the next tithe. Having elfin children under these rules is problematic emotionally. Without recruitment, faerie shrinks. (For each hundred, down to a quarter in 130 years: 100 90 81 73 64 58 52 47 42 38 34 31 28 25, etc. If one rounds the numbers to the nearest tenth, four or five fairies will finally survive.)

The Queen of Drum could be one of the final survivors, but the long-range odds are certainly against her. She of course is the protagonist of the poem: the young Romantic who has sought beauty and intensity of feeling in dream and vision and in reality, who has fled to the far mountains, the realm of faerie, and who (most likely) will end in Hell. Whatever Lewis's plan for the poem when he began it in his pre-Christian days, he has shaped it, still within

the folklore tradition of the Childe Ballads, into a Christian poem in which the Queen of Drum, the most sympathetic figure in the poem, defiantly seeks what may well end in being, and, indeed, if Tam Lin is right, what quickly will be, her own damnation. And this is the third thing that fairy land stands for in this poem—for the pull of *Sehnsucht*, for dreams of a magical existence, and finally for damnation.

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