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## Mythcon 50

Looking Back, Moving Forward

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### The Arthurian Myth in Modern Literature

#### **Abstract**

Discusses Moorman's work, which analyzes how Arthurian legend is treated by Charles Williams, T.S. Eliot, and C.S. Lewis.

#### **Additional Keywords**

Eliot, T.S.—Knowledge—Arthurian romances; Eliot, T.S. *The Waste Land*; Lewis, C.S.—Knowledge—Arthurian romances; Lewis, C.S. *That Hideous Strength*; Moorman, Charles. *Arthurian Triptych*—Criticism and interpretation; Williams, Charles—Knowledge—Arthurian romances; Williams, Charles. *Taliessin Through Logres*

THE ARTHURIAN MYTH IN MODERN LITERATURE  
by Simone Wilson

Arthurian Triptych, written by Charles Moorman, traces the development of myth in primitive society, in which it functioned as a means of bringing order to a chaotic universe, and goes on to analyze a similar use of myth today. It takes as its example the Arthurian legend as used in modern times by Charles Williams, T.S. Eliot, and C.S. Lewis: each employs elements of this legend to form a view of reality. Yet they use it not as allegory or metaphor; a myth is something which is intrinsically true but which is expressed in mythical language because it can't be properly expressed in ordinary language. The workings of the real world coexist simultaneously on two levels of discourse, using the terms of both indiscriminately.\* The myth, therefore, is a fusion of a symbol of truth and the truth itself, a blend which Moorman describes as "sacramental:" the thing being symbolized exists in the symbol, so that the two may stand for one another. "Myth... becomes then a special sort of symbol at once more complex and more meaningful." The author can, in referring to a myth, "call forth by implication the whole substance and meaning" and imagery contained in it, "in order to condense and reorder his ideas into the shapes required by formal literature." Charles Williams, T.S. Eliot, and C.S. Lewis each used the Arthurian legend to bring order and imagery to a theme: the failure of secularism in society.

Charles Williams' reworking of the Arthurian fuses its framework and many of its elements with his own conception of the forces at work in our world (and thus in the Arthurian world as well). Williams' Arthurian myth, which is contained in two cycles of poetry, Taliessin through Logres and Region of The Summer Stars, as well as in a prose study entitled the Arthurian Torso, is set in the Empire, modeled after the Roman Empire, with centres at Rome and Byzantium. Yet it is also a system of organic unity; each geographic region represents a portion of the human anatomy, with all the parts forming a whole. Logres (now Britain) is the head, "the theme of the design of the Empire," (TTL, p.7); Rome is the hands; Jerusalem, the birth-giving loins. Close to Logres, but not part of the Empire, is Carbonek in the forest Broceliande, where, watched over by the wounded Fisher-King, Pelles, lies the Holy Grail, object of the greatest quest of Arthur's court, Camelot, and the instrument through which all unifications and reconciliations are to be fulfilled, and all things made whole in an image of the Second Coming: the union of Carbonek and Camelot, of Emperor (God) and Empire. "of religious and civil ideals," to form the perfect civilization, a Holy State in the likeness of the Incarnation, "geography breathing geometry, the double-fledged Logos." (TTL, p.1) But as is ultimately foreseen by Merlin, the attempt at fulfillment through the Grail quest is doomed to failure, destroyed by dividing forces at work in Camelot which break

\* All quotes are taken from Arthurian Triptych, unless specified by TTL as being from Taliessin through Logres.

the bonds of what Williams calls the Law of Exchange and Substitution, the day-to-day practice of Christian love which, ideally joins all people together. One disruptive force is the illicit love of Guinevere and Lancelot. Others originate with Arthur himself: his lack of true vision - he "can see the kingdom only in terms of the King" - ; his unintentional though (in Williams myth) not blameless incest with his sister Morgause, which produces Mordred, the fated destroyer of Camelot; and, most clearly symbolic, his introduction of coin money into Logres, an artificial medium of exchange replacing a spiritual one. These rending forces and others actuate what Williams finds to be reality: the conflict at various levels "between order and chaos, love and pride, Exchange and possession" which are characteristic and coexistent in both world.

T.S. Eliot's The Waste Land makes use of a number of myths to show sharp contrasts and comparisons between our society and others. Among them is the Arthurian figure of the wounded Fisher-King, to Eliot a symbol of physical and spiritual barrenness, representative of our society as Eliot sees it: a waste land. "Eliot finds in these two symbols /the Fisher-King and the waste land/ almost perfect objective correlatives by which he can express the emotion he feels toward the modern world."

In his Deep Space trilogy, C.S. Lewis creates his own myth, one which encompasses the traditional outlook of Christian theology and infuses elements of the Arthurian legend to complete it in its final book, That Hideous Strength. As in the first two volumes, Earth is Thulcandra, the Silent Planet, cut off from the knowledge of Deep Heaven by the workings of the Bent Oyarsa (Satan). In bringing his myth back to earth, Lewis shifts his emphasis away from science fiction, bringing in elements of the Arthurian myth which help the story to focus upon the central conflict of secularism (the N.I.C.E.) versus idealism (Ransom's company at St. Anne's: the representative of God's power on earth and also the surviving remnant of Camelot in Logres). Ransom as a combination of the Pendragon (Arthur's successor), the wounded Fisher-King, and, by virtue of the wound in his heel, a kingly though fallen Son of Adam, leads the struggle, directed by the powers from Deep Heaven. Later these powers are brought directly into play through the vehicle of Merlin, the Arthurian wizard and seer. By using elements of the Arthurian myth, Lewis calls to mind all the imagery and meaning of its struggle "between Logres and Britain, the Arthurian ideal and the secular reality." In showing the universal and perpetual conflict inherent in the Arthurian, Christian, and Deep Space mythology to be parallel, Lewis reinforces his idea of the reality whose nature he is trying to convey.

In the course of Arthurian Triptych, Moorman analyses clearly how and why each of these three authors adapts the Arthurian myth to his own vision of reality. Each sees a world of disorder and

moral relativism "mirrored in the myth of a crumbling civilization, a civilization destroyed by the same sort of secularism" which characterizes today's troubled and restless society.

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AN INTRODUCTION TO WORLDS OF FANTASY

by Bernie Zuber

Last October the first issue of a magazine entitled Worlds of Fantasy appeared on the newsstands. Galaxy Publishing intended it for readers of fantasy in general, but I thought it would be of interest to readers of Mythlore, and Tolkien fans in particular because of a report on Tolkien by Lester del Rey, the editor. Tolkien is also mentioned in two other instances in this issue.

To begin with there is a cover by Jack Gaughn, who also created all of the interior illustrations. In the center of a green and yellow background stands a green monster of reptilian nature with large pointed ears, frog-like orange eyes, sharp scales on its back and talons on its hands. It is cradling a normal human baby and feeding it milk from a bottle while looking suspiciously toward the reader.

The green motif of the cover is even repeated inside the magazine because all the pages are a pale green tone. This, we have been told by other publishers, is supposed to be easier on the eyes. I'm not sure about that, but I do feel that sharper printing would be easier on my eyes! As with other Galaxy publications (International Science Fiction for instance) the printing varies between somewhat smudgy black and fading grey. This can be unfortunate, especially in the case of the illustrations. I do hope that in the near future Galaxy will be able to conquer its printing problems.

In addition to the feature articles by del Rey there are nine all new fiction pieces. There is some confusion in my mind as to what constitutes a short story, novelette or novel according to the number of words. I was further confused while reading the stories listed on the page of contents as novels. I felt they were too short for novels. Then when I turned to the first pages of these stories, I saw them listed as novelettes (probable more accurate). Obviously there was some confusion in the layout of the issue.

Irregardless of my quibbling criticisms of technical details, I do mean to encourage fantasy fans to read this magazine. Not being an experienced reviewer I can only give you some brief impressions of the stories and my reaction to them.

"The Mirror of Wizardry" by John Jakes is a story of Drak, the barbarian. I believe there have been other Drak stories before. It is a sword and sorcery story, straightforward but with some rather interesting and colorful details. For instance: living

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