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Trying to Capture "White Magic"

Abstract

Brief explication of Dorothy L. Sayers' poem.

Additional Keywords

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Trying to Capture "White Magic"

by Joe R. Christopher

Dorothy Leigh Sayers (1893-1957) is most often remembered as a detective story writer -- a member of the Golden Age of puzzles between the World Wars, and one who deliberately combined in her later work those puzzles with novels of manners. Howard Haycroft and other mystery fans lamented the experimentation, the loss of the simpler puzzles about Lord Peter Wimsey, although Haycroft added, "Her very errors do her honor."

She went on to write religious drama, thus moving from lesser mysteries to the great Mystery, and to translate Dante. In her theological study, *The Mind of the Maker*, in which, it has been suggested, God had the mind of the creator of detective puzzles, and in several of her essays, Sayers was part of the Anglican revival of lay evangelism, shown most clearly in C. S. Lewis's radio talks over the B.B.C., collected as *Mere Christianity*.

But there was a younger Sayers, still religious but less formidable, who, before her first mystery novel was published in 1923, was writing verse. I direct the reader's attention to "White Magic," a ballad found in *Catholic Tales and Christian Songs* (1918).¹ Sayers had received her Oxford degree in medieval literature in 1915, taught briefly, and returned to Oxford for her M.A.

For a short poem, it has a long epigraph, identified as coming from "The Story of Pwll Prince of Dyved." I assume this is from Lady Charlotte Guest's translation, but since the point is not important to my essay, I have not sought confirmation via inter-library loan. The point is simply Sayers' knowledge of *The Mabinogion*, which (of course) would be expected of a medievalist:

And while he sat there they saw a lady, on a pure white horse . . . coming along the highway that led from the mound; and the horse seemed to move at a slow and even pace . . . And he took a horse and went forward. And he came to an open, level plain, and put spurs to his horse; and the more he urged the horse, the further was she from him. Yet she held the same pace as the first . . . "Lady," said he, "wilt thou tell me who thou art?" "I will tell thee, Lord," said she. "I am Rhiannon."

The epigraph is analogous to the situation in the ballad, except that Pwll speaks to Rhiannon, and the chasers do not speak to the chased in Sayers' poem, which leaves (as will be discussed more fully later) the irony of the unsuccessful hunt.

The first stanza is the only one which needs to be quoted in full; the purpose is to indicate the four lines of refrains which appear identically in each stanza:

Looking out of my window high
Sursum cor!
I saw a merry chase go by,
E sus le cor!
I saw a merry chase go by
Before the sun was in the sky --
Sursum corda, sursum cornua,
Up, hart and horn.

The refrains (ll. 2, 4, and 7-8) are a series of puns. Perhaps the place to start is with the religious reference in l. 7: *Sursum corda* appears in the Latin mass, meaning "Upwards the hearts" or "The hearts on high." It is Englished in *The Book of Common Prayer* as "Lift up your hearts." (The

place of this phrase in the Anglican rite, it may be important to note, is immediately after the priest has pronounced the forgiveness of the congregation's sins and immediately before the *Sanctus* [Isaiah 6:3b] and the consecration of the elements: the *Sursum corda* is the opening of the main part of the service, the coming of Christ in the bread and wine: thus there is good reason for the believers to "lift up their hearts.") In the poem, the hearts are lifted up in the "merry chase," and *sursum cornua* -- "lift up [your] horns" -- completes line and the hunting emphasis.

The use of the singular in l. 2, *Sursum cor*, "Lift up the [my?] heart," ties into this first stanza better than the later stanzas, where the narrator does not appear in ll. 1 and 3. But the use of French, instead of Latin, in l. 4, *E sus le cor*, by echo back, makes a pun of this Latin singular *cor*, "heart." For in French *cor* means (a) a horn, a hunting horn, and (b) the tine of an antler -- the hunting horn was originally made from an animal's horn, of course. Thus the Latin gains meanings in retrospect, and the first of these French meanings prepares for the *cornua* in l. 7.

E sus le cor is an interesting phrase -- "And upon [the sounding of] the horn" -- partly because of the use of *e* for *et*. Although *e* is perfectly good Italian for *and*, so far as I know it appears for *and* in French only in the medieval period: it is used in this way in ll. 40 and 508 of *Le Chanson de Roland*, for example. I suspect although I am not knowledgeable enough to check the enough to check the matter out, that Sayers' whole phrase may be found in one of the medieval French epics. Here, if I am correct in this surmise, is a minor result of Sayers' studies at Oxford.

The final refrain, "Up, hart and horn," has in *up* the equivalent of *sursum* and *sus*; in *horn* the equivalent of the French *cor* and the Latin *cornua*; and in *hart* a pun on the *heart* of the Latin *cor* and *corda*, and an allusion to the French *cor* in its sense of *tine*.

After this elaborate discussion of the macaronic refrains, it is a fairly simple matter to consider the narration of the following four stanzas:

The quarry went upon an ass
That soft and slowly forth did pass[:]
So soft and slowly forth did pass
His little hoofs upon the grass [.]

And smiting with the scourge and spur,
Came king and priest and labourer[:]
Both priest and king and labourer,
The queen with her ladies after her [.]

And, shifting into the historical present --

They sweep beside the water-mill,
An hundred yards betwixt them still[:]
An hundred yards betwixt them still
As they came hunting round the hill [.]

And they may ride till they crack their breath
To track that quarry down to death[:]
They never will ride down to death
The Wizard-Man from Nazareth [.]

Thus the point of the epigraph is Christ upon an ass (as the one he rode to enter Jerusalem before

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his Passion) is as uncatchable as Rhiannon. Christ as a medieval wizard? It seems a daring figure of speech, but today the reader can recall Gandalf. Not all wizards are evil.

I suppose some will react as I first did, thinking the point of the poem is nonsense. First, this is as idiotic as Ray Bradbury's "The Man" in which Christ avoids a man seeking him. After all, didn't the Son of God come into the world to save it? (And Sayers' listing of royalty, maids of honor, priests, and laborers certainly is meant as a cross-section of society, top to bottom.) Second, historically, Christ did not escape his society: he was crucified by it.

But, upon reflection, I think the poem can be defended (as, no doubt, most readers assumed immediately). First, the analogy to Rhiannon implies that Christ will stop and speak to anyone who is sensible enough to stop the race and speak to him. Second, the poem suggests that society -- "the world" of the standard three forms of temptation, "the world, the flesh, and the devil" -- that society is not up to Christ's standards, has not caught up to his meaning, yet, nor ever will be. And *that* sounds very much like a point Sayers would make.

Besides, it's a lively hunting poem.

¹ Published by B. H. Blackwell; the poem appears on pp. 24-25. I wish to thank Miss Barbara Griffin, of the Marion E. Wade Collection, Wheaton College, Wheaton, Illinois, who sent me a copy of the poem after I mislaid that I made when I visited the collection in the summer of 1973.

² I owe this fact to Dr. Russell Peterson of the language section of Tarleton State University.



Non-Human Speech

in the Fantasy of C.S. Lewis,
J.R.R. Tolkien,
and Richard Adams

by Marie Nelson

Creators of fantasy have more freedom than writers of more ordinary fictions. With or without explanation, they can give the ability to speak to animals and even, on occasion, to trees.

Of the three writers to be considered in this paper only C. S. Lewis tells how his animal characters gained the gift of language. In *The Magician's Nephew*, one of the Narnia chronicles, Lewis tells a story of the creation of species. He asks the reader to imagine "a stretch of grassy land bubbling like water in a pot." It swells into humps, all of different sizes. From the humps animals burst out -- moles, dogs, stags (who come out antlers first, so they look like trees emerging) -- butterflies, bees, birds, panthers and elephants. A great cacaphony follows -- "cawing, cooing, crowing, braying, neighing, baying, barking, lowing, bleating, and trumpeting." There is so much noise that the song of the Great Lion Aslan can hardly be heard. This, then, is not yet the gift of language.

Aslan bestows the power of speech by divine command. There is a swift flash like fire, and then the deepest, wildest voice ever heard says: "Narnia, Narnia, Narnia, awake. Love. Think. Speak. Be walking trees. Be talking beasts. Be divine waters."¹

The power granted does not mean that Lewis's talking beasts are not animals. The birds of *The Dawn Treader* sing with human voices, but they are still birds. In *The Last Battle* the sound of their language recalls the animal nature of the donkey and the unicorn. Puzzle enjoys a grand "Haw-hee-haw-hee-hee," and the unicorn neighs a ringing challenge, "Bree-hee-hee! Come further up, come further in." With a little more onomatopoeic subtlety, perhaps, the talking dogs, who

were just as doggy as they could be... all stood up and put their front paws on the shoulders of the humans and licked their faces, all saying at once: "Welcome! Welcome! We'll help, we'll help, help, help. Show us how to help, show us how, how. How-how-how?"²

Animals talk in Lewis's chronicles; and human beings talk too. Language is not a feature that distinguishes non-human from human beings in this fictional world. However, it seems to distinguish non-virtuous from virtuous creatures. The case of Ginger the disloyal cat proves an example. Ginger turned against Aslan and joined the forces of Tashlan, and then he lost the power of speech. After his fall from grace, all he can say is "Aii -- Aii -- Aaow -- Awah!" Thus, in *The Last Battle*, that which was given by divine fiat is now taken away.

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