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Joe R. Christopher

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Trying to Capture "White Magic"

Abstract
Brief explication of Dorothy L. Sayers’ poem.

Additional Keywords
Sayers, Dorothy L. "White Magic" (poem)—Explication, Peter Thorpe
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 Haycraft and other mystery fans lamented the experimentation, the loss of the simpler puzzles about Lord Peter Wimsey, although Haycraft 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). 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 farther was she from him. Yet she held the same pace as the first... "Lady," said he, "will 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 narrator does 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 (11. 2, 4, and 7-8) are a series of puns. 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 line 1, Sursum cornua, "Lift up the [my?] heart, ties into this first stanza better than the later stanzas, where the narrator does not appear in 11.1 and 3. But the use of French, instead of Latin, in line 1, 4, E sus le cor, by echo back, makes a pun of this Latin singular cornua, "heart." For in Latin cor means (a) a heart, a hunting horn, and (b) the line 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 1.7.

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 11. 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 it the equivalent of sursum and unus 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 sone.

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.