The Honour and Glory of a Mouse: Reepicheep of Narnia

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Abstract
Despite the fact that Lewis viewed pride as "the central issue in Christian morality" and it is a great sin in Narnia, the character of Reepicheep escapes condemnation because his pride is "a proper sense of dignity and worth" and his motives generous.

Additional Keywords
Lewis, C.S.—Characters—Reepicheep; Lewis, C.S. Chronicles of Narnia; Pride in the Chronicles of Narnia
Of all the great heroes of Narnia, the most unlikely is a small, fur-covered rodent who customarily dressed in a red plume and a bright sword.

Both touchy and foolhardy, Reepicheep, the leader of the Talking Mice, was hardly an imposing figure—more likely to inspire laughter than awe. But this improbable hero, created by C.S. Lewis, was not to be taken lightly. For Reepicheep was symbolic of much of the character of Narnia, in all its pride and glory.

Start with pride. Of all the creatures Lewis created, Reepicheep is the proudest and most sensitive. Yet, to C.S. Lewis there was no greater sin than pride. In *Mere Christianity* he wrote, "It is pride which has been the chief cause of misery in every nation and every family since the world began. It was "the essential vice, the utmost evil" and could lead to every sort of wickedness."

It was also Lewis's belief that pride was the central issue in Christian morality, and he made it a key to Narnian morality. The defeat of pride was required of each of the children who entered Narnia as a condition of their taking their place as leaders in Narnia, while nearly every evil to enter that country can be traced to excessive pride.

King Miraz, the Telmarine usurper of Prince Caspian, is a good example of pride working evil on others and on himself. Racial pride leads the Telmarines to attempt the extermination of the Old Narnians. Even the memory of non-human intelligence is repulsive to them. The lust for power and wealth leads Miraz to kill Caspian's father and take the throne, but the desire to set his own son on the throne, the pride of lineage, is what sets Miraz to seek Caspian's life. While Miraz has no heir Caspian is safe, but the birth of a son to the King means death to the Prince.

Caspian escapes and seeks the help of the Old Narnians. When the battle is joined and High King Peter has come to aid Caspian, pride again begins to work, this time on Miraz himself. Miraz is challenged to single combat by Peter, and Miraz, for the sake of his own self-esteem, his pride, accepts the challenge from a fighter who is known to him only as a shadowy legend from the past; a legend of power and skill and experience.

Pride ultimately leads to the death of Miraz. Glozelle and Sopespian, two of the Telmarine nobility, are offended at the small rewards that have been their lot after their aid in setting Miraz on the throne. Their pride has been wounded and they, in return, work for the defeat of Miraz. It is Glozelle and Sopespian who skilfully play on Miraz's self-image when he must decide whether or not to fight Peter, making subtle suggestions that Miraz will appear a coward if he refuses the bout. "No man of your Majesty's age...would be called coward by any wise soldier for refusing combat with a great warrior in the flower of his youth." Pride offended and fully on pride to become pride avenged. Peter's skill and youth held Miraz at bay, but the knife in his back came from his proud friends.

Pride works for the Telmarines too. Nikabrik of the Black Dwarves had become warred by the long years of hiding and hating, nursing his hatred and wounded pride. He was so eaten up with his hatred of Telmarines that he would pull down everything and everybody to be avenged. Otherwise, how could he have been willing to restore the reign of the dreaded White Witch?

Rabadash, the Calormene prince of the Horse and His Boy is another example of pride leading to humiliation and defeat. His self-esteem does not admit that Queen Susan finds him undesirable. She is his forbidden fruit, all the more delicious because she cannot be had at his slightest whim. Yet while he desires Susan, he derides the land of Narnia as small and contemptuous. He makes the prideful boast that, "...a thousand spears could conquer it in five weeks." And yet his two hundred horsemen are beaten less than 48 hours after entering Archenland.

Yet even this does not show Rabadash his error. Defeated, in the hands of his enemies, faced by Aslan, Rabadash must still strut and threaten, insulting his captors. It is this pride that Aslan punishes by the ultimate humiliation. Not only does he turn Rabadash into the ass that he had tried so hard to make of himself, but Aslan decrees that he and his dependents shall live on the Beggars' Feast, and in the full view of thousands of his subjects would Rabadash regain his human form?

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Pride, then, is clearly a grievous fault in the subjects of Narnia, and the lands that Aslan had created. How then does the touchy and proud Reepicheep escape the punishments that others have received?

To some extent, he does not. The toll in blood and fur is high in the Battle of Beruna. Not willing to stay out of the fighting for fear of losing face with the rest of Narnia, and going directly against the orders of his king, Reepicheep is very nearly killed. He does lose his tail, and with it some of his courtly bearing. Yet the tail is restored and Reepicheep never seems to suffer for his actions as do others in Narnia, including the children themselves.

The difference between Reepicheep's actions and those of other people in the Chronicles is one of motive. Lewis, in referring to pride means, "...an undue sense of one's own superiority, arrogance, conceit." But he also means a feeling or sense of total disregard for the wants and feelings of others. As Lewis says, "Other vices may bring people together; you may have good fellowship and jokes...among drunken people or unchaste people. But pride always means enmity—it is enmity. And not only enmity between man and man, but enmity to God." This definition would certainly apply to the attitude of the Telmar (may he live forever) and his son Rabadash. Each sought to further himself and his goals at the expense of the other, and at the expense of their neighbors. Nor did Miraz give much thought to those he had taken position from or to those who had helped him to gain the kingship of the Telmarines.

But look at the actions and attitudes shown by the Talking Mice. At Beruna, Reepicheep is "...quite out of countenance at appearing before your Majesty in this unseemly fashion." That is, without his tail. He readily admits that he could live and..."
serve the king without one, but asks Aslan to restore it to him for the sake of his dignity. In a land where some might be "tempted to measure worth by inches" his dignity is important. And as Reepicheep said, "A tail is the Honour and Glory of a Mouse." The Talking Mice were equally sure of this, and if the Chief Mouse was to be denied a tail, then they would cut off their own tails. They would not willingly carry an honour that was to be denied to their leader.

Narnia was an honourable nation. The lands that bordered it did not need to build defenses for any attack from Narnia unless they meant to attack Narnia first. Narnia did not hesitate to go to the aid of its neighbors, as the Calormene raiders of Archenland found to their dismay. Friendship to Narnia could be dangerous, but the danger came from your friend's enemies, not from your friend. Nor would Narnia ever be too proud to speak to a small or insignificant neighbor.

For all his mannerisms and strange appearance, Reepicheep was a good example of the virtues of Narnia carried to their extreme. Never crossing the line between his own honor and that of others, he always preserved his beliefs, uncompromising in his standards of behavior for himself and for others, Reepicheep never loses the virtues of kindness and charity. His is the ultimate reward, to be there waiting to guide the survivors of the shadow Narnia into the light. And if anyone has special cause to dislike him, it is Reepicheep. Yet when Eustace is lost aboard, Reepicheep says, "...that stinker, Eustace," but rather a fellow creature in great distress. Indeed, Reepicheep could not conceive of any other course he might follow but to show compassion.

Reepicheep's "pride" is actually a "...proper sense of dignity and worth. He could not allow himself to be advanced at the expense of another's honour or put himself forward by belittling other people. But he would refuse to yield up the least shred of his own honour to anyone, even himself. Not even Reepicheep could really believe that a lone mouse could defeat a dragon in single combat, but that one Mouse could buy the time needed for the Queen and her escort to escape at the cost of his own life. Reepicheep had very little difficulty in making a fight-or-flight decision. He knew that to desert his friends or let them be hurt was to lose honour, and for Reepicheep life without honour was simply a slower way of death.

In this feeling of self-worth, which Lewis is careful not to refer to as pride, Reepicheep is much like the Narnia that bred him. Narnia was a small country, much smaller than the various provinces of Calormen, and of strange appearance to the outsiders. It was a land of talking animals, dwarves, sprites, unicorns, and other unlikely creatures. Its God-figure was the talking Lion, and like Aslan, there was more to Narnia than appeared on the surface. Even the Tisroc recognized that Narnia would be dangerous to attack, or even to anger.

from what may be described as a trendy campus viewpoint. To emphasize Baum's ideological kinship with today's flower children and quote heavily from Charles Reich is to overlook Baum's strangely conceived character Sacha in The Sea Fairies, whose passive innocence serves the satanic Zog. Joseph Campbell is also frequently called upon, along with the whole recent mystique of mythical affinities. This too often becomes pedantic and absurd. Thus the four-colored skirts of the girl army in The Land of Oz is a not-so-tale echo of a much-quoted folk-tale from Yorubaland, West Africa, about the trickster-divinity Edshu..." (p. 125).

Her saturation in the Joseph Campbell way Jung kind of susceptibility leads to what seems to me a deeply erroneous conclusion: "...02 is first and last constructed of the stuff of the primitive unconscious, the darkly glittering building materials of all myth and fairy tale." (p. 123). "...Baum's fictional world is a veritable catchall for the historical, the mythic and the folkloric." (p. 93)

This overlooks the element that keeps Baum popular and, at the same time, alien to fantasy societies like this one; I mean the amazingly isolated nature of his individual genius. No one reads him for his prose style, or for the sake of archetypes that can be reached by quicker paths through other works—the "classical" fairy tales or more recent books. L. Frank Baum, raconteur, dreamer, man who found his place in a child's story, was the first full-fledged robot in literature. But the binding force, the energy, blazes in a peculiar ability to fill the world with undreamt-of phenomena. Anyone, for instance, noting the man-shape of a scarecrow, might think to animate it in a child's story, as Collodi animated the puppet Pinocchio. But now page on through The Wizard to the Tin Woodman rusting in his forest. Why a tin woodman? A tin man—well, anyone might think of it. But why a woodman? But there is a woodman with his own context and his own history. And there are others to follow: Jack Pumpkinhead, the Woggle-bug, the Patchwork Girl, the Woozy, the Ork.

"...Consider," says Mrs. Moore, and a decline she perceives in Baum's powers, "the account in The Lost Princess Of Oz/ in which the Thistled-thorns are thistles-eaters with gold throats and stomachs to accommodate their diet, an eccentricity which seems to exist for its own sake." Dear lady, it had been going on from the first.

And let us admit that dark and grotesque things eventually came scrambling out of Baum's imagination. Mrs. Moore deplores this—apparently she likes her archetypes pasteurized—but I personally think the recognition and rendering of evil and distortion was a gain for Baum as a maker of adventures and a truth-teller.

This book is, as I've said, the first full-length study of Baum. There will be more, and I hope that some in the future will touch on two elements that are neglected here. One is the oftently tarty realistic nature of the dialogue he wrote, an element that makes the Ozians live, breathe, and even have human failings. It helps to carry the stories and helps link them back to personal friendships and to thousands of child readers. Those children live, like this one, past thirty, and still feel at home around the Scarecrow, the Shaggy Man, the Frogman, and the Woozy.

And not enough attention is paid to the fact that they are happy books. As we become more conscious of the continuum of folklore and mythopoetic images, the act of writing children's fantasy has developed a decidedly ritual character. The stories have linked back to the personal friendships and to thousands of child readers. Those children live, like this one, past thirty, and still feel at home around the Scarecrow, the Shaggy Man, the Frogman, and the Woozy.
This poetry of which I write, in its coarse flexible mesh,
Rich with a strange juxtaposition of colours,
Here and there snarled or gaudy, but still strong-fibered,
With common words in a strange dye, with knots of metaphysics—
This is the mesh that drew the loud myth so close
(The manuals coupled, the echo instantaneous),
This at last compelled the slow sea-coming
And loosed upon England the invisible virtues.

Note: the poem is not included in Ridler's Selected Poems

Tolkien, J.R.R. "All that is gold does not glitter".

The poem, reprinted from The Lord of the Rings, Bk. I, Ch. 10,
and Bk. II, Ch. 2, is illustrated and in script by Lucy Matthews.

STAR CALLS
The singers call and beckon;
Songs in glistening streams,
Gold and silver fingers
So far I cannot reckon
Yet reaching mine, it seems,
Drawing higher, farther;
Their long music lingers
From my infant dreams.

Here I am a stranger;
Here I have no place.
I would know a brother;
I would be a ranger
Of song-sown fields of space;
There among the singers
I may find another,
Truer, closer race.

by Gracia Fay Ellwood

FOUNDER'S FOCUS
by Glen GoodKnight

With this issue we have a new editor -- Gracia Fay Ellwood. She has been active in the Society since 1969; a woman of special talents and wide interests. Her published books include Psychic Visits from the Past and Good News from Tolkien's Middle Earth. Despite honest differences on certain areas of concern that do not directly pertain to mythopoeia, I cannot think of a person better qualified to assume the editorship. I ask you the readers to give her the support and confidence she rightly deserves. I will continue to support the production of Mythlore, advising and assisting in various ways.

The Society is now more than 11 years old. My original vision was for it to be a medium of exchange and insights and opinions for people of the same interests, enriching each individual involved. The Society has gone through considerable evolving, and sometimes revolving. When people interact, of necessity there arises "politics" (used in the broad sense). Contrary to what might be assumed, deep down, I have never enjoyed politics in the Society, but endured it, knowing that the reality of human nature requires it. The sole reason the vast majority of Society members joined and continue to join is their enthusiasm for the literature, and their desire to be in contact with others of similar enthusiasm. Using the Society as a vehicle for political games is not their intent, and the majority are quickly turned off when such surface. Thus, I personally have sought to keep politics at a visible minimum. Of course it is unreasonable to expect everyone in an organization will agree, and honest disagreement can be constructive in resolving problems.

My deep hope is that the new Council of Stewards will be open to the ideas of all the members with a sense of reasonable proportion as to the practicality of the ideas expressed. One of the reasons for the recent changes in the Society's Bylaws was to cut politics to the bare minimum, so the Society could get on with the real job we all want it to do. During this transition period the Council is working out new ways to streamlining operating procedures. There is a working confidence that this can be done. Speaking for myself, not the Council, I ask you to give it the support it needs at this time.

In the last 11 years there have been problems and even heartache along the way, but below and above that there has been the in-deepening and enrichment I have received from interchange with the very special people of this Society. To all, a deep thank you.

I close with a quote from C.S. Lewis: "The future is bright, the road leads on -- but tomorrow is a Monday morning." Onward!