



Mythopoeic Society

mythLORE

A Journal of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis,
Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature

Volume 5 | Number 2 | Issue 18, Autumn

Article 12

10-15-1978

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Recommended Citation

Haykin, Michael (1978) "A Note on Charles Williams' *The Place of the Lion*," *Mythlore: A Journal of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature*: Vol. 5 : No. 2 , Article 12.

Available at: <https://dc.swosu.edu/mythlore/vol5/iss2/12>

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Mythcon 50

Looking Back, Moving Forward

San Diego, California

August 2-5, 2019

A Note on Charles Williams' *The Place of the Lion*

Abstract

Considers why Williams refers to a non-existent Gnostic tradition in a conversation between Anthony and Mr. Richardson. Is this mere error or purposeful?

Additional Keywords

Williams, Charles. *The Place of the Lion*

A NOTE ON CHARLES WILLIAMS'

The PLACE of the LION

by Michael Haykin

On page 80 of Faber & Faber's 1952 edition of Charles Williams' *The Place of the Lion* we read:

From outside the bookseller's he peered cautiously in. A nice-looking old gentleman was showing children's books to two old ladies; a tall gaunt man was putting other books into shelves. Anthony hoped that the first gentleman was Mr. Martin and the other Mr. Richardson. He went in with a quick determined step, and straight up to the young man, who turned to meet him.

"Have you by any chance an edition of St. Ignatius' treatise against the Gnostics?" he asked in a low clear voice.

The young assistant looked gravely back.

"Not for sale I'm afraid," he said.

"Nor if it comes to that, the Gnostic treatises against St. Ignatius."

"Quite," Anthony answered. "Are you Mr. Richardson?"

"Yes," the other said.

"Then I apologize and all that, but I should very much like to talk to you about modern Gnosticism or what appear to be its equivalents." Anthony said rapidly.

Anthony's main intent in this passage is to engage Mr. Richardson in conversation. The question about the possibility of obtaining a copy of St. Ignatius' treatise is thus a ploy. What is interesting in the reference to St. Ignatius' treatise against the Gnostics is that no such treatise exists nor is suspected, by Patristic scholars, to have even existed. Is this then an obvious mistake on behalf of Williams? Or has he confused St. Ignatius with another author?

It is certainly the case that when St. Ignatius lived and wrote (circa A.D. 100-117), the presence of Gnosticism was beginning to be felt in the Christian Church. In the seven epistles of St. Ignatius known to be definitely genuine,¹ part of St. Ignatius' concern is to combat various erroneous opinions (*heterodoxiai*) which are circulating among his Christian brethren. L.W. Barnard identifies the group against whom St. Ignatius directs his polemic² as being a form of Judaeo-Gnosticism, which denied the bodily reality of Jesus Christ, especially His death and passion.³ However, none of the seven genuine epistles of St. Ignatius is a formal treatise against the Gnostics (neither, for that matter, are any of the epistles which are spuriously attributed to St. Ignatius). St. Ignatius' attack against the Gnostics is woven in with his other concerns in the seven epistles.

Mr. Richardson's reply concerning "the Gnostic treatises against St. Ignatius" is equally baffling to the student of Patristic history; no such treatises are known or even suspected to exist.

There is the possibility that Williams has confused St. Ignatius with St. Irenaeus (circa A.D. 130-200), the Bishop of Lyons, who wrote the important *Adversus omnes Haereses*, which is a detailed attack upon Gnosticism.

Yet we must also bear in mind that Charles Williams wrote *The Descent of the Dove* subtitled "The History of the Holy Spirit in the Church." In this work, Williams reveals a clear knowledge of who St. Ignatius was, and a certain acquaintance with his work. Williams also undertakes a fairly lengthy explanation and examination of Gnosticism and gives an indication of his knowledge of St. Irenaeus as an "individual anti-Gnostic writer," (See *The Descent of the Dove*, pp 20, 22-26, 28, 46) It is thus extremely unlikely that Williams would have confused St. Ignatius and St. Irenaeus. Furthermore, if Williams had gone to the trouble to include a reference to St. Ignatius and to his Gnostic opponents in *The Place of the Lion* it is also extremely likely that he likely have done a little research, and easily discovered that there is no evidence whatsoever for the two treatises. Why then did he include a couple of historical references for which there is no factual evidence?

The reason probably lies in the nature of Gnosticism itself. Gnosticism thrived on esoteric texts, which they claimed were uniquely their own. Thus, in the first centuries of Church history, we find such pseudonymous Gnostic works as the *Gospel of Thomas*, the *Gospel of Peter*, the *Apocryphon of John* [the Evangelist], and one which Williams mentions, the *Gospel of Barnabas*, (*The Descent of the Dove* p. 24). Because of the nature of the esoteric teaching contained within these works, they were only given to those who were "spiritual" (*pneumatikoi*), the *illuminati*, who alone had the capacity to receive them.

Therefore, when Anthony enters the bookshop seeking to talk to Mr. Richardson, he already believes that Mr. Richardson is part of a group of "modern Gnostics." In view of the practices of ancient Gnosticism it would indeed be typical for a "modern Gnosticism" to have an imaginary treatise such as *St. Ignatius against the Gnostics*, upon which they might base their heterodox (and in the eyes of the orthodox Church, heretical) beliefs and practices.

Mr. Richardson's reply, "Nor, if it comes to that, the Gnostic treatises against St. Ignatius.", in the light of the above, can either be viewed as simply a humorous twisting of Anthony's phrase, or as a serious assentation; he believes such works to exist, and they might truly exist, as forgeries of a "modern Gnostic" group. The latter is more likely; Mr. Richardson looked grave rather than amused. Further he begins his reply by saying, "Not for sale" very likely because such works might exist as the property of a "modern Gnostic" group, but because of their esoteric character they are only for members of the group. This would also give sense to Anthony's apology; he has asked for something that is meant to be a secret.

The unsuspecting reader might easily overlook such a passage, yet the analysis of this brief section has revealed something of the fictional accuracy of *The Place of the Lion*. The ties between certain modern Gnostics, such as Mr. Foster or Dora Wilmot (who becomes a serpent), and certain ancient Gnostics such as the Cainites, who regarded the God of the Old Testament as evil (and thus exalted all who stood against Him, e.g. Cain, Esau, and Judas Iscariot) are thus made clearer. The ways

of ancient and modern Gnosticism are the same; the same emphasis on esoteric teaching and secrecy (which the modern Gnostics in *The Place of the Lion* received from Mr. Berringer), the same emphasis on special writings. Yet, we must note that there is a vast difference between some of these modern Gnostics: some, like Mr. Richardson, and eventually Anthony and Damaris Tighe, turn out to possess a true *gnosis*, while others like Mr. Foster and Dora Wilmot turn out to be under the power of *daimonia*, who destroy them.

¹ i.e. the Epistles to the Ephesians, Magnesians, Romans, Trallians, Philadelphians, Smyrnaens, and to Polycarp.

² L.W. Barnard "The Background of St. Ignatius of Antioch" *Vigiliae Christianae* 17 (1963) pp. 193-206.

³ The denial of the bodily reality of Jesus Christ is called Docetism. See St. Ignatius' attack on this heresy in *Magnesians XI*.



A WORD FROM MISTRESS ELLWOOD

My name is Gracia Fay Ellwood, and I am the new editor of *Mythlore*.

Introducing oneself calls for a sorting out of the different dimensions of one's personality. People tend to define themselves primarily by what they do ("I am a writer") or by relationships ("I am a mother.") It is also possible, though less neat, to define oneself by one's major preoccupations. Going this route, I would say that what I think about most is the Great Adventure, and that it is the point of unification for almost everything else that interests me.

The Great Adventure: a heroic figure encounters dangers, evils, mysterious events; struggles desperately with them and is almost bested, but ultimately wins handsomely.

The forms of the Adventure that I encountered first were chiefly from the Bible, and involved the heroes' entering the belly of a fish, or a pit or prison or cave, all images closely analogous to the womb, so that rebirth still is to me the most basic image of what takes place in the Happy Ending.

As a feminist I also find my deepest spring in the Adventure, centering in God as giver of new birth, as ultimate mother.

I am also interested in psychical research, particularly retrocognition. This relates to the Adventure in several ways. The tales that I most enjoy involve other worlds, with marvels and wonders sometimes analogous to those I study as a parapsychologist. Both in fiction and history, then, I love the boundary where worlds meet. Secondly, it has been observed that persons who have had especially gruelling ordeals and vivid experiences of rebirth often emerge with supernormal powers. Thirdly, instances of retrocognition (i.e. visions of past events) frequently involve symbols of the Return to the Womb, but seldom do they include the Happy Ending; it is as though the Adventure were arrested in mid-course. In Williams' *Descent Into Hell* the visionary Pauline offers resolution and rebirth to a beleaguered hero, but seldom in real life have visionaries thought to do so.

Then there is psychiC kinship, the sort of

thing that causes people to think "I have been here before" at a first visit, or "You have been mine before" at a first meeting. I am intrigued by the possibility that the co-inherence of these "families," spread out over space and time, may be the means whereby apparent defeats of justice find their resolutions, and one person's rebirth may be shared by many.

All this interest in adventure does not mean that my daily life contains much of it at present, which is fine with me. Adventures are nasty disturbing uncomfortable things that make you late for dinner.

My personal predilections are not necessarily to be taken as indicators for the direction of *Mythlore* from now on. *Mythlore* will continue to print articles dealing with many aspects of myth and fantasy, together with poetry and artwork. Hopefully the letter column will be lively with new insights, agreement and disagreement. (Letters not printed, or substantially edited, will be answered personally.)

* * *

A problem arises occasionally in the matter of addressing female correspondents. Some women object to "Mrs." or "Miss" because they reject the idea that they are to be publicly defined by their relationship, or absence thereof, to a man. Because our culture has long penalized single women, and because I don't want anyone to hurt like that, I have favored the use of "Ms." Others, however, dislike "Ms;" they are uncomfortable with its associations, or (as Evangeline Walton charmingly put it) "It makes me feel too much like a manuscript."

Unfortunately, unless people indicate how they want to be addressed, I can't tell which to use. It occurred to me to go back, in such cases, to the term for which "Mrs.," "Miss" and "Ms." were all once abbreviations, namely, "Mistress." Of course the word has acquired a negative meaning since then, but not as a title; and it has a pleasantly archaic feel to it.

* * *

May all your Adventures have Happy Endings *Gracia*

