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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 treatise against St. Ignatius."

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

"Yes," the other said. "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, 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 polemic as being a form of Judaic-Gnosticism, which denied the bodily reality of Jesus Christ, especially His death and passion. 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 Haereses, which is a detailed attack against 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, 29, 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 would 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 illuminae, 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 Gnostic" 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 assertion; 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, "Nor 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 Places 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.

Wilmot turn out to be under the power of Anthony and Damaris Tighe, turn out to possess a

is a vast difference between some of these modern

Hell

Adventure in several ways. The tale that I most

Happy Ending; it is as though the Adventure were

 arrest 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 "fam-

ilies," 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 arti-
cles 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 person-
ally.)

A problem arises occasionally in the matter of

addressing female correspondents. Some women ob-
ject 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. Be-
cause 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 asso-
ciations, 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.

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


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