10-15-1982

Cavalier Treatment: A Column

Lee Speth
Independent Scholar

Follow this and additional works at: https://dc.swosu.edu/mythlore

Part of the Children's and Young Adult Literature Commons

Recommended Citation
Available at: https://dc.swosu.edu/mythlore/vol9/iss3/14

To join the Mythopoeic Society go to: http://www.mythsoc.org/join.htm
Mythcon 50

Looking Back, Moving Forward
San Diego, California
August 2-5, 2019

Cavalier Treatment: A Column
Cavalier Treatment
A Column by Lee Speth

The Dawn's Failing Light

Some years ago, on a friend-of-a-friend basis, I attended a wedding at the Temple of the Adytum in Los Angeles. Don't look on your tourist guide; the word "Temple" conveys a physical image remote from the reality. It proved to be a renovated storefront on a main thoroughfare. I don't recall much; huge, colorful reproductions of tarot cards around the walls, the bride very attractive in blue, a priest and priestess jointly officiating. It was whispered to me with a slight note of disapproval that the male half of the team was an ex-Catholic priest who leaned toward ritualism in the Temple's ministries. I can't remember being moved or touched by the ceremony. There were circlings of the altar, references to the Aristotelian elements, lots of invocations of Knowledge and Wisdom and Spiritual Progress. I don't recall anyone saying anything wise. But it all turned out to be a link with some of my favorite authors, for I find, neatly laid out on a chart, that the Temple derives, through a Chicago lodge, from the English Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn.

The chart is one of many in Sword of Wisdom: MacGregor Mathers and the Golden Dawn by Ithell Colquhoun (Putnam, 1975). I bought my copy about four years ago on remainder and cannot advise as to availability. It is not a book to be undertaken lightly, not so much because of profundity as because of minutiae. The lists of members of various lodges are skippable, but the endless details of occult theory must be followed if one is to capture the flavor of the thing, even when they puddle away into shallow inconsequence.

The book is a remarkable act of devotion to a man the author never knew. It is aimed at vindication. To Colquhoun, Aleister Crowley is the Stalin of occultism, seizing and perverting the Golden Dawn, becoming synonymous with it in the public mind, displacing and discrediting the true master, the Order's founder, MacGregor Mathers. Mathers could not lower himself to retaliate, could not reassert himself against Crowley's showy megalomania and died in obscurity, his gifts, as Ithell Colquhoun sees it, tragically denied to us.

The occult tendency is, seemingly, as old as religion and may be known by two distinctive notes. First, a belief that the meaning of creation, "the visible world," lies buried in it, never apparent but open at last to a unified, all-encompassing interpretation. It is the business of the occultist to break the Baconian cipher in which God has authored the world. The final answer has never been reported but the initiate explores approaches and, if so inclined, reports his progress. The second note is a belief that this quest is unsuitable for humanity at large, but is the proper business of an elite, the initiates. Occult societies will be rigidly structured, hostile to the merely curious and often deceptive in their language and in instructions to neophytes.

One becomes an occult expositor, well, by becoming one. In the case of Mathers (Samuel Liddell Mathers in full; he seems to have appropriated "MacGregor" to express some felt connection with Rob Roy) he owed his exaltation to contact with three supernaturals "masters". They equipped him with a message and a cause. He married Mina Bergson, the sister of Henri Bergson, in an occultist ceremony, Celticized her name to Moña and, on orders from the Masters, never consummated the marriage. This pleased Moña, but not Ithell Colquhoun, whose hope that the Matherses violated their vow of celibacy is vicariously fervent and a nite embarrassing. She makes a weak apology for Mathers' adoption of the clearly bogus title "Count of Glenstrae."

The initiations, the peculiar studies, the attempted spells, the infighting of the mages, went on in the mosaic optimistic world of the late Victorians and Edwardians. One participant, Arthur Machen, recalled the contrast with good humor:

To stand waiting at a closed door in a breathless expectation, to see it open suddenly and disclose two figures clothed in a habit that I never thought to see worn by the living, to catch for a moment the cloud of incense smoke and certain dim lights glimmering in it before the bandage was put over the eyes and the arm felt a firm grasp upon it that led the hesitating footsteps into the unknown darkness; all this was strange and admirable indeed, and strange it was to think that within a foot or two of those closely curtained windows the common life of London moved on the common pavement....

Ithell Colquhoun cannot reflect humorously upon the Golden Dawn's transit, for, alas, nothing about these people seems funny to her. Even the conflict inherent in Mathers claiming to be the reincarnation of Bonnie Prince Charlie when a contemporary made the same claim fails to give her a chuckle. (How to resolve such a conflict? The occultists apparently just overlooked it.)

Secrets, always secrets, preferably bearing the stamp of the Middle East--Chaldean ways of knowing and Egyptian lore, a pinch of Qabala and a shot of Eleusis, though Mathers himself preferred the Celtic. Strange issue abounded: No, Colquhoun downs the rumor; Moña Mathers did not kill Miss Netta Fornario

Continued on page 41
"Leaf by Niggle," and "Smith of Wooton Major," in which Tolkien explores the Platonic and Christian premises which are the source of the beauty of his masterpieces of fantasy.

Patrick Wynne Fosston, MN

I'm currently reading Vergil's Aeneid for the first time and am fascinated by the similarity between certain of its plot elements and those in Tolkien's works. Looking through the Subject Index in ML 31, I found an article called "The Influence of Vergil's Aeneid on The Lord of the Rings..." Actually, I've noticed more similarities between Vergil and The Silmarillion than LoTR. Aeneas' escape from the fall of Troy with his divinely-destined son Ascanius bears a strong resemblance to Tuor's escape from the fall of Gondolin with his divinely-destined son Earendil, and the burning of the 'Trojans' ships at Sicily reminded me of Feanor's burning of the ships at Losgar. Some of the names are similar too: Vergil's Agenor and Ucalegon to Tolkien's Aegnor and Ancalagon.

This reminds me of another interesting Roman/Tolkien similarity. In some of the names of the royal houses of the Noldor, the element fin 'hair' was used in a non-literal sense to emphasize one's lineage. In the names Fingolfin and Finarfin fin is used as a prefix to emphasize the fact that these two sons of Finwe were descended from the fair-haired Vanya Indis rather than Miriel. Both Fingolfin and Finarfin in turn gave their first-born sons names beginning with fin to mark them as their heirs; hence Fingon = 'Commander, Heir of the House of Fingolfin,' and Finrod = 'Champion, Heir of the House of Finarfin.' This makes more sense to me than taking the names literally as 'Hair-Commander' and 'Hair-Champion.' Anyway, what this has to do with Rome is that Caesar, originally the family name of the first Roman emperors, and later used as a title by all Roman emperors, meant 'a head of hair.' A hair-raising coincidence indeed...

The 14th Annual Mythopoeic Conference
Scripps College Claremont, California

August 12-15, 1983

THEME: Mythic Structures in J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, and Charles Williams. Guests of Honor: STEPHEN R. DONALDSON and C.S. KILBY. Registration: $10 until Nov. 20, '82; $15 until April 30, '83; $20 thereafter. Papers related to the theme are especially encouraged, as well as on the Guests of Honor and other subjects. Please send a brief abstract of your intended paper as soon as possible. Send all mail and make checks payable to: Mythopoeic Conference XIV, Post Office Box 711, Seal Beach, California 90740.

ART SHOW DRAMA EXHIBITS FILMS PAGEANT PANELS PAPERS MASQUERADE MUSIC and more.

Contributions Policy: This is to amend the statement on Mythlore contributions which appeared on page 14 of issue 30. The previous statement applies to subscribers of Mythlore. Non-subscribers which have submissions printed will receive one copy of the journal containing their contribution.

LEWIS CARROLL continued from page 28

"Argonauts" in Science Schools Journal in 1888. This beats Sylvie and Bruno by one year. (The article on "Time Travel" in Nicholls's The Science Fiction Encyclopedia credits The Time Machine, not "The Chronic Argonauts" and not Sylvie and Bruno, with the first controlled trips in time.) Perhaps it is fairer to say that the idea of time travel was "in the air" about 1890.

REVIEWS continued from page 37

"the "organic sanctity of meaning." He says "The meaning sanctifies the form, and the form the meaning, lifting the whole experience beyond pleasing instruction to belief. It is here that Lewis achieves the enviable result of making the reader feel the Joy, the sublimely indefinable exhalation of the spirit, which he sought throughout his life." (p. 143)

Glover has stated clearly what Lewis achieves and has even attempted to give the result a name. One might add that despite his useful literary criticism he has not prepared a manual on the art of enchantment. Writers hoping to emulate Lewis in merging "theme and form," or, as Lewis put it, Poiema and Logos, will find that it is one thing to call the art by name. It is another to be able to achieve it!

Nancy-Lou Patterson

CAVALIER TREATMENT continued from page 39

by black magic. "As the incidents leading to Miss Fornari's death did not take place until some eighteen months after Mo'ina's own, the charge is scarcely worth refuting. Even if the latter had been living, the scratches found on the corpse are less likely to have resulted from an attack by Mo'ina in the form of a monster cat than from running naked in the dark over rough country, which Miss Fornario had done immediately before her collapse."

They gathered in secret, they wove formulae, they initiated each other and conferred degrees; there is depressingly little evidence that anyone came away happy. But some people of literary talent were affected by the association and among these Colquhoun lists Charles Williams, with critical reflections upon him. This aspect of her book is worth considering. /To be continued/