Cavalier Treatment: A Column

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Abstract
Describes several sightings of supposed mermaids in the literature of sea travel and exploration.

Additional Keywords
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Cavalier Treatment
A Column by Lee Speth

The Woman Beneath the Waves

On June 15, 1608 (Old Style), Henry Hudson's ship stood at 75 degrees, 7 minutes north latitude, westward bound in the cold Atlantic in hope of the Northwest Passage. Her masthead flew the standard of James Stuart, King of the British Isles. The voyage had been so far uneventful and Hudson's log, even with the antique charm of its English, makes dry reading; barebones mariner business, professional and predictable. Then on the fifteenth, after comments on weather and course, without fanfare, we are given this:

"This morning, one of our companie looking over bord saw a Mermaid, and calling up some of the company to see her, one more came up, and by that time shee was coming close to the ships side, looking earnestly on the men: a little after, a Sea came and overturned her: from the Navill upward, her backe and breasts were like a womans, (as they say that saw her) her body as big as one of us; her skin very white; and long hair hanging downe behind, of colour blacke: in her going downe they saw her tayle, which was like the tayle of a Porposse and speckled like a Macrell. Their names that saw her, were Thomas Hilles and Robert Rayner."

We should, I think, admit this to be a poseur. I am not predisposed to a belief in mermaids, but, probed and analyzed, this calm and circumstantial entry offers remarkably little scope for rationalization.

Some of my readers will smile knowingly and ask, "What had they been drinking?" They will ask this out of an innocence in their own lives that does them credit but leaves them open to misimpression. Demon Rum is a completely unworkable explanation.

First, without having really surveyed the field, and Dumbo and his pink elephants notwithstanding, I don't believe there's any solid evidence that people ranging from Tipsy to Well Under the Influence have exotic hallucinations. Their memories may blur, they may mistake the person they are talking (or attempting to talk) to, they may fall into dull visual errors. But, I believe, only advanced alcoholics "see things" and when they do, those things aren't appealing. The experience is traditionally known as "the horrors" and the creatures perceived are slippery, boneless, crawly or cold-blooded. If we are temperate and frequent temperate society, we may imagine one of those people who has hoisted a few calling out genially to his fellows to look at the mermaid. The reality is a skid row delirium screaming in agony because he sees snakes.

Second, the roistering seaman of stereotype, all a-ash with rum, is the seaman ashore. He has never been tolerated on duty, and especially in the days of wind-driven vessels. Working those ships required coordination and alertness. Every man could hold the life of his fellows in his hands and rum on shipboard was rationed. Apparently this discipline worked. I've done some reading on sea disasters and know of no British shipwreck in the age of sail attributed to drunkenness among the crew.

And third, even if Hilles, Rayner or both had swigged on the sly before they spied their apparition, it is really incredible to assume that Hudson, or the deck officer who first received the report, would not have recognized a drunken man.

No, drink won't do. There's always, of course, fraud, and here we must deal at three levels.

By way of instructive contrast Hudson's famous contemporary, Captain John Smith, claimed a mermaid sighting in the West Indies in 1614. Here, blessedly, we have plain sailing before us. Smith was a liar (for a complete and satisfying demolition of the famous story starring himself and Pocahontas see James Branch Cabell's critique of Virginia legends, Let Me Lie). But Hudson sustains no such reputation. He was not a colorless figure, but neither was he a rogue adventurer like Smith; his eyes were fixed upon facts. Smith's style is to see his own mermaid rather than relay a report, there are other-worldly touches (she has green hair . . . a dunker punker?), the lurid immediately engages him: he had "already begun to experience the first effects of love" before realizing she had a tail. Over against this romancing stands Hudson logging his report with clinical detachment.

It should be said that, unlike Smith, Hudson did not publish his own explorations. He vanished into Hudson's Bay in 1611 and his logs and other accounts of his voyages were given to the world as part of a weighty compilation by the Rev. Samuel Purchas, Purchas His Pilgrimes (1625). As far as I can discover, the originals have disappeared. Did Purchas spice up his text, adding in the mermaid? It seems improbable. The passage is stylistically of a piece with the rest of the log, and it stands alone. It would be more than odd for a gamesome editor to have played tricks with one entry and only one. And in such undramatic tones.

Hilles and Rayner may have lied, but again this is improbable. Hudson protected himself with the parenthetical "as they say that saw her," but he seems to regard the men as credible. There were only fifteen aboard and they'd been at sea for fifty-five days, long enough to know quite well who was or wasn't given to quirks. Note also that he who first saw the mermaid called out to everyone but only one other joined him. If they'd preconcerted a lie, they could not have counted on that.

We may, I think, pretty easily dismiss the question of mistaking an animal. There is too much detail. The ship was small; only a few feet may have separated the bulwarks from the swells upon which the creature rode. At least one of the men, it seems, claimed to have discerned her navel.

But what is proved? Nothing. Hilles and Rayner are gone.

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last, and the Turks swept in, behaving with far more restraint than Christian conquerors had, either in the similar victory over Constantinople at the end of the Fourth 'Crusade,' or in the prodigious shedding of blood at Jerusalem at the end of the First.

Mohammed, fired by his victory, had marked off the first item on his agenda. Next would be Rome. The pope's dreams of a safe neutrality were thus exposed as being as unrealistic as were Sarum's when Gandalf exposed him. Rome was not conquered in the 1460's, because of the tenacious defense of the island of Rhodes, reminiscent, perhaps, of Cair Andros in Tolkien's parallel.

Having drawn this parallel, complete with its moral bias toward Christendom, I think it only fitting to freely moralize for a moment.

Yes, the people of Christian Europe saw the marching Turks as subhuman, orc-like invaders, eaters of raw flesh, rapists, slave-takers, and worse. This illusion has always been Western Civilization's bane: that those who oppose us are not fully human. Tolkien, in the personification of the Turks is very faithful to the flavor of the illusion.

The Turks were not orcs. No humans are. The sack of Constantinople lasted for one day, although a three-day period was officially declared. The soldiers tired of it soon, and were persuaded by the military police to return to their fortified camps. Mohammed freed many married women, and even gave some of them enough money to ransom their husbands. He declared an amnesty for any survivors. Many areas of the city had never been touched, and if a semi-isolated city-ward surrendered without resistance, it was provided with Turkish guards to defend it from looters. It has been claimed that Mohammed was appalled by the destruction he had wrought upon the truly beautiful city, and certainly restoration began immediately upon what was to become the brilliant capital city of the Ottomans. (Vickers, op. cit., pp. 12-13.)

Naturally, this humanizing of the Turks can be carried too far. Slaves were taken; resisters were executed. But the European image of the barefoot and ragtag horde of undisciplined thugs — in a word, orcs — is desperately wrong.

The Middle Ages, Western History's own Third Age after ancient glories and after Rome, had ended. Gutenberg had recently invented 'the printing thing,' and the impetus for the Renaissance was unimpeded.

To close, then, the siege can be put into perspective, both from the point of view of European history and of Tolkien's mythology.

The conflict between Islam and Christianity is part of the great struggle between East and West. Far too often, though, it is seen as "them versus us," and moral judgments are made. It is no simple matter of bad against good, of wrong against right, or even, truly, of Asia against Europe. Islam is nearly as much a Western Religion as Christianity is, and certainly Christianity, Judaism, and Islam all have their formative roots in Asia, not in Europe. For much of Islam's history, its civilizations have had a higher level of learning and of culture than the huddled kingdoms of Frankistan — Europe.

In one of his letters, Tolkien speaks of a story too depressing to write, in which the youths of the renewed Gondor, some hundred or so years after the death of Aragorn, revive the orcish style, presumably borrowing many words of Black Speech origin. (Carpenter, op. cit., p. 344.) This, although unfitting for publication in his view, clearly give the lie to 'good versus evil' in the context of the siege. In The Lord of the Rings we saw an orc with some rough element of nobility, and we saw humans gone utterly bad.

No culture is significantly better than another.

The stark blacks and whites, then, of the siege of Minas Tirith, function as a remarkably good wish-fulfillment caricature of reality. It is a parallel siege.

Cavalier Treatment, continued from page 30 to their fathers; we cannot examine them. For myself, I conclude agnostically. I think they saw something unusual in the water but am not, after all, quite prepared to accept a mermaid. But if anyone wants to start building a Case for the Mermaid, he may start here. I'm not a Creationist myself, but I might recommend mermaids to the Creationists. Should they really exist they would go far to devastate Darwin (there is a delightful medieval painting at Gjerrild Church in Jutland showing God, on the Fifth Day, creating birds, fishes and mermaids).

At any rate, we can toy with the idea that on the 15th of June, 1608 (Old Style), something emerged through the Atlantic and approached us. Emerged from where? Broceliande, Elfland, call it what you will. Some strange and marginal place that shadows the earth and, on occasion, feathers against it. We will, most of us, never enter it and it's probably just as well however it allures; it is, by all accounts, no home for us. With a turn of her speckled tail she was gone they say and we cannot follow.