Cavalier Treatment: A Column

Lee Speth

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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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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 eventful 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 company looking over board saw
a Mermaid, and calling up some of the company to see her, one
more came up, and by that time she was come close to the ships
side, looking earnestly on the men: a little after, a Sea came and
overturned her: from the Navill upward, her back and breasts were
like a woman, (as they say that saw her) her body as big as one of
us; her skin very white; and long hair hanging down 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 aposer. I am not predisposed
to a belief in mermaids, but, probed and analyzed, this calm and cir-
cumstantial 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 impres­sion.
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 derelict screaming
in agony because he sees snakes.

Second, the roistering seaman of stereotype, all ashore 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, blissfully, 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 conquerers 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 1640'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 exposure him. Rome was not conquered in the 1460's, as being as unrealistic as were Sarum's when Gandalf exposed him. Rome was not conquered in the 1640's, because of the tenacious defense of the island of Rhodes, reminiscent, perhaps, of Cair Andros in Tolkien's parallel.

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 judgements 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 gives 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.

NOTES