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Reviews

Abstract

The Song of Middle-Earth. David Harvey. Reviewed by Nancy-Lou Patterson.

The Impulse of Fantasy Literature. C.N. Manlove. Reviewed by Nancy-Lou Patterson.


The Black Cauldron. Walt Disney Film. Reviewed by Benjamin Urrutia.

The Book of Three. Lloyd Alexander. Reviewed by Benjamin Urrutia.

The Black Cauldron. Lloyd Alexander. Reviewed by Benjamin Urrutia.

Through the Open Door: A New Look at C.S. Lewis. Dabney Adams Hart. Reviewed by Nancy-Lou Patterson.


Additional Keywords

Paula DiSante; Kevin Farrell

Imaginary but Powerful

Having produced his masterpiece, the seamless whole of The Lord of the Rings, Tolkien was left with the vast detritus of his earlier writings yet unpublished. The scale of these materials is indicated by the fact that the long-awaited posthumous work, The Silmarillion, has proved to be but one of an on-going series of volumes. Every year or so, as these seemingly endless tomes drop heavily onto the shelf beside The Lord of the Rings, somebody tries again to encompass all we have come to know about Middle-Earth in a single coherent analytical study. The task is apparently becoming increasingly difficult, to judge by The Song of Middle-Earth.

Harvey begins his study with these theses: "The use of mythic forms and archetypes by the writer is an aesthetic device for bringing the imaginary but powerful world of prae-natural forces into a manageable collaboration with objective and experience ([sic] facts of life in such a way as to stimulate unconscious passions and the conscious mind." (p.22.)

Readers who skip the first two chapters, of which this is the most, and pass on to the rest of the book, will find an earnest effort to pull together the major motifs from Tolkien's gargantuan depository of mythologies. Some of Harvey's chapters present what is already received wisdom, without much emendation or improvement. Others offer useful and new ideas: the chapters on Earendil and on the use of nature symbolism are well worth adding to the canon of significant Tolkien commentary.

His best chapter is his last, "A Fanfare for the Common Hobbit." Here he touches on the heart of Tolkien's genius. When Tolkien invented the hobbit, he found a focussing-lens for his giant creativity. The hobbits provide the organizing and controlling structure of The Lord of the Rings. When they are present, Tolkien's imaginary world remains coherent, capable of being held together in the mind. When they are absent, even Tolkien was unable in his lifetime to match The Lord of the Rings. Harvey has written his study as if every volume of "lost tales" increased the aesthetic total of Tolkien's world. He has not, I think, proved it.

Nancy-Lou Patterson

A Celebration of Being

It was the thesis of his previous work, Modern Fantasy: Five Studies (1975) that "evoking wonder" is the purpose of fantasy; in this present volume, C.N. Manlove finds that purpose to be the "celebration of the separate identities of created beings." (p. ix) As a result of the first thesis, Charles Kingsley, George MacDonald, C.S. Lewis, and J.R.R. Tolkien were given essentially negative readings, while Mervyn Peake was praised. As a result of the second, Manlove gives positive readings of Charles Williams, Ursula LeGuin, E. Nesbit, George MacDonald, and T.H. White, while reserving his judgement of Peake. Most remarkable is his potent new positive reading of George MacDonald, which is an extraordinary reversal of his previous treatment of that author. It is without a doubt the best interpretation of Phantastes and Lilith ever penned.

Not having mended his ways entirely, Manlove concludes his new book by bagging together and damning as "anaemic Fantasy" William Morris, Lord Dunsany, E.R. Eddison, and Peter S. Beagle. Read together, Modern Fantasy: Five Studies and The Impulse of Fantasy Literature comprise a remarkable exploration of their subject: it would seem that Evoking Wonder and Celebrating Being are two sides of the same coin. Impulse contains a strongly-worded presentation of Christian teaching used to condemn the philosophical posture of Eddison's epics: for the Christian, Manlove writes, "God became incarnate. He took on Himself the sufferings of the world that He might redeem it: eternity and the corruptible were married. Beside the reality and inclusiveness of this vision, the aloof rejections of Eddison seem thin and insubstantial." (p. 141) On the basis of this statement, one may hope for reversals of Manlove's oddly insensitive earlier readings of C.S. Lewis and J.R.R. Tolkien to match the one he has now given to George MacDonald.

Nancy-Lou Patterson

Lewis Letters

As the first British book about C.S. Lewis in quite a few years, this little study may be a returning swallow, though it is certainly no summer. It is very much in the manner of the Twayne or Ugur or other literary series books, each on a single author, with the inevitable biography, plot synopses, and borrowed evaluations. It contains minor but annoying errors like spelling Martha Sammons' name as "Simmons." And the literary materials are handled very oddly; The Pilgrim's Progress is given a whole chapter (no bad thing in itself) but Till We Have Faces receives only two mentions, neither of them in regard to the work
Elrond harbors the Heir of Isildur

D. Sante 1986

itself. The Interplanetary Trilogy is treated after the Narnian Chronicles (which are lumped in the chapter on apologetics). The scholarly works — Allegory, Prologomena, and the "OHEL" — are treated in the last chapter, which is entitled "Appraisal" but also narrates the last phase of Lewis' life, including his marriage. On the whole, the book may be a disappointment to a reader who has kept abreast of North American Lewis scholarship.

On the other hand, it has its virtues, and if it were to be the only volume to come to a reader's hand, it would likely do some good, for it does take wide cognizance of other studies of Lewis, including works published within a year of itself, and if a new reader had never considered the subject before, it would give good direction as to where to look next. The treatment of Lewis' biography is balanced, charitable, and perceptive, while facing openly his curious combination of endless grace to his inferiors and occasional brutality to his equals. In particular, Peters makes good use of Lewis' letters, to prove that while he was profoundly bruised by the death of his wife (A Grief Observed is a textbook of the stages of grieving, a penetrating psychological study of the deepest realities of loss) he was not broken. The wound was to the bone but the man still lived. Despite this bereavement and his own progressive illnesses, he continued to write peaceful and wholesome letters to the very end of his life, facing his own death in a mood of "tranquil assurance." (p.7)

This episode touches upon the central virtue of John Peters' study — its emphasis upon the letters of C.S. Lewis as works of great significance and merit in themselves. While unable to include the Letters to Children, it not only devotes a whole chapter to the collected Letters, Letters to an American Lady, and They Stand Together, but makes valuable use of the letters throughout the book. If you have read all the other books, including especially the recent books, on C.S. Lewis, you will still find this chapter useful: if you are coming newly to the idea of books about Lewis, Peters' study will give you a good start.

Nancy-Lou Patterson

A Pig and a Pot in Prydain


In the Dictionary of Imaginary Places, Lloyd Alexander's kingdom of Prydain (a name "derived from the Welsh Prydyn, Britain," according to Rod Walker, Pellenonorth 3:9) suffers some severe geographical displacements. Most notoriously, Annwn and its Dark Gate are moved from their true location in the northwest to the southeast, right next door to Caer Dallben, south of the Great Avren (a river very similar to the Avon-Severn in Britain). Apparently, the Disney animators have taken the DOIM, or some other misguided guide, as their source of ideas about Prydain, since they have also moved the realm of the Death Lord to the neighborhood of Dallben's farm. Not content with this,
they have also merged Arawn Lord of Annuvim with his general, the Horned King, while Annuvim has become fused with the Spiral Castle (creating at least one very bizarre new situation: Eilionwy is no longer the fosterling of Aarchen, which made some sense, but of the Horned King, which makes no sense at all and is very hard to believe). In this same spirit of merging things (similar to what Rospo Pallenberg did with various elements of the Arthurian legend in *Excalibur*), even the plots of two of Alexander's *Prydain* novels (*The Book of Three* and *The Black Cauldron*) have been mixed together for the movie, creating something new that is neither fish nor fowl, but hash.

Displacements and mergers are not the only kinds of changes that have been made. Hen Wen, Gurgi and the Fair Folk have been shrunk in size, cute-sified and disneyfied. King Eldidleg and his people, who were mostly Dwarves, plus minorities of other peoples (taller, not smaller, than the Dwarves), have been changed by some insane enchantment into Tinkerbell's cousins. Such a metamorphosis seems calculated to outrage *Prydain* Purists.

If it is any consolation, it could have been worse. What if the film had been made by Rankin and Bass, those blasphemers who even dared to show the beautiful Elves as hideously ugly monsters? One shudders, and prefers not to think about it. And what if Ralph Bakshi had been in charge? He would have emphasized the battles and swordplay, and really poured on the red ink, as is his wont.

Considering all that, it could be possible to forgive the Disney people for the above mentioned things, plus for shaving off Dalben's beard, changing the shape of Fflewddur Fflam's nose (the result being that the two look too much alike, which is a big mistake), and totally misrepresenting the Three Weird Sisters. For at least Alexander's central message has been preserved: Compassion and Sacrifice are more important than Fame and Glory.

Also relatively unchanged is the central character, Taran himself. He is still very much the Assistant Pig-keeper we know and love. He is not as much humbled, humiliated and hurt as much as he was in the books, but he learns the same important lessons.

He also gets to do some things he could never do in the books, though he would have liked to. For one, it is he who takes Dyrnwyn from the dead grasp of the unworthy King Rhitta. Mr. Alexander, boldly reversing gender stereotypes, had Eilionwy perform the deed. But the film Eilionwy is not the spunky chatterbox the real one is, only a dainty stereotype of a princess. I suspect that someone who is both a feminist and a *Prydain*ist would find it hardest to forgive the Disney filmmakers.

Taran, to his great joy, even gets to swing the magic sword around, with wondrous special effects to help us forgive the various aberrations we have mentioned. It is a beautiful sight. But he could not have used that sword when he was only an untried callow boy. The true history of Prydain is very clear and emphatic on the fact that Taran Wanderer was only able to wield Dyrnwyn when he had grown to noble worth by his hard labors and afflictions and sacrifices.

One other thing that Taran gets to do in the movie that, much as he would have liked to, he never did in the books: To smooch with Eilionwy. The kids kiss thanks...
though the tale has been in these ways Tolkienized, it has been de-Tolkienized in others, such as changing the Dwarves into Tinkerbell Fairies, and the elimination of Taran's most positive and unbotched accomplishment, The Book of Three: his rescue and healing of the fledgling gwythaint. (By the way, the "gwythaints" in the movie are not really gwythaints — large birds of prey — but dragons, winged reptiles.) This act of mercy made the bird both willing and able to lead Prince Gwydion to Hen Wen, who in turn reveals to the hero the Antlered King’s real Name, which is the means whereby that evil one may be destroyed. This plot element, I think, has roots in Tolkien and branches in George Lucas. Just as in The Hobbit the lesser hero (Bilbo, Taran) makes it possible for a bird (thrush, gwythaint) to communicate to the greater hero (Bard, Gwydion) the enemy's (armored dragon's, Horned King's) secret weak spot. The similarities between The Book of Three and Star Wars are even more numerous: Our hero, an impatient and impetuous farm boy with dreams of glory (Taran, Luke) chases after the runaway (Hen Wen, R2D2) who alone holds vital information about the enemy's secret weak spot. In his quest, our hero is invaluable assisted, but also much scolded, by the brave and sharp-tongued Princess (Ellenwy, Leia). Lucas apparently has been inspired by Alexander as Alexander was by Tolkien, though neither one of course has produced a Xerox copy — both instead have introduced modifications and new elements.

The Disney animators have eliminated, added and changed so much that Alexander is cut off from both root and branch, quodam modo. The connections backward to Tolkien and forward to Lucas have been eliminated or at least obscured. And just as the moviemakers introduced other elements from The Lord of the Rings to replace Tolkien elements they removed (among which should also be listed Lord Gwydion, who, though coming from the Mabinogion, is very much like Aragorn, as portrayed by Alexander), they have done the same thing with the Horned King, to whom they have given a Darth Vader voice and a Vaderish habit of squeezing the neck of a subordinate when angered, while making him less like Darth Vader in more essential matters. In both The Book of Three and the Star Wars trilogy, the foolhardy farm boy, armed with a magic sword, dares to face the dreadful masked enemy, but is overwhelmingly defeated, which is logical, since the foe has great power as both wizard and warrior. This confrontation is also missing from the film version.

What is most sorely missing is a good, solid, believable plot. The special animation effects provide many delights for the eye and ear, but apparently they are not enough to make up for that lack.

Benjamin Urrutia

A New Look


C.S. Lewis was not a professional theologian, though he wrote works of speculative theology; he was not a professional writer, though he wrote many works of fiction. His profession, as Dabney Hart tells us, was the teaching of literature. In that role he offered models for consideration as possible and
In *Through the Open Door*, Professor Hart explores Lewis' career in the light of this profession, giving elegant and challenging analyses of *The Allegory of Love* (1938), *A Preface to Paradise Lost* (1942), *English Literature in the Sixteenth Century* (1954), *Studies in Words* (1960), *An Experiment in Criticism* (1961), and *The Discarded Image* (1964). Her method is deceptively simple; she describes Lewis' role as teacher, scholar, and prophet. His literary studies are discussed as natural, even casual elements in these contexts, interspersed with succinct and stunningly apposite characterizations of most of his fictional and some of his apologetic works. Hart's book thus reads like the longest and most telling in that apparently endless series of memoirs still being produced by Lewis' students. She heard him lecture; she visited him in his home. And she wrote the first-ever PhD. thesis on his work, "C.S. Lewis' Defense of Poesie" (University of Wisconsin, 1959). She was too modest to list this last in her bibliography, so I looked it up in Joe Christopher and Joan Ostling's indispensable Checklist, *C.S. Lewis* (Kent State University Press) which she not only lists but generously cites!

Now, 25 years later, her first published book opens a door straight into the heart of his professional life. After analyzing what she finds there, it is her conclusion that "What C.S. Lewis represents for a wide range of readers is what he said we all look for in literature: an enlargement of our own limited experience."

Her title comes from a metaphor of Lewis': "We want to see with other eyes, to imagine with other hearts, as well as our own... we demand windows. Literature as Logos is a series of windows, even of doors." *An Experiment in Criticism*

*Through the Open Door* is a wide and delightful book that should send Lewis' readers back (or in many cases, on) to his scholarly works for "a new look."

Nancy-Lou Patterson

The Play's the Thing


Readers of *Mythlore* are accustomed to regarding their favorite writers as their own contemporaries, saying things like "Lewis says..." or "Williams says..." or even "Miss Sayers says..." as if these continuously republished authors were at one's elbow. In fact, of course, the lives and works of such writers were lived and written in a specific historic context, in a place, time, and culture which no longer, at least in precisely the same form, exists. Our reading of them is a part of our own period, as witness the recent discussion as to whether Miss Sayers was or was not a "feminist." (See "7x6" *Mythlore* 65, Spring 1986, pp. 59-60) A special feature, in fact, of the 1980s is the appearance of excellent historical studies which help us to place and to know our beloved authors in their own and actual context.

*Drama in the Cathedral* is a very useful addition to these studies: in Pickering's careful and detailed book we can see Charles Williams' play "Thomas Cranmer of Canterbury" and the plays of Dorothy L. Sayers, "The Zeal of Thy House" and "The Devil to Pay," compared with T.S. Eliot's acknowledged masterpiece of those plays presented at Canterbury Cathedral during the twenty year period, and Christopher Fry's early play, "Thor with Angels," along with plays by John Masefield, Laurence Binyon, Laurie Lee, and Christopher Hassall.

The book begins with a survey of nineteenth century verse drama, proceeds to the re-emergence of Medieval drama in modern presentations, and then shows how these sources contributed to the reappearance in British Anglican churches and Cathedrals of drama, that is to say, of theatrical presentations in the place where post-classical drama re-emerged in the Medieval period.

The three plays by writers of direct interest to readers of *Mythlore* are given detailed analyses: a full chapter to each, as well as numerous contextualized references, and are well illustrated so that those who know the works in book form can begin to imagine them as staged. Details of that staging, comments on the casting and performances, a look at the backstage scene with its emotional and personal elements, and the author's own critical commentary on the works both as literature and as dramatic presentations, fully reward the reader's interest and curiosity. This book is highly recommended.

Nancy-Lou Patterson

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