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Cavalier Treatment: More About Arthur Machen

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Abstract

Continues his discussion from Mythlore #27 on Machen.

Additional Keywords

Machen, Arthur; Machen, Arthur. "The Bowmen"; Linda Leach

CAVALIER TREATMENT

MORE ABOUT ARTHUR MACHEN

LEE SPETH

"And here I am moved to wonder, as I often wonder, whether what we call 'fairy tales' do not in fact contain a curious wisdom and the secrets of a very strange and mysterious psychology."

The words are Arthur Machen's, not Tolkien's. The sentiments are, of course, pure Inklings, but as I lamented last issue, Machen is the unknown soldier in the fight to make myth and fantasy respectable in our age. His reputation as a writer of horror stories stands, I believe as a barrier - a foolish and unnecessary one - between Machen and those natural allies whose ideal of mythopoeia is exalted and reverential. They exclude him ungratefully from the ranks of the prophets and send him out to dwell among the unclean and déclassé, even such as Poe.

Of course there are balrogs in Tolkien and galloping phantoms, and an "un-man" in Lewis. There are occult horrors of great ingenuity in Williams, but then Williams reassures us with sweeping eucatastrophes. Machen gives the devil his due and his stories often enough leave his heroes enlightened but helpless, ordinary people baffled and grieving, and some strange form of evil replete for the moment, having worked its will. Thus "The Shining Pyramid", thus "Change". We may not want to hear that, but if the question of edification must be broached, I think I belong morally on the side of the messages of Nameless Dread. Evil does have its innings; good is not unremittently triumphant. They do us no favors who tell us the contrary.

Machen himself would dismiss moralizing over his horror stories; he regarded them as imaginative exercises. When he aimed to instruct he wrote essays and satire. He embodied his odder speculations in fiction like "N" and the prologue to "The White People" and thereby evaded serious responsibility for the ideas therein.

He never went near science fiction and avoided conventional ghosts, curses and vampires. Only once that I know of did he bring the dead back to earth and in that case their intentions were benevolent. Oddly enough, the upshot was bothersome and perplexing to him. For at a time of British reverses in World War I, with no sense at all of doing anything significant, Machen wrote "The Bowmen" and soon found himself embroiled in one of the strangest controversies to ever befall a man of letters.

It is on record that Tolkien saw himself as consciously creating a mythology for modern England. The ambition puzzles me, for surely a real mythology must have at one time received literal credence; a real myth (as opposed to a story with a mythical "feel" to it) is a story that someone, somewhere, once held to be literally true. Now no one has ever told me that the Journey of Frodo Baggins really happened. But when I first heard, orally, of the Angels of Mons, I was very definitely informed that the incident had occurred.

The notion of medieval archers, soldiers from the Hundred Years War, reappearing to cover the English retreat out of Mons against the twentieth century armaments of the German advance appealed to Machen on two counts. He regarded the war with ordinary patriotism, and he was a medievalist with an ingrained hatred of mechanization. Newspapers in those days received fiction as such and "The Bowmen", a very short short

story, appeared in *The Evening News* for Sept. 29, 1914. Machen has reported the outcome:

"... A few days from its publication the editor of *The Occult Review* wrote to me. He wanted to know whether the story had any foundation in fact. I told him that it had no foundation in fact of any kind or sort.... Soon afterwards the editor of *Light* wrote asking a like question and I made him a like reply.

"A month or two later, I received several requests from editors of parish magazines to reprint the story. I - or rather my editor - readily gave permission; and then, after another month or two, the conductor of one of these magazines wrote to me, saying that the February issue containing the story had been sold out, while there was still a great demand for it. Would I allow them to reprint "The Bowmen" as a pamphlet, and would I write a short preface giving the exact authorities for the story? I replied that they might reprint ... with all my heart, but that I could not give my authorities, since I had none, the tale being pure invention. The priest wrote again, suggesting - to my amazement - that I must be mistaken, that the main "facts" of "The Bowmen" must be true.... It seemed that my light fiction had been accepted by the congregation of this particular church as the solidest of facts...."

The flurry became a snowball, the snowball an avalanche. Machen found himself besieged by a clamor of corroborative gossip; reports flew that the incident had been witnessed up and down the embattled British lines. The Bowmen became Angels - because, Machen suspected, he had described his figures as shining, and England, long divested of saints, had only one half-believed category for shining beings.

"And so soon as the legend got the title 'The Angels of Mons' it became impossible to avoid it. It permeated the Press: it would not be neglected; it appeared in the most unlikely quarters - in *Truth* and *Town Topics*, *The New Church Weekly* (Swedenborgian) and *John Bull*.... People send me cuttings from provincial papers containing hot controversy... *The Daily Chronicle* suggests scientific explanations of the hallucination... The pulpits both of the Church and of Nonconformity have been busy... Letters come from all the ends of the earth to the editor of *The Evening News* with theories, beliefs, explanations, suggestions."

But no first-hand report from the front ever appeared and Machen dismissed all claims as exaggerations of his own fiction. To such a controversy there can be no satisfactory conclusion and Machen is still assumed, in some quarters, to have acted upon early information or psychic intimations of a real event.

Some fantasists are marked by an overriding concern or theme. We can note how much of Tolkien is related to Time; even in *The Hobbit* (silent as to Ages of Middle-earth), we are given at the end

an unusually strong sense of how long Bilbo has been gone from the Shire. So Machen's sense of horror is tied to the organic. The dead held no interest for him; he creates his effects through distorted life. Even in discussing abstract evil in "The White People" he fell back upon organic illustration: "What would your feelings be ... if your cat or your dog began to talk to you ...? You would be overwhelmed with horror. I am sure of it. And if the roses in your garden sang a weird song, you would go mad." In "The Great God Pan", that unrecognized predecessor of *Rosemary's Baby*, the organic is invaded by the infernal, in *The Terror* nature casts aside its decorum, in *The Green Round* strange things are astir upon the earth.

Such a sensual apprehension was consistent in an author who believed that the great struggle of western civilization is that between "the sacramentalist and the anti-sacramentalist". Machen's eventual death in a Catholic hospital led to a rumor that he had gone over to Rome at the last; in fact he remained an Anglican, but an Anglican of a combatively High Church variety.

"We want the Mass," he would write and he regarded bitterly all vetoes that Low or Broad Church held over ecclesial policy. Machen reserved only disgust for those who "drove Newman out of the Church of England". He was forever on the alert for inward grace breaking through its earthly masks and wrote Vincent Starrett that Cabell's *Cream of the Jest* ought to be subtitled "On the Right Receiving of the Sacraments". Of his war tales, "The Monstrance" is more typically a Machen story than "The Bowmen".

To such a man, one to whom matter may be the vehicle for grace, not merely its symbol, matter must also lie open to spiritual infection and a malignancy not of this world. Earthly horror is the price we pay for the Incarnation.

Fermented drink was for him, as for Chesterton, a misunderstood, maligned and misused sign of our destiny. Sex likewise - he translated Casanova explicitly and apparently without qualms "for private subscription" and his works often embody a covert but concentrated eroticism that occasionally maddened Victorian and Edwardian reviewers (see especially *Ornaments in Jade*).

The obscurity of many of his references, his willingness to hint at concepts rather than spell them out, has been applauded by Starrett, Cabell and other Machenites, regretted by quasi-admirers like Robertson Davies. This trait has certainly limited Machen's appeal. But it was, perhaps, inescapable in an essentially lonely man, who perceived himself as a minority spokesman, writing what he could for the other sacramentalists of the world, and in one who believed in the glaring insufficiency of language to convey any reality that truly matters. He worked hard and deserves his laurels, even though he decried the work.

"The fact is, that what we commonly call life is not life at all. All the things that are considered serious, important and vital: the faithful earning of a living, the going to the City every morning to copy letters, keep accounts or float companies ... these things are not life at all. They are the curse of life, or, as it is sometimes called, the curse of Adam; as the theologians might have told us if they had not been too busy over the 'curse of alcohol,' over the dubious moral influence of 'the pictures,' over the decidedly frivolous character of the lighter fiction of the day, and the demoralizing effect of putting a bob on the winner But this curse of getting a livelihood remains profoundly unnatural to man, in spite of his long experience of it: hence his frantic efforts to escape from what he erroneously calls life by running himself red

in the face at Lord's, by rowing himself blue in the face at Henley, by drinking methylated spirit ... and even by writing books."

MEMBERS QUESTIONNAIRE, Continued from p. 24

[Questions 60 and 61 involved a proposed classified ad section in *Mythlore*. On Question 60, "1" indicated "would place ads and would consult other people's ads"; "2" indicated "would place ads but would not consult other people's ads"; "3" indicated "would not place ads but would consult other people's ads"; and "4" indicated "would not place ads and would not consult other people's ads." Question 61 asked whether such a service is appropriate for *Mythlore*.]

60. *Mythlore* Classified Ads
1: 13 2: 0 3: 45 4: 2
61. Ads Appropriate for *Mythlore*?
Yes: 48 No: 8
62. Should *Mythlore* Have Special Issues?
Yes: 53 No: 2
63. No Question
64. No Question
65. State or Country of Residence
Other than United States: Canada, 4; West Germany, 1.
Within United States (by states in order of numbers of respondents): California, 16; Illinois, 6; New York, 4; Ohio, 4; Pennsylvania, 3; Connecticut, 3. [No other state had more than 2 respondents.]

[In addition to the numbered questions, the questionnaire included an invitation for open-ended comments. Many such comments were received and are being considered.]

CRIME AND PUNISHMENT, Continued from p. 28

with immediate and violent physical results."

²Review of *Uncle Peter's Fairy Tales*, *The Atheneum*, January 11, 1845, p. 40.

³Christina Rossetti, *Sing-Song, Speaking Likenesses, and Goblin Market* (1872; rpt. New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1976), p. 28.

⁴J. R. R. Tolkien, *Tree and Leaf* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1964), p. 3.

⁵Andrew Lang, *The Gold of Fairnilee* (Bristol: J. W. Arrowsmith, 1896), p. 2.

