

10-15-1969

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Recommended Citation

Wilson, Simone (1969) "The Empire of Charles Williams," *Mythlore: A Journal of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature*: Vol. 1: No. 4, Article 8.

Available at: <https://dc.swosu.edu/mythlore/vol1/iss4/8>

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Abstract

Outlines the geography of the Empire in Williams's *Arthuriad*, and the symbolic meaning of its parts.

Additional Keywords

Williams, Charles. *Arthuriad*—Geography; Williams, Charles. *Arthuriad*—Symbolism

THE EMPIRE OF CHARLES WILLIAMS

BY SIMONE WILSON

When I was asked to write this article on Charles Williams' Empire I was glad the Society does have an occasional thought about him. Williams is one of the three authors that The Mythopoeic Society is "devoted" to, yet he is certainly the least mentioned and the least read. This isn't really a reprimand; I know why Williams is not so widely popular as C.S. Lewis or J.R.R. Tolkien: in some ways Charles Williams is my favorite author, but I know that he's almost as hard to read and to understand as he is to write about. This goes not so much for his novels as for his Empire poetry. One almost has to approach the poems fore-armed with some background of Christian theology as well as knowledge of the Arthurian legend and its characters. It's also wise to read these poems with a dictionary and/or encyclopedia at your elbow: the verses abound with literary and historical allusions whose meanings are sometimes hard to ferret out but which do add greatly to the richness of the poetry.

Now that I've probably thoroughly scared all of you out of wanting to read the poems, I'd better go on to describe them so that (hopefully) you'll be interested and curious enough to explore them, formidable though they may seem at first. Actually the cycle of poems is contained in two separate sets, Taliessin through Logres and The Region of the Summer Stars: there is an accompanying prose study, The Arthurian Torso, the first half being Williams' unfinished Figure of Arthur (his death in 1945 cut short the work) and the rest an invaluable commentary on the cycle by C.S. Lewis.

The Empire is modeled after the old Roman Empire geographically speaking, but in meaning it is much more. The whole of the Empire is patterned after the whole of man's nature, with each area of the geography representing some part of man's body and the activities that go with it. (See the map.) Logres (Britain) is the head, center of rational thought and government, where at Camelot Arthur is to establish his rule of justice and reason. At Gaul are the breasts, the source of nourishment of intellectual thought and doctrine. "I," says Taliessin, "born of the Druids by the sea, drank also in the schools of Gaul... at the table of all the doctors." (TTL, p.8) The hands are at Rome, center of activity-- the active hands of the clerks and builders spreading throughout the Empire, the passive hands of the Pope, raised in adoration. Byzantium, as the navel, the point of contact of one's origin, is the center of truth and glory and the Throne of the Emperor. (The Emperor is an image of God.) Jerusalem is the womb, where the faith was born. The sunny province of Caucasia is the buttocks and the region of physical sensual joy, a balance against the colder intellect of Logres. (Williams joyfully affirmed, rather than solemnly, the worth and value of all aspects of man's unity.) There is also a barren, evil land beyond the Empire, Plo-l'u, which, because it is the complete rejection of all unity, lies entirely outside.

Such is the vision of the Empire -- of all parts functioning together in balance and of man fulfilled, such that the glory of the Empire (and of man) is felt and known. "The organic body sang together" is the line repeated over and over throughout the poem "The Vision of the Empire."

But the vision is not the reality. Caucasia falls to the Moslems who deny the sanctity and glory of physical matter, and the unity is broken: in the Empire and in man physical beauty and love are out of tune with the whole, are no longer simple and natural. Further (and greater) disorder results from the loss of the Grail from Logres (removed for reasons implied in the poems) to Carbonek, a semi-super-natural spot, a sort of halfway mark spiritually speaking between Camelot and Sarra, the ultimately spiritual land.

The goal pursued throughout, the central quest, is the restoration of the Empire (and parallelly of man), sought on the one hand by King Arthur through rational rule (again here is Logres the intellectual land lacking the Caucasian influence of physical harmony, for Arthur's rule is cracked by the love of Lancelot and Guinevere and by Arthur's bastard son Mordred), but also attempted by those who seek the hidden Grail as the way of Union.

I said before that you should approach these poems fore-armed. You should also come to them fore-warned so that, knowing that they are somewhat difficult and knowing what to expect, you won't be too discouraged straightway and give up. This article has been the warning: Williams' poems take time and effort to read, partly because of style but also because the things which Williams has to say are unique and unusual and make that effort totally worth your while.

The books at present are hard to get, but the grapevine tells me that they are now being reprinted, good news to all Williams fans (especially me -- this means that I can stop trying to copy Glen GoodKnight's edition and give it back to him. During ten months I toiled up to page 52 and would've never finished it.) So good luck in finding a copy, and good reading.



((Just a few comments from the editor: true we have not discussed Williams nearly as much as Tolkien or Lewis at the monthly meetings. So far we have covered Many Dimensions and The Greater Trumps and this month are discussing The Place of The Lion. We will in time discuss his other four novels as well. Because Williams is hard to read, and because many people's first reaction is one of bewilderment, I for one have not pushed him too hard, yet I do deeply feel he has such deepness and richness waiting for the reader who is patient. In a sense, Williams has to be worked up to, and reading Tolkien and Lewis is a good preparation. As Dr. Carnoll says of Lewis is true also of Williams; they both had background and knowledge of classical and Medieval literary heritage, which to many in this generation is infinitely more remote. Many today know more about Hell from No Exit rather than Paradise Lost or the Inferno.

Yes I too have heard by the grapevine that both Taliessin Through Logres and Region of The Summer Stars and Arthurian Torso are being reprinted in England by Oxford U.P. I suggest you write to Blackwell's, Broad Street, Oxford, England. They are a very large bookdealer and could tell you the price and order it for you.))