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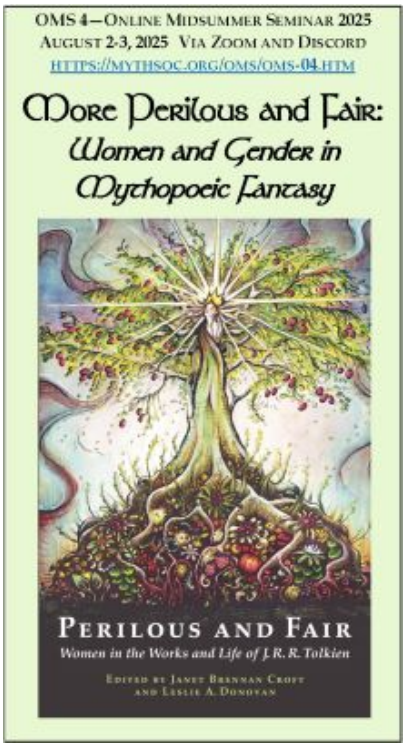


Arthurian & Cosmic Myth in *That Hideous Strength*

Abstract

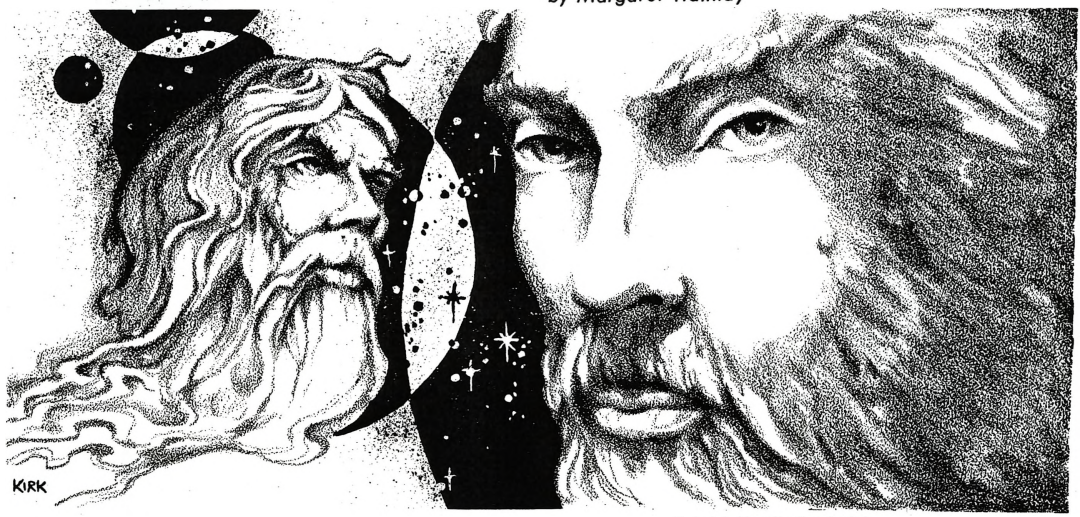
Discusses the elements of Arthurian legend in *That Hideous Strength*, particularly the character of Merlin.

Additional Keywords

Lewis, C.S.—Characters—Merlin; Lewis, C.S.—Critical interpretation; Lewis, C.S.—Knowledge—Arthurian romances; Merlin

Arthurian & Cosmic Myth in THAT HIDEOUS STRENGTH

by Margaret Hannay



There are two main differences between That Hideous Strength and the preceding books of the trilogy: the story is set on earth rather than on a distant planet, and the Arthurian myth is added. The two changes are interrelated — the cosmic myth cannot function on earth as it can on distant planets. A story set in England "after the war" must agree, at least in externals, with what the reader knows of modern England. Thus Lewis draws on the intensely British myth of King Arthur. He uses four main elements of the Arthurian story: the battle between Logres and Britain, Dr. Ransom as the Fisher-King and Pendragon, the remnant of Logres, and Merlin. The Arthurian myth thus exists within and parallel to the planetary myth. Logres (the Arthurian ideal) fighting Britian (secular reality) symbolizes the war between good and evil, between the fallen and unfallen angels. The earth is demonstrated to be "enemy-held territory" in Arthurian terms. [1]

This earthly setting requires a treatment of materials more like that of Charles Williams than like that of Lewis' other books. Without question many of Lewis' ideas about Merlin came from Charles Williams; the two were close friends and often discussed their manuscripts at the Inklings' weekly meetings. The use of Logres "as the core of Arthur's kingdom"[2] is probably derived from Williams; St. Anne's is also closely related to Taliessin's Logres. [3] To Williams' Arthurian myth Lewis adds the idea that the myth is historical fact, and that the history of the struggle between Logres and Britain has never been described properly. [4] From Williams' suggestion that the Pendragon was related to the Plantagenets Lewis probably derived the idea that the title had been handed down from one generation to the next through the entire history of Britain. [5] The idea of black and white magic is as prominent in Williams' work as it is in That Hideous Strength. Lewis draws from Ware and Layamon the legends that Arthur was transported to the Isle of Avalon to be cured, and that he stands guard over England and will return. [6]

In a letter to a young American friend Lewis suggests sources he might consult to pursue his interest in Merlin: the prose Merlin, Geoffrey, the Arthurian Chronicles from Ware to Layamon, and the three-volume set of the Works of Sir Thomas Malory. [7] One may surmise that these were the sources Lewis used in compiling his own version of the Arthurian myth in That Hideous Strength.

Lewis mentions the fact that he is in debt to his friend J. R. R. Tolkien for the idea of Numinor and the True West. Numinor is a fallen land beyond the sea, and "was in its prime in the days when nature and spirit were more unified, when magic was a living art." [8] It was not the abode of the gods but a place where man was closer to the gods.

The Arthurian myth comes into the novel long before the cosmic one. In the description of Bragdon College we are told of Bragdon Wood, which figures in a song of the fourteenth century:

> In Bragdon Bricht this ende dai
> Hude ich Merelin ther he lai
> Singinde woo and welawai

This poem refers to the legend that Merlin is not dead, but lies asleep in "Merlin's Well" in the heart of Bragdon Wood. Thus the Arthurian legend finds natural entrance into the story because of the location of Bragdon College at Merlin's Well, and because Ransom and Dimble between them are centuries ahead of the rest of Arthurian scholarship. They know that the Arthurian story is "mostly true history." Lewis really meant this. In illustrating a point of Biblical criticism he casually remarked, "We may without disgrace believe in a historical Arthur." [9] Ransom and Dimble also know that Edgestow was at the heart of ancient Logres, that Cure Hardy was originally Ozana le Coeur Hardi, and that a real Merlin once worked in the Bragdon Wood.

The novel is filled with almost purely literary discussions of Arthurian times which heighten the sense of mystery when Merlin later awakens. Dr. Dimble once tells the group at the Manor about two sets of characters in Arthur's court: the courtly people like Guinevere and Lancelot, the Roman part of the society and thoroughly Christian; the "dark people" like Morgan and Morgawse, very British, hostile, using magic and practicing the old Druidical religion. While the court wore togas and spoke a Celticised Latin (rather like Spanish), in isolated places the old British underkings still held sway, speaking Welsh and living in a primitive fashion. Merlin was an anomaly, British but not hostile. Arthur was on both sides, trying to pull the society together and almost succeeding. This division of the characters explains why Sir Kay was always considered a boor in the legends; he was part of that native strain despised by the Romanized court.

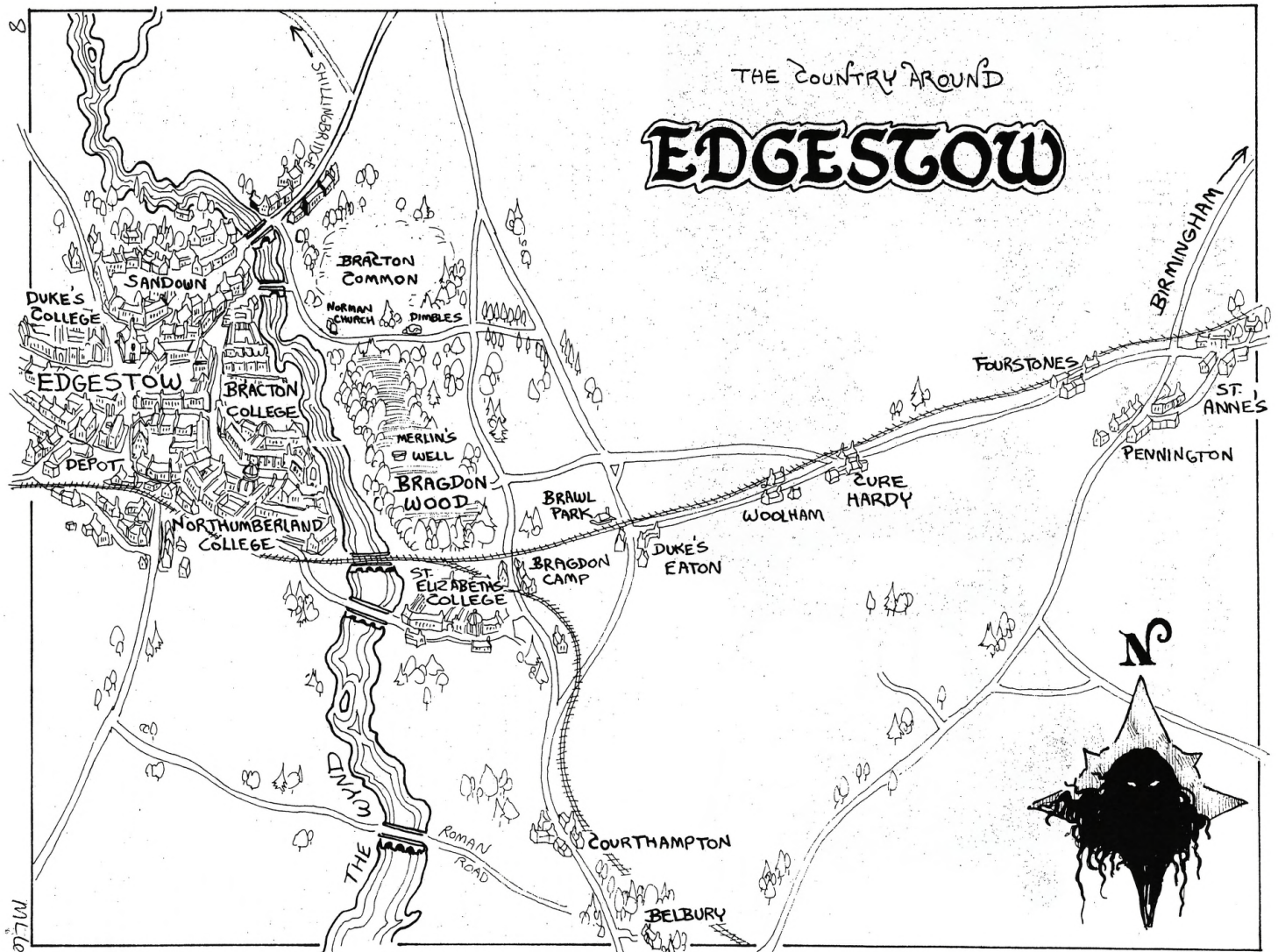
Merlin's position was difficult to explain. He was a magician but not evil; he lived before the time when one had to be priest or sorcerer, black or white, to be in touch with the supernatural. Merlin's magic was:

> a last survival of something older and different — something brought to Western Europe after the fall of Numinor and going back to an era in which the general relations of mind and matter on this planet had been other than those we know. (THS, Collier Books, pp. 200-201)

His magic had been more effective and less wrong than Renaissance magic. He was the last vestige of Atlantean magic, surviving into the fifth century, a magic which began before the Great Disaster, before the Druids, back in Numinor in pre-glacial periods. The Britain of Merlin was a horrible place with its dwindling Roman cities, and "eyes in the thickets, eyes of men not only pre-Roman but pre-British, ancient creatures, unhappy and dispossessed, who became the elves and ogres and wood-wooses of later tradition." (THS, p. 233)

Merlin comes back as Merlin of the fifth century though his life had been laid aside out of our one-dimensional time for fifteen hundred years. His presence emphasizes the difference that time makes. He thinks himself

MLL


THE COUNTRY AROUND
EDGESTOW
SHILLINGBRIDGE
BRACTON COMMON
NORMAN CHURCH
DIMBLES
SANDOWN
DUKE'S COLLEGE
EDGESTOW
BRACTON COLLEGE
DEPOT
MERLIN'S WELL
BRAGDON WOOD
NORTHUMBERLAND COLLEGE
BRAWL PARK
BRAGDON CAMP
ST. ELIZABETH'S COLLEGE
DUKE'S EATON
WOOLHAM
CURE HARDY
FOURSTONES
BIRMINGHAM
ST. ANNES
PENNINGTON
THE WYND
ROMAN ROAD
COURTHAMPTON
BELBURY
N

kind — yet he wants to behead Jane because she has not borne a child, and MacPhee because he talks too much. His prophecies are unnerving, as though he were given glimpses into the future through a window, and then the window were closed. He knows no more of what he means than what he speaks in words as the vision comes to him.

Merlin is the key figure in the controversy between the Manor and Belbury, since both sides need the preternatural power he represents. Thus Lewis uses Merlin as the active agent of good. The semi-divine nature and invalidism of Ransom would make it inappropriate for him to be the main actor as he was in Perelandra.[10] The descent of the Oyeresu to pour their spirits into Merlin fuses the myth of Deep Heaven with the Arthurian legends. The whole question of Powers becomes focused in Merlin. For he has lived in a time before good and evil were so distinct; there was a middle ground in his time. The whole universe is coming to a point like the old song about "Heaven and hell eating into merry Middle Earth from opposite sides." (THS, pp. 283-284) Everything is getting further and further apart. As Lewis said in an article entitled "The Decline of Religion": "When the Round Table is broken every man must follow either Galahad or Mordred: middle things are gone."[11] In Merlin's time not all eldila were angels or devils as they will be at the end of time. The neutral eldila were not bad in themselves, but they were still bad for men. Merlin is altered, withered, by his contact with those powers. The gods, elves, dwarfs, water-people, fate and longaevi were all neutral spirits here before the universe came to a point. Merlin denies that he is the "devil's son" as some had called him, but he is not completely Christian either. One reason he was awakened is that he might be saved. The other reason is to serve as a medium for the Powers to invade Tellus. True, the Law forbids the Powers to descend until the End, but evil men have removed that protection by leaving the planet, and so "pulled down Deep Heaven on their heads." Merlin is a tool good enough to be used but not too good. No virgin mind may be violated, and a black magician is not acceptable to the righteous Powers.

In his study of sixteenth-century literature Lewis mentions the "middle spirits...betwixt th' Angelical and the Human kinde," which appear in Apuleius, Bernardus Sylvestus and Layamon. This mass of "mysterious but not necessarily evil spirits creates the possibility of an innocent traffic with the unseen and therefor of high magic or magia."[12] Of the "white" magic Merlin is the best-known example. But as Ransom reminds Merlin, "It never was very lawful, even in your day. Remember when we first knew that you would be awakened, we thought you would be on the side of the enemy." (THS, p. 289)

The riddles asked by Merlin are intensely serious, the great password to his College. Merlin does not realize in what sense his words are true; when he discovers that Ransom call the Oyeresu his Masters because they actually are, he is astonished beyond words. Merlin thought the Oyeresu merely served as a password. The riddles themselves are of interest in tying together the cosmic and the Arthurian myths. The first concerns Sulva, the moon which was half wasted with the earth's curse. The other half faces Deep Heaven, and is unspoiled. (Merlin thought only three men knew the answer.) The second riddle concerns the ring of Arthur the king. Ransom replies that the ring is on Arthur's finger "In the House of Kings in the cup-shaped land Abhalligin, beyond the seas in Perelandra," where Arthur is with Melchisedec. (Merlin thought only two men knew that answer.) The third riddle was known only to Merlin himself. Who will be Pendragon when Saturn descends? In what sphere did he learn war? Ransom replies, "In the sphere of Venus I learned war. In this age Lurga shall descend. I am the Pendragon." (THS, p. 274) And Merlin drops on his knees before his master.

Thus the riddle game plays an important part in tying together the two major myths of the novel — the cosmic and the Arthurian. Ransom, the Pendragon, knows the Oyeresu which are only legend to Merlin. Ransom had fought on Perelandra; he is taken to Melchisedec's hall in Lur to be with Arthur at the end of the novel. But correlating the two identities of Ransom the space traveler and redeemer of Perelandra with Ransom the Pendragon and Fisher-King is difficult, and is not completely successful.

The idea of the wounded Fisher-King is probably derived from Frazer and Eliot. Majorie Wright suggests that the duel identity of Fisher-King and Pendragon is "to show that the Pendragon is ruling over a broken, fallen kingdom, or that modern England is, as according to Eliot, the wasteland."[13] Charles Moorman states that the wound is "made a symbol of Ransom's fallen state; it is the sting of the serpent."[14] This idea is of course based on the prophecy in Genesis 3:15, "He shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel." This prophecy, however, is commonly believed to refer to the Christ — thus the wound would symbolize not Ransom's fallen, but his divine nature. Thus as Perelandra compares Ransom's heel and the Unman's head, so That Hideous Strength compares the pain from Ransom's wound with the head of Alcasan and the terrible pain suffered by the Head. This wound of Ransom's, which can be healed only in Lur, can also be compared to the wound in Frodo's shoulder given by the Ringwraith which could never be completely healed in Middle-earth.

The mythical pattern of death and rebirth is used to transform Ransom into Mr. Fisher-King;[15] the cave from which Ransom emerges to a resurrection dawn is a clear identification with Christ. However, Ransom is not made whole, as Christ was. Christ's wounds were somehow there and visible (Thomas touched them) but they did not give pain after the resurrection. Ransom is in continual pain on Earth, pain that he must bear without drugs and without the healing touch of Merlin's magic. Thus Lewis avoids the pits of allegory. Ransom is not Christ. Ransom may be Man, redeemed but not yet glorified, man enacting Christ.

The mythical function of Ransom as Fisher-King is power; the explanation in the novel for that identity is weak. This title, Jane is told, came from his married sister in India, a Mrs. Fisher-King, who had died and left him a fortune on the condition that he take her name. The sister was supposed to be a friend of the "great native Christian mystic...the Sura" who had warned her of danger to mankind that would focus in Edgestow. With the name and fortune she had handed over the problem of the impending crisis to her brother. The only connection this has with the earlier books is that Ransom had casually mentioned to Weston, before he was kidnapped, that his only living relative was a "married sister in India." This is a bit far-fetched. There is less attempt to explain how Ransom obtained the title of Pendragon, and, for that reason, it is more convincing. He has simply received the office of Pendragon from the seventy-eighth from Arthur; he is the successor of Arthur, Uther and Cassibelaum. And he will go to be with Arthur, Barbarossa, Enoch, Elijah — those who never die.

Ransom's further identification with the Pendragon combines the myth of the ideal kingdom (Logres) with that of Deep Heaven (Ransom the voyager) and the Grail myth (Ransom the Fisher-King). His household is a microcosm of the Arthurian court, each member evincing clear-cut allegiance and partaking in communal efforts — a sharp contrast to the mutual distrust and vague responsibilities at Belbury.

The best description of Ransom returned from Venus is given as a skeptical Jane is led into his chamber, the "throne room." He is wounded from the bite on his heel, a wound that cannot be healed until his return to Perelandra. He is eternally young, with a golden beard — like her imagined Arthur, the imagined Solomon of her childhood. He recalls the word "King itself with all linked associations of battle, marriage, priesthood, mercy and power." His voice is like gold, not only the mild rays of an English spring, but the fierce rays of the sun on the desert. Mrs. Maggs brings in his meal on a tray which holds "a glass, a small flacon of red wine, and a roll of bread... He broke the bread and poured himself out a glass of wine." (THS, p. 149) He symbolizes not only Arthur, kingship, Solomon's majesty and wisdom, but also Christ breaking the bread of the Sacrament. Jane had seen him before in her dreams of Merlin's waking, when someone bearded and divinely young, "Someone all golden and strong and warm was coming with a mighty earth-shaking tread down into that black place." (THS, p. 136) Yet even Ransom is dwarfed by the hugeness of the Oyarsa who came to talk with him — Malacandra, who made the Director a tiny mortal and who made the room aslant by abolishing the earthly system of reference. Ransom tells her later that Angels and Powers are not good company for men, even if they are good angels and good men. Paradoxically, Maleldil Himself seems more comfortable because of Bethlehem. Jane is forced to realized that Maleldil might simply be God.

The chapter entitled "Descent of the Gods" is the climax of Lewis' cosmic myth that joins together all myth into one great harmony. Viritrilbia gives those in the house a dazzling wit; Venus brings warmth and the scent of the floating islands that was inconsolable longing. Mars imparts a martial spirit evoking thoughts of "Mars and Mavor, and Tyr who put his hand into the wolf-mouth." Saturn comes as unbearable weight, yet Glund (Jupiter) comes with joy. He is Glund-Oyarsa, King of Kings "through whom the joy of creation principally blows across these fields of Arbol, known to men in old times as Jove and under that name, by fatal but not inexplicable misprision, confused with his Maker." (THS, p. 327)

In That Hideous Strength Lewis has joined his own cosmic mythology to the Grecian planetary deities, the Fisher-King of the Grail legend, and Merlin and the Pendragon of the Arthurian legend. That there is an occasional weakness, such as the married sister in India, is not surprising; what is surprising is that Lewis was able to blend these diverse elements into a cohesive novel of contemporary England which can be read on either the narrative or the mythic level.

FOOTNOTES

1. "Spaceships and Grail: The Myths of C.S. Lewis," Charles Moorman, College English, XVIII (May 1957), p. 402.
2. Marjorie Wright, "The Cosmic Kingdom of Myth: A Study in the Myth-Philosophy of Charles Williams, C.S. Lewis, and J.R.R. Tolkien" (unpublished Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Illinois, 1960), p. 20.
3. Ibid., p. 90.
4. Charles Moorman, Arthurian Triptych (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1960), p. 115.
5. C.S. Kilby, The Christian World of C.S. Lewis (Grand Rapids, Mich: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1964), p. 111.
6. Moorman, Triptych, p. 112.
7. Letter to Martin Kilmer, August 18, 1959.
8. Wright, op. cit., p. 96.
9. C.S. Lewis, Christian Reflections (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1967), p. 162.
10. Moorman, Triptych, p. 119.
11. C.S. Lewis, "The Decline of Religion," The Cherwell, XXVI, (November 29, 1946), p. 9.
12. C.S. Lewis, English Literature in the Sixteenth Century Excluding Drama (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1965), pp. 11-12.
13. Wright, op. cit., p. 152.
14. Moorman, Triptych, p. 116.
15. Ibid., p. 124.

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