Arthurian & Cosmic Myth in *That Hideous Strength*

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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
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.

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" is probably derived from Williams; St. Anne's is also closely related to Taliessin's Logres. 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. 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. 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.

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. 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." 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 daie

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." 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 Romanised 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...
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 was closed. He knows no more of what he means than what he speaks. The conclusion he reaches is that the Head of Perelandra, 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 no distinction as he understood it in his time. The 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 R eligion": "When the Round Table is broken every man must follow either God or Satan..." 11 In Merlin's time not all eidilas were angels or devils as they will be at the end of time. The neutral eiddi were not bad in themselves, but they were still bad for men. Merlin is altered, withered, by his contact with those powers. The gods, eldila, and Pen-dracon are "the wizard in the wasteland. "13 Charles Moorman states that the wound is "made a symbol and sign of the Christ — thus the wound would symbolize not 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 Ranson's fallen, but his divine nature. Thus as Perelandra compares Ransom's "wound" with that of Jesus, so That Percival Strength compares the pain from Ransom's wound with the pain of Alcmena. The wound of Alcmena is a wound of the back, the Saturnian wound, the suffering of the arcanum. The mythological pattern of death and rebirth is used to transform Ransom's story 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 the risen Christ, who is somewhere else and visible (Thomas touched them) but they did not give pains or harm to the. 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 pitfalls 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 office of Pendragon from the seventy-eighth from Arthur; he is the successor of Arthur, Uther and Cassielbaum. And he will go to be with Arthur, Barbarossa, Enoch, Elijah — those who never die.

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 Arthur of the story. Therefore, Perelandra is used 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 no distinction as he understood it in his time. The 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 R eligion": "When the Round Table is broken every man must follow either God or Satan..." 11 In Merlin's time not all eidilas were angels or devils as they will be at the end of time. The neutral eiddi were not bad in themselves, but they were still bad for men. Merlin is altered, withered, by his contact with those powers. The gods, eldila, and Pen-dracon are "the wizard in the wasteland. "13 Charles Moorman states that the wound is "made a symbol and sign of the Christ — thus the wound would symbolize not 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 "wound" with that of Jesus, so That Percival Strength compares the pain from Ransom's wound with the pain of Alcmena. The wound of Alcmena is a wound of the back, the Saturnian wound, the suffering of the arcanum. The mythological pattern of death and rebirth is used to transform Ransom's story 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 the risen Christ, who is somewhere else and visible (Thomas touched them) but they did not give pains or harm to the...