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An Introduction to Narnia - Part III: The Genre of The Chronicles

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An Introduction to Narnia - Part III: The Genre of The Chronicles

Abstract
The third part discusses the genre of fairy-tale in general and the Chronicles in relation to it, in addition to other children's books of the 20th century.

Additional Keywords
Frye, Northrop—Theory of literature; Hough, Graham—Theory of literature; Lewis, C.S. Chronicles of Narnia; Lewis, C.S. Chronicles of Narnia—Literary classification
In his essay "Sometimes Fairy Stories May Say Best What's To Be Said," C.S. Lewis describes the way the Chronicles of Narnia came to him first:

In the Author's mind there bubbles up every now and then the material for a story. For me it invariably begins with mental pictures. This ferment leads to nothing unless it is accompanied with a longing for a Form: verse or prose, short story, novel, play or what not. When these two things click you have the Author's impulse complete.

... Some people seem to think that I began by asking myself how I could say something about Christianity to children; then fixed on the fairy tale as an instrument; then collected information about child-psychology and decided what age group I'd write for; then drew up a list of basic Christian truths and hammered out 'allegories' to embody them. This is all pure moonshine. I couldn't write in that way at all. Everything began with images; a faun carrying an umbrella, a queen on a sledge, a magnificent lion. At first there wasn't even anything Christian about them; that element pushed itself in of its own accord. It was part of the bubbling.

Then came the Form. As these images sorted themselves into events (i.e., became a story) they seemed to demand no love interest and no close psychology. But the Form which excludes these things is the fairy tale. And the moment I thought of that I fell in love with the Form itself: its brevity, its severe restraints on description, its flexible traditionalism, its inflexible hostility to analysis, digression, reflections and 'gas'. I was now enamoured of it. Its very limitations of vocabulary became an attraction; as the hardness of the stone pleases the sculptor or the difficulty of the sonnets delights the sonneteer.


Although I shall in the next installment of this series consider other ways of looking at the literary type to which the Chronicles belong, let us begin with the fairy tale.

Fairy tales are, of course, folk tales in origin—"folk stories of supernatural events" suggests one reference book. The precise definition does not matter greatly, for (as with folk ballads) the type is recognized by the person who has listened to the saying of the tales or the singing of the ballads. (Or, in these days, who has read the tales or heard the ballads on record.) The comparison of the fairy tales and the folk ballads is not an idle one, for collectors began their compilations of both types of popular literature about the same time, as public taste began to shift in the latter part of the eighteenth century toward a fascination with the primitive which is one characteristic of the Romantic Movement. Not the first but the most influential collection of English ballads appeared in 1782: Thomas Percy's Reliques of Ancient English Poetry. Percy (later an Anglican bishop) was followed by such collectors as Sir Walter Scott and John Leyden, whose Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border appeared in 1802 and 1803. The popularity of these ballads led to artistic imitations, suggested by the title of William Wordsworth's and Samuel Taylor Coleridge's combined volume, Lyrical Ballads, in 1798. In this volume, Wordsworth imitated the style of the broadside ballads of the Renaissance and Seventeenth Century in such poems as "The Idiot Boy" and "Goody Blake and Harry Gill: A True Story", while Coleridge (with better taste) imitated the folk ballad in "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner". Other English poets followed later with other imitation ballads: John Keats in 1819 with "La Belle Dame sans Merci", Alfred Tennyson in 1830 with "The Lady of Shalott", and Dante Gabriel Rossetti in 1851 or 1852 with "Sister Helen" and in 881 with "The King's Tragedy" (the latter in the manner of the Border Ballads). And, of
course, the wide-spread popularity (since my above list only names the most obvious examples) provoked less serious imitations: W. S. Gilbert's "The Yarn of the Nancy Bell" (1860), Edward Lear's "The Owl and the Pussycat" (1871), and Lewis Carroll's "Jabberwocky" (1872) and The Hunting of the Snark (1876)—the prevalence of sea stories in these parodies may suggest the influence of Coleridge's work on later imaginations.

When discussing the fairy tale, unfortunately the pattern cannot be traced so precisely. The first collector of importance was Charles Perrault (1628-1703), a Frenchman, whose volume of stories in 1697 was written in a sometimes polished style, with Morals added in verse which were often slightly cynical. He was, after all, writing at the time of Molière and Racine, when Louis XIV was on the throne. The history of the fairy tale in France in the eighteenth century is one of sophisticated retellings of folk matter. Perrault, however, is important for giving us such stories as "Sleeping Beauty", "Red Riding Hood", "Bluebeard", "Puss in Boots", and "Cinderella", not the more bloodthirsty version of the Brothers Grimm, which we find established in our own day, with the TV musical by Rogers and Hammerstein and the cartoon movie supervised by Walt Disney. (For more information on these matters, with analysis of some of Perrault's stories, see Geoffrey Breton's introduction to his translation of Perrault in the Penguin Classics series.)

The Brothers Grimm have just been mentioned: they were Jakob Grimm (1785-1863) and Wilhelm Grimm (1786-1859). Of the two, Jakob was the more scholarly and Wilhelm the more literary, but they were complementary in their study of the German language and literature; they collected folktales between 1807 and 1814, and published two volumes, in 1812 (containing eighty-six stories) and 1815 (containing seventy). Their collection contains such stories as "Hansel and Gretel", "Briar Rose" (the German version of "Sleeping Beauty"), "Snow-White", and "Rumpelstiltskin". Their stories were first translated into English in 1824 under the title Popular Stories—presumably in the root meaning of popular from populus, the (common) people, the folk.

The next figure in this international history of the fairy tale is Danish: Hans Christian Anderson (1805-1875). And it is with Anderson that the imitation folk tale (analogous to the imitation ballad) appears. He published his fairy tales in a series of pamphlets, later collected in book form (the first pamphlet, in 1835, contained "The Tinderbox", "Little Claus and Big Claus", "The Princess and the Pea", and "Little Idas Flowers"). According to one critic, Richard B. Wovles, some of Anderson's stories are actual folk tales: "The Tinder Box", "Little Claus and Big Claus", and "The Travelling Companion", for example. But the other stories, written in the folk-story style, may be classified into other groups: (1) stories based on Anderson's life: "The Ugly Duckling" and "She Was Good for Nothing"; (2) stories about Denmark: "The Wind Tells about Valdemar Paae and His Daughters" and "Holger Danske"; (3) stories showing human flaws: "The Emperor's New Clothes" and "The Rays"; and (4) philosophical stories: "The Story of a Mother" and "The Shadow". Whatever the classification, Anderson's 168 stories are very important in the development I am tracing, for they mark the shift from folk tales to literary tales. They also had made the author famous by the early 1840's, and in the course of visits to a number of European countries, he visited England, staying with Charles Dickens—hence his influence came quickly into England.

One other aspect of Anderson's fairy tales deserves notice, as preparation for the next step: this is that his stories vary greatly in length. Many are extremely short, being shorter than the average of those collected by the Brothers Grimm, but some are also extremely long, and often divided into chapters. The longest I have read (but I have not read nearly all) is "The Ice Maiden", which runs forty pages of fairly small print in the Modern Library Giant edition of Grimm and Anderson stories. But a better example of the type of story which points toward the Chronicles of Narnia is "The Snow Queen" (twenty-eight pages in the same edition). "The Ice Maiden" is too adult in its characters and too theological in its climax to be much like Lewis's stories: it is a Charles Williams fairy tale, if such can be imagined. On the other hand, "The Snow Queen" has children as its protagonists and a series of adventures as its plot: the boy hitchs his sled to the back of the Snow Queen's sleigh by mistake, and is taken off by her to her castle in the north and kept there; the girl goes in search of him and ultimately rescues him. (There is a good possibility that "The Snow Queen" had some conscious or unconscious effect in Lewis's creation of the White Witch in The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe.)

Once the fairy tale was literarily produced in extended length (like Coleridge's "Rime" in seven parts), the volume or several-volume fairy tale was imminent. George MacDonald (1824-1905) produced it: the single-volume fairy tale is At The Back of the North Wind (1871), and the two-volume fairy tale is The Princess and the Goblin (1872) and The Princess and Curdie (1883). The temptation is to expand at length on the relationship of MacDonald to Lewis, but that is really matter enough for a paper in itself. Suffice it to say that Lewis acknowledged MacDonald his master: the debt Lewis owed to MacDonald's adult fantasy, Phantastes (1858), may be found stated by Lewis in his autobiography, Surprised by Joy, near the end of Chapter XI; in his Preface to his compilation of quotations, George MacDonald: an Anthology; and in his truncated Divine Comedy, The Great Divorce: A Dream, in which MacDonald plays the God-bearing part of part of Beatrice to Lewis's Dante. Lewis also refers to the fairy tales in That Hideous Strength where Ransom mentions the diet of "the King in Curdie" (Chapter Seven, Part II); later Jane Studdock decides to read "the Curdie books" (Chapter Eight, Part II).

Of course, I am not saying that the tradition is as simple as (1) short folk tales, (2) chaptered imitation tales, (3) one-volume fairy stories, (4) two-volume fairy stories, and (5) the seven-volume Chronicles of Narnia. Nor that the influence is that step by step. I have already suggested that Anderson may have influenced Lewis directly with "The Snow Queen" (just as Anderson's "A Vision of the Last Day" may have influenced the conception of The Great Divorce, for that matter); further, there is a tradition of German roman...
tics behind MacDonald which may have (but I do not know) also influenced Lewis: Novalis (George F. P. von Hardenberg, 1772-1801), Ludwig Tieck (1773-1853), and Ernest T. A. Hoffman (1776-1822). The whole tradition of German Romanticism is complicated, and I am no more than a nonce student in the field. But I believe the usual outlines are fairly clear. The first group of German Romantics was the circle of friends at Jena from 1798 (the year of Lyrical Ballads) to 1804 (that is, these men are those to whom the term 'Romantic' is usually applied: Goethe and others in the previous generation are Romantics in a broader sense of the word). Included in this circle at Jena were Tieck and Novalis, and Novalis' Heinrich von Ofterdingen (an uncompleted novel, 1802) is the major work produced by the group. Further, in the novel Heinrich dreams of a blue flower, a symbol of longing, which was later used by a number of critics as a representative symbol for the element of Sehnsucht which appeared in much Germanic romanticism. Lewis alludes to it in his autobiography:

And ever day there were what we called 'the Green Hills'; that is, the low line of the Castle-reagh Hills which we saw from the nursery windows. They were not very far off but they were, to children, quite unattainable. They taught me longing—Sehnsucht; made me for good or ill, and before I was six years old, a votary of the Blue Flower.


(Lewis, of course, would know the general facts about Germanic Romanticism while not necessarily being influenced by any of the Poe-like tales which some of the authors produced, but he does refer to Novalis' Heinrich in his English Literature in the Sixteenth Century (London: Oxford University Press, 1954), p. 382, and to a symbolic personage from the novel in a note in 'The Allegory of Love (New York: Oxford University Press, 1958), p. 363.) The second group of German Romantics were at Heidelberg in the years of 1806 to 1809. The Brothers Grimm were connected to this circle in its early days and thus my thesis begins to tie together. After this group drifted apart (several of its members moved to Berlin), the Romantic movement was less defined by place of residence: Hoffmann is one of the writers in northern Germany during these later developments. Hoffmann's tales were well known throughout Europe, however—and are known today perhaps best for the music they inspired: The Nutcracker and the Mouse-King is the basis for Tchaikovsky's ballet, and the mining aspects of the Curdie books to like interests in Novalis and Hoffmann (Novalis was a mining engineer). Perhaps Dr. Glenn Sadler (who played Curdie to Tenny Rule's Princess in the masquerade at Mythcon I) and—equally important—whose doctoral dissertation was on MacDonald will illuminate this whole Germanic tradition behind MacDonald and Lewis. Since Novalis celebrated a medieval Catholicism, there may well be an influence on the Chronicles of Narnia, but I suspect that Lewis's most typical works in the tradition are outside of my present discussion, Dymer and 'The Nameless Isle'.

To return from my digression into Germanic romanticism: I know of no thorough study of the fairy-tale tradition running from the Grimms through Anderson to MacDonald (with or without Perrault), but a brief analysis of 'The Juniper Tree' which was collected by the Brothers Grimm, Anderson's 'The Girl Who Trod on a Lost!', and MacDonald's The Princess and Curdie, as a preparation for the study of the Chronicles of Narnia, may be found in Chapter One of Mary Barrows Thomas's The Fairy Stories of C. S. Lewis (Norman, Oklahoma: an unpublished Master of Arts thesis at the University of Oklahoma, 1964). However, I cannot make the step directly from MacDonald to Lewis in this generic tradition I am sketching. Perhaps MacDonald's works, if differentiated, will prepare for the intermediate writer. The Princess and the Goblin and The Princess and Curdie are Marchen in setting, like those collected by the Brothers Grimm: a far-away kingdom, vaguely medieval in circumstances. On the other hand, At the Back of the North Wind is set in Victorian London, involving a boy named Diamond and a cab horse named Diamond (the boy was named for the horse). The episodes about North Wind may be interpreted as dreams only, while the rest of the book is realistic.

The books of E. Nesbit (1858-1924), while not being dream stories, are much closer in tone to At the Back of the North Wind than to the Curdie books. (Lewis Carroll's two volumes of Sylvie and Bruno, 1889 and 1893, are of the same type.) Lewis mentions Nesbit's Five Children books in his autobiography:

Much better than either of these (Doyle's Sir Nigel and Twain's A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court) was E. Nesbit's trilogy, Five Children and It, The Phoenix and the Wishing Carpet, and The Amulet. The last did most for me. It first opened my eyes to antiquity, the 'dark backward and abysm of time', I can still re-read it with delight.

—Surprised by Joy, p. 21

The basic device of these stories is, like MacDonald's At the Back of the North Wind, the intrusion of a fantasy-device into the realistic world. In Five Children and It (1902), five Edwardian children discover a Psammead, a sand fairy, who can grant wishes: the rest of the book indicates the dangers of casual wishes. The Phoenix and the Carpet (1904)—Lewis's version of the title is incorrect—introduces the two titular "devices", the latter of which being a magic journey-taking carpet. The Story of the Amulet (1906) begins with half an amulet, with which the children seek the other half: Lewis, from the above quotation, seems to have enjoyed the journeys into the past (including Atlantis, in Chapter IX); I was also impressed by the trip into the future as planned by H. G. Wells (in Chapter XII). (Edith Nesbit's first husband, Hubert...
Bland, was a member of the Fabian Society, as was she, and their home has been described as 'the Fabian social headquarters', by Anne Fremanctle; Wells, of course, was a Fabian, from 1902 to 1908—and Edith named her first son Fabian.) Obviously, the magical journeys of Nesbit's children are something like those of the Pevensies in the Chronicles (I shall be more specific in my comparisons in a later installment). And Roger Lancelyn Green has pointed out that Lewis unconsciously lifted the wardrobe of The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe from Nesbit's "The Aunt and Amabel" (see Green's C.S. Lewis (London: The Bodley Head, 1963), p. 36). Thus, this-worldly aspects of the Chronicles of Narnia belong to the tradition of MacDonald's At the Back of the North Wind and E. Nesbit's children's books (at least one of her books, The Railway Children, does not involve fantasy at all).

But the Narnian side of the Chronicles belongs to the Marchen, (the dual heritage being what Lewis meant by "flexible traditionalism" in my opening quotation). I do not intend to try to "prove" the fairy-tale tradition exists in them. Any reader will recognize the generic conventions of giants, dwarves, talking animals, and wicked queens. And, as I have promised parenthetically above, when I reach a three-installment survey of the individual books, a number of specific comparisons will appear.

Logically, at this point this installment is finished. But I would like to tidy up a few loose ends (while resisting an impulse to discuss the traditions of other children's books by Inkings, Tolkien's The Hobbit and Own Barfield's The Silver Trumpet). I have not mentioned the 'Narnian Suite', for example. The subtitles of the two parts indicate clearly enough that these are marching songs—and marching songs for folklore creatures: 'March for Strings, Kettledrums, and Sixty-three Dwarves!' and 'March for Drum, Trumpet, and Twenty-one Giants'. Of course, they are wartime marching songs, not songs for marching to work, but sometimes I have tried to picture Walt Disney's Seven Dwarfs singing, instead of 'Hi ho, hi ho, it's off to work we go', this:

With plucking pizzicato and the prattle of the kettledrum
We're trotting into battle mid a clatter of accoutrement;
Our beards are big as periwigs and trickle with opopanax,
And trinketry and treasure twinkle out on every part of us--
(Scrape! Tap! The fiddle and the kettledrum).

Second, I should like to pick up loose end of stock fairy-tales. I pointed out W.S. Gilbert and others wrote humorous ballads. This tradition also exists in the imitation folk tale: William Makepeace Thackeray's The Rose and the Ring, George MacDonald's 'The Light Princess', and Andrew Lang's Prince Prigio are examples. (Is this where Barfield's book belongs? Does Lewis's 'Narnian Suite' show touches of this attitude?) In our own day, Donald Barthelme's Snow White (New York: Atheneum, 1967) demonstrates the Absurdist fairy-tale. But these have little to do with my main concern in these studies.

Finally, I would like to make the obvious point that fairy tales are romances in one of the commonly accepted meanings of the word: "any long fictitious narratives embodying scenes and events remote from common life and filled with extravagant adventures". Thus I shall begin with a comparison to a romance epic, Spenser's The Faerie Queene, in my next installment.

TOLKIEN AWARDED C.B.E.

We have learned shortly before going to press that Professor Tolkien has been awarded the C.B.E. (Commander of the Order of the British Empire) by Queen Elizabeth II, shortly before his 80th birthday.

C.S. LEWIS COLLECTION AT WHEATON COLLEGE

by Margaret Hannay

Serious scholarship can become very frustrating, particularly if one has spent hours pouring over the MLA bibliographies and the various indexes only to find that the materials most needed are totally inaccessible. But Wheaton College has done much to relieve this annoyance and to introduce a dash of adventure into the study of C.S. Lewis and the other "Oxford Christians" (Charles Williams, J.R.R. Tolkien, Dorothy Sayers, Owen Barfield and George MacDonald.)

Wheaton College has a truly remarkable collection of first editions, manuscripts, and holograph letters in its "C.S. Lewis Collection," started in 1965 by Dr. Clyde S. Kilby. Over 850 of Lewis' original letters (most of them still unpublished) and another 261 copies of letters are now included in the Collection. Although it takes a little effort to decipher Lewis' hand at times, the attempt is well rewarded when one comes across an exciting nugget of information in some unpublished letter like the one to Ann and Martin Kilmer in which Lewis said, "I am so glad you both like Till We Have Faces. I think it much my best book but not many people agree." Until that was discovered it was generally believed that Lewis preferred Perelandra.

A high point of the Collection is the "Great War" between Lewis and Owen Barfield which is referred to by Lewis in Surprised by Joy as "one of the turning points of my life." One expects to wade into an incomprehensible dialogue on anthroposophism only to find the philosophic discussion literally surrounded with fantastic diagrams and doodles—an effect which could never be fully appreciated in a published version.

Although Lewis had the reputation of habitually filing his manuscripts in the wastebasket, Wheaton was able to obtain the holographs of An Experiment in Criticism, his essay " Donne and Love Poetry in the Seventeenth Century," and the poem The Nativity, in a published version.

Another task under way is the xeroxing of all periodical collections, pictures, tapes of voices, maps and drawings pertinent to the writers, the College has been engaged in the massive task of compiling a bibliography of all six writers and acquiring all their writings. Nearly all books have already been purchased, including many first editions of the original works and foreign translations. All doctoral theses on the writers and most master's theses are included as well as many honors papers and a collection of such magazines as The Tolkien Journal, Orrecrist, Niekas, and Mythlore.

Another task under way is the xeroxing of all periodical articles by and about these writers, a task which will probably never be completed since there are new articles appearing constantly. Dr. Kilby and various helpers have also been working for many years on an exhaustive index to all the published works of Lewis; most of the individual books have been finished and the next undertaking is the collation of the indexes. The C.S. Lewis Collection now has such academic stature that a contract has been signed with the great Bodleian Library at Oxford University to exchange microfilm copies of all manuscript holdings. For the serious Lewis scholar there are only two possible sites for his research—the Bodleian in England and the C.S. Lewis Collection at Wheaton College.