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Machen's Hallows

Abstract

Discusses one of Machen's rare stories that deal with "the good supernatural"— in this case, the Grail. Sees parallels between this story and works of Lewis and Williams (especially *War in Heaven*).

Additional Keywords

Lewis, C.S.—Relation to Arthur Machen; Machen, Arthur. "The Great Return" (short story)—Relation to C.S. Lewis; Machen, Arthur. "The Great Return" (short story)—Relation to Charles Williams; Williams, Charles—Relation to Arthur Machen

Machen's Hallows

Mary M. Stolzenbach

I can recall no reference showing that C.S. Lewis read Arthur Machen, but we know that he did read and enjoy what he called in one essay "Good Bad Books," such as Rider Haggard's. Machen, was chiefly a writer of good horror stories, perhaps not in the class of M.R. James or LeFanu; he is reminiscent of Lovecraft, but much more taut and literate.

His stock-in-trade, or fundamental mythology, drew heavily upon ancient Roman or Celtic paganism; perhaps his most famous story of this type is "The Great God Pan"—a figure of dread, very far removed from Grahame's Pan of The Wind in the Willows, and a story which brings to mind the haunted London of Stevenson's "Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde."

Machen, amazingly enough, wrote some few stories which contrast completely with his usual sort and bring to life the good supernatural, as we know it in Lewis or Williams. And he has a strong claim to the interest of the Mythopoetic Society in that he is perhaps the only twentieth-century writer who created a widely believed myth—the story of the "Bowmen," popularly called "The Angels of Mons."

Machen's tale "The Great Return" is another tale of the good supernatural, and breathes an unforgettable air of blessedness. It is similar to Lewis and Williams in its use of elements of the Arthurian legend. In this case, it is the Holy Grail, accompanied by angelic guardians and two other "Hallows," an altar-stone of changing colors and a great bell which once belonged to a Celtic saint. The altar, the Grail and the Bell come sailing supernaturally across the waters to a small, modern-day Welsh village and there remain briefly, blessing the life of the people until they are again removed, presumably into Heaven or into the Utter West.

Those who saw the hallows sailing across the waters in a "rose of fire" experience, Machen says, "a world that was like paradise...a world rectified and glowing, as if an inner flame shone in all things, and behind all things.

"And the difficulty in recording this state is this, that it is so rare an experience that no set language to express it is in existence. A shadow of its raptures and ecstasies is found in the highest poetry; there are phrases in ancient books telling of the Celtic saints that dimly hint at it... But these are but broken hints."

Here is a phrase almost exactly paralleling one of Charles Williams' titles, Shadows of Ecstasy. And to many of us a hint of that experience has come through reading Lewis and Williams; Lewis' autobiography tells how that aspect of it which he called Joy haunted him all his life. He tried to express it in many places; we may recall Orual's vision of the God at the end of Till We Have Faces, or Ransom's experience of the unfallen pair of Perelandra coming into their glory, in which he says that he has hitherto only seen (in Machen's words) "broken hints" of what men and women were meant to be.

A skillful mixture of real and invented fact, such as Lewis used in his trilogy, and Williams in several

novels, lends verisimilitude. The altar, for instance, is "called 'Sapphirus' in William of Malmesbury"—and whether this detail is true or invented, it works. The description of the altar-stone reminds one of the glowing quality of Williams' Arthurian poems:

"It was like a great jewel, and it was of a blue colour, and there were rivers of silver and of gold running through it and flowing as quick streams flow, and there were pools in it as if violets had been poured out into water, and then it was green as the sea near the shore, and then it was the sky at night with all the stars shining, and then the sun and the moon came down and washed in it."

The climax of the story takes place in the old parish church, where the rector, the deacon of the Methodist chapel, and all the villagers, are awed spectators of the Mass of the Grail sung by the heavenly visitors behind the rood screen. The narrator, arriving weeks later, still smells the "fragrant and exquisite...odours of paradise."

This scene is reminiscent of Prester John's mass at the end of War in Heaven; and also it is deeply satisfying in itself, not least through the numerous use of phrases in Welsh, Greek and Latin.

"Fferiadwyr Melchisedek! Fferiadwyr Melchisedek!" shouted the old Calvinistic Methodist deacon with the grey beard, 'Priesthood of Melchizedek! Priesthood of Melchizedek! ...The Bell that is like y glwys yr angel ym mharadwys—the joy of the angels in paradise— is returned; the Altar that is of a colour that no man can discern is returned, the Cup that came from Syon is returned, the ancient offering is restored,... the Three Holy Fishermen are among us, and their net is full. Gogoniant, gogoniant— glory, glory!"

A voice like a trumpet cried from within the brightness:

Argos, Argos, Argos.

And the people, as if an age-old memory stirred in them, replied:

Argos yr Tad, Argos yr Mab, Argos yr Ysprid Gian. Sant, sant, sant, Drindod sant vendigeid. Sanctus Arglwydd Dduw Sabaoth, Dominus Deus.

And the old rector cried aloud then before the entrance:

Bendigeid yr Offeren yn oes oesoedd—blessed be the offering unto the age of ages.

And then the Mass of the Sangraal was ended...."

The healing of Olwen, a village girl dying of tuberculosis, and the reconciliation of two bitter enemies in the town, are recounted with a convincing simplicity, and may suggest to readers the coming of blessedness which takes place with the descent of the Perelandra at the end of That Hideous Strength.

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Psyche is a counterpart of that of Oedipus, but there are important differences. The Oedipus legend tells of a father's fear that his son will replace him; to avert this, the father tries to destroy his son. Psyche's story tells of a mother who is afraid that a young girl will replace her in the affections of mankind and of her son, and who therefore tries to destroy the girl. But, while the tale of Oedipus ends tragically, the tale of Amor and Psyche has a happy ending... in the end Jupiter and Venus accept the situation; Amor and Psyche celebrate their wedding in the presence of all the gods; Psyche is made immortal; and Venus makes peace with her. ...Whether Freud was impressed by the parallels and differences of these two ancient myths we do not know...." [1]

Professor Rene Girard has, similarly, pointed out some interesting parallels, and one crucial difference (almost the same as the above mentioned) between the story of Oedipus and the story of Joseph son of Jacob [2]. Both men were outcast and rejected by the communities that gave them birth. They were both successful immigrants. However, they were then rejected by their adoptive communities as they had been by their native communities. Both were accused of sexual crimes: Oedipus of incest, Joseph of adulterous attempted rape. Both had to deal with major disasters: Oedipus with a plague, Joseph with drought and famine [3].

The major difference is that Joseph, unlike Oedipus, is vindicated. He is freed from prison and raised to a high station from which he does not come down again. He is not blamed for the drought, but empowered with the authority to take rational measures to alleviate it.

Putting together the observations of Professors Girard and Bettelheim, we would have to conclude that the stories of Psyche and Joseph are structurally identical, both being reversals of the Oedipal story. However, comparing the two directly with each other, we find that there is a major difference: Joseph is reconciled with his brothers, but Psyche is not reconciled with her sisters. This one factor is still missing to move Psyche from the realm of Pagan

mythology to the Judaeo-Christian tradition.

This lack is, of course, supplied by C.S. Lewis in Till We Have Faces, which ends in the full reconciliation of Psyche with the only one of her sisters who went up the mountain with her.

Notes

1. Bruno Bettelheim, Freud and Man's Soul. Knopf, New York, 1983. 12-15.
2. Rene Girard, devotional lecture at Brigham Young University, 13 Nov. 1984.
3. There are also some strange points of contact between the story of Joseph and the story of Theseus (who was younger than Oedipus, but roughly contemporaneous). In the former, Pharaoh has a dream of seven lean cows devouring seven fat cows. In the latter, Minos king of Crete demands, and gets, a tribute of seven youths and seven maidens from Athens every year, to be devoured by the Minotaur. Both stories feature flesh-eating cattle and the number seven, doubled.



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"The Great Return" is told in the first person by an inquiring journalist from London, who, it seems, has old ties with Wales, as did Machen himself, whose father was a Welsh clergyman. He half-believes, but places his story in a skeptical framework. Strange things do happen, he says, but "at the last, what do we know?" This framework, though slightly disappointing, does not succeed in spoiling the central impact of the story, its delicious and memorable fragrance, abiding in the mind as did the incense in the church at the Return of the Hallows.

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