



Mythopoeic Society

mythLORE

A Journal of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis,
Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature

Volume 15
Number 1

Article 13

Fall 10-15-1988

Sonnet XXXVII

Donald T. Williams

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Recommended Citation

Williams, Donald T. (1988) "*Sonnet XXXVII*," *Mythlore: A Journal of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature*: Vol. 15 : No. 1 , Article 13.

Available at: <https://dc.swosu.edu/mythlore/vol15/iss1/13>

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Christian period, when each tradition enriched itself through its examination of the other, without setting up rigid barriers. The anachronistic partisanship that marred *The Mists of Avalon* is thus avoided. Even after she has finally committed herself to the Old Religion, Branwen is able to recognize the spiritual power that flows from the hands of the Christian hermit Ogion.

In the balance it manages to strike between historical realism and mythic fantasy, between the demands of modern storytelling and the evocation of a period remote in time, and between Celtic particularism and human universality, *The White Raven* is remarkably successful, and is likely to become a milestone that future writers dealing with the Matter of Britain will ignore at their peril.

Mythopoeic literature is often thought of as a medium of transformation, a way of taking the human perspective to a level where the unresolved problems of mundane existence can be understood and dealt with. What would happen if you tried to use one of the most primary, powerful but dangerously overexploited symbols in our mythic vocabulary, the unicorn, against one of the most symbolically charged, ugly, cruel calamities to beset the world to-day, the AIDS crisis? This is essentially the experiment Michael Bishop has made in his new novel, *Unicorn Mountain* (Arbor House, 1988). The plot follows the basic pattern of North American "urban fantasy" as practiced by Charles De Lint, Megan Lindholm and other writers (though since the action takes place in rural Colorado, a more inclusive term than "urban fantasy" will have to be found), taking a realistically described contemporary situation into a rather matter-of-fact confrontation with supernatural events. The three main protagonists of the story are all suffering from the consequences of failed relationships: Bo Gavin, a gay man dying of AIDS, has forsaken his lover who had contracted the disease before him, and is estranged from his homophobic parents; Libby Quarrels, an aging hippie who runs a horse farm, is still dogged by her shallow, philandering ex-husband (Bo's first cousin); and Sam Coldpony, a middle-aged Ute Indian who works on Libby's farm, has left his wife (now a suicide, whose decapitated ghost plays an important role in the plot) and his daughter. When Libby, in an act of moral courage (and with considerable misgivings), gives shelter to the dying Bo, the fantastic elements of the plot come together in earnest. Unicorns have appeared on the grounds of Libby's ranch, migrating between this world and the spirit-world, and they are suffering from a plague with symptoms disturbingly like those of AIDS. The image of the unicorn here takes on at least three levels of symbolic significance: the suffering Christ; Death, as a positive agent of transformation; and sexuality liberated from its potential for pain and destruction. AIDS becomes a metaphor for that corrupting strain of modern thinking that blocks us from the riches of the spirit-world – the sort of cynical "objectivism" that can desacralize any life-giving image through commercial exploitation. Characters like Libby and Sam (and, eventually, Bo, who of course has a special affinity for them) respond intuitively to the

unicorns' symbolic message, while others see them only as quantitative riches to be possessed.

It is Sam's teenage daughter Paisley, dream-called to be a shaman and to participate in the normally all-male Sun Dance, who becomes the catalyst for the final healing. When she sacrifices her desire for modernity to become her people's shaman, she displays the kind of moral strength that makes communication with the spirit-world possible, and through her the Sun Dance ceases to be a powerless ritual in a disintegrating culture and becomes a true sacrament. The unicorns are able to heal Bo spiritually in this world, and he, after his death, heals them physically in the spirit-world.

In a short review one cannot do justice to the intricacies of Bishop's writing, the wealth of minor characters, the kaleidoscopic transformations of symbol into symbol, all understated by the deceptive simplicity of his diction and his grittily American idiom. *Unicorn Mountain* is an impressive achievement, worth many rereadings.

Sonnet XXXVII

Commentary, Genesis 2:19

*And how he thought about them, trooping past,
Stopping to lick his hand or sniff his knee –
Tiny as bee or hummingbird, or vast
In girth, the river-horse – and first to see
In fur or feather, cold heraldically,
The colors – and the antics! – speechless, stare
At scampering mice, at stallions' thunder, tree-
Like limbs of elephants, ambling bulk of bear –
This creativity beyond compare!
What Fruit brought forth in bare but fertile mind;
From sound and sight, throat muscles, subtle air
To weave the Words, the Poet's power unbind:
To call the Correspondences by Name,
As Adam called the animals who came.
Donald T. Williams*

NOTE

In the last issue a line was mistyped in this column. It begins on the 12th line from the end of the column, on page 44. It read "Although the psychological mechanisms that govern the functioning of religion is offered in response." It should have read "The psychological mechanisms that govern the functioning of religious institutions are here mercilessly exposed, yet no materialist/rationalist version of "truth" is offered in response." – Ed.