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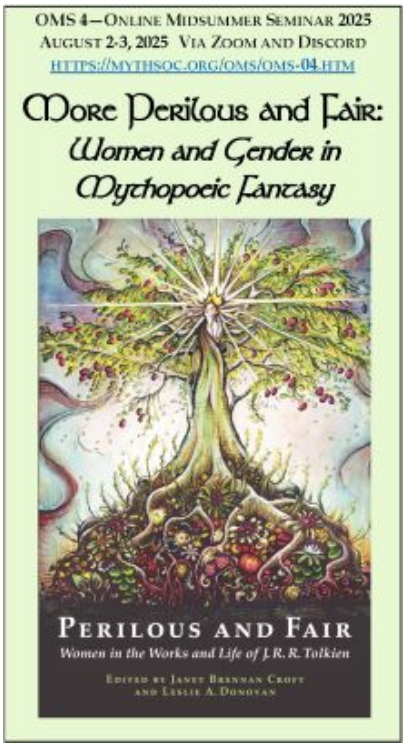

Arthurian Elements in *The Hideous Strength*

Abstract

"A look at the specifically Arthurian inspirations behind parts of [*That Hideous Strength*] [...] how Lewis diverged from the traditional sources in crafting his tale, and what he did with them."

Additional Keywords

Arthurian myth in C.S. Lewis; Lewis, C.S. That Hideous Strength

Arthurian Elements in *That Hideous Strength*

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This article is not an attempt at a comprehensive study of C. S. Lewis' *That Hideous Strength*, but rather a look at the specifically Arthurian inspirations behind parts of it, how Lewis diverged from the traditional sources in crafting his tale, and what he did with them.

Calling itself "A Modern Fairy Tale for Grown-Ups," *That Hideous Strength* has been said to be parallel to the "romances of 'the Matter of Britain'" (Nardo 125) and it might be because of this that the book has been hard to classify according to modern genres. The story takes place in the twentieth century, "vaguely 'after the war'" (referring to World War II), in England (Lewis 7). A pseudo-scientific conspiracy, calling itself the "National Institute for Co-ordinated Experiments" (or, ironically, the N.I.C.E.), partly with diabolical inspiration, attempts to take over the British Isles and is stopped by the modern equivalent to King Arthur's knights: a small company of "ordinary" people (and a few animals) who are led by the current holder of the Pendragon title — and Merlin himself, returned from "out of our one-dimensioned time" after fifteen hundred years (Lewis 202).

The evil forces do not concern us here; it does not appear that they are themselves particularly Arthurian in nature. No Mordred, Morgan le Fay, or Lancelot-Guinevere adulteries seem to be in evidence, and that may be partially because whereas the Arthurian "villains" tend to be connected with incest (Mordred), adultery (Lancelot-Guinevere), or the exposure of same (Morgan le Fay), the enemy in *That Hideous Strength* is connected more to cold sterility through a tyrannical domination over, and hatred of, the forces of nature. As Filostrato explains to Mark Studdock, "'This Institute . . . is for the conquest of death: or for the conquest of organic life, if you prefer. They are the same thing . . . Nature is the ladder we have climbed up by, now we kick her away'" (Lewis 177). Earlier, Filostrato says "'We do not want the world any longer furred over with organic life, like what you call the blue mould — all sprouting and budding and breeding and decaying. We must get rid of it'" (173). The battle is not against unlawful passion but against a willed, sterile impotence. "'There will never be peace and order and discipline so long as there is sex. When man has thrown it away, then he will become finally governable'" (173). In contrast, the "company at St. Anne's" lives in a sort of walled garden on a hill that immediately reminds Jane Studdock, on her fist visit to St. Anne's, of other gardens, including those of the *Romance of the Rose* and of Paradise, and of theories about female sexuality (62). Even the soil has copper in it, indicating (according to the Pendragon) the influence of the heavenly Venus (317). Fertility, both physical and spiritual, as opposed to sterility, is of great importance in this book, as it is in Chrétien de Troyes' *Perceval*, in which the fertility and health of the Fisher-King affects the fertility and health of the land.

Turning now to the Pendragon himself, he is a rather Christlike figure, and also a specifically Arthurian one. In the previous book, *Perelandra*, Dr. Elwin Ransom had traveled to the planet Venus and found it a world of floating islands in which a parallel to the story of the temptation of Eve was taking place. He fought, both with arguments and in mortal combat, the diabolically-possessed Earthman who was the source of the struggle, and killed him, in the process wounding his foot — a wound that will not heal in this world. (This becomes relevant later.) Between then and now, his married sister in India, a Mrs. Fisher-King, has died and "left him a great fortune on condition that he took [her] name," apparently on the advice of a native Indian Christian mystic, the Sura (114). And thus Ransom (whose original name, also, had Providential significance in *Perelandra*) becomes "Mr. Fisher-King."

The original Fisher-King in Arthurian legend is "the wounded occupant of the Grail castle" in some works, and also has a wound that must be healed supernaturally (Lacy 183). But while the Fisher-King in *Perceval* has a wound in his genitals, Ransom's is in his foot (paralleling a Biblical prophecy, Genesis 3.15), and whereas Perceval must ask the Grail question in order for the Fisher-King to be healed, it is Lewis' Fisher-King's "'business to bear [his wound and its attendant pain] to the end'" — neither Merlin's magic nor earthly drugs are permitted to take that away (Lewis 288). In the end it may only be healed in another place, which will be spoken of later.

In *That Hideous Strength*, the Fisher-King is also the Pendragon. Geoffrey of Monmouth applies the title both to Arthur and to his father Uther; and in Lewis, Ransom is the seventy-ninth successor from Arthur to hold the title, in an unbroken line, receiving the "office and the blessings" that go with it (369). "'In every age,'" says Cecil Dimble, "'[the Pendragons] and the little Logres which gathered round them have been the fingers which gave the tiny shove or the almost imperceptible pull, to prod England out of the drunken sleep or to draw her back from the final outrage into which Britain tempted her'" (369).

And this brings us to the conflict and contrast between

"Logres" and "Britain" in *That Hideous Strength.* Logres is the setting of Chrétien de Troyes' *Perceval* and is most likely identified as England, but in Lewis it takes on a slightly different meaning. The glory and rightness of Camelot was a brief glimpse of Logres; Arthur and Milton, as opposed to Mordred and Cromwell, represent Logres; and the company at St. Anne's, with its Christian love and fruitfulness, represents Logres (368-69). "Britain," in this context, represents the fallen, lesser England, of which the N.I.C.E. is an example. But all this does not mean that England is better or worse than other countries; each place has its own parallel to Logres. "'When Logres really dominates Britain, when the goddess Reason, the divine clearness, is really enthroned in France, when the order of Heaven is really followed in China — why, then it will be spring'" (370-71). In this way Lewis takes the Arthurian conflict and makes it universal.

Merlin is, next to the Pendragon himself, the character most related to the Arthurian legends in *That Hideous Strength.* He is not a successor but the real Merlin, taken out of time and dug up out of the earth. In some of the Arthurian stories Merlin is held captive in the enchanted forest of Brocéliande, and Dorothy F. Lane suggests that there are hints of this in *That Hideous Strength.* In the medieval prose romance, *Merlin,* Merlin and Nimue sit "in the shadowe" in the "forest of brochelonde," while Lewis' Merlin is unearthed in Bragdon Wood, a place also possessing "deep shadows" (Lane 12). The similarities between the names may also be intentional.

At first, the company at St. Anne's is unsure as to which side Merlin will join, and even expect that he will be on the side of the N. I. C. E., when he awakens, but he is loyal to the Pendragon and is in fact a Christian. In *Merlin,* he is described as being a human/demon hybrid, but is baptized and so is saved from evil. In *That Hideous Strength,* however, he says "'. . . they called me a devil's son, some of them. It was a lie'" (289); Merlin's powers do not derive from non-mortal ancestry but from his relationship to the Nature of his day, in which "'matter and spirit were, from our modern point of view, confused. For him every operation on Nature is a kind of personal contact, like coaxing a child or stroking a horse'" (285). However, Ransom says that not only have such things become "'utterly unlawful'" in this age, when "'whatever of spirit'" has withdrawn a great deal more from the earth, but that even in Merlin's time it was never quite lawful; and that one of the purposes of God's returning him to earth was that his "'own soul should be saved'" (289). Also, his magic has had some bad effects on him: "'Merlinus is withered,'" says Dimble. "'He's quite pious and humble and all that, but something has been taken out of him. That quietness of his is just a little deadly, like the quiet of a gutted building. It's the result of having laid his mind open to something that broadens the environment just a bit too much'" (285). Lewis also describes Merlin using dramatic touches that make one feel as if this is what he might really be like (if he existed), especially if he returned in the twentieth century: that he wouldn't know about forks, but could have table manners just as elegant in his own way, and that the modern British are really what he would call the Saxons, and not the people he might expect (282). Lewis also shows the "character of the two-sided [Celtic and Roman] society" he would have lived in, in a scene in which Merlin reacts to the prospect of being used as a contact point between the planetary Intelligences and Earth with "undisguised tears" and a bestial "yell of primitive Celtic lamentation," but then recovers his composure at a word from Ransom, and shows no embarrassment at his temporary loss of it (291).

A word might be said here about a possible parallel between Jane Studdock and Guinevere. Guinevere was unfaithful to Arthur by sleeping with Lancelot, and this action is what precipitates the fall of Camelot. In contrast, Jane was meant, with her husband Mark, to have begotten a child "'by whom the enemies should have been put out of Logres for a thousand years,'" according to Merlin; but by their own will, Jane and Mark did not; this brings the barrenness motif into the picture again (278). So, then, all the events in the novel are really (at least) second-best; better would have been the birth of the child, but the enemies of Logres must be stopped in the ways that are left. And it may be significant that both Guinevere's and Jane's wrongdoings turn on their sexuality, Guinevere by adultery and Jane by denying hers its fruitfulness.

In the end, the N.I.C.E. is stopped, and Merlin is (presumably) consumed by the heavenly powers' use of him as their instrument (361). But for the Pendragon, there is another end. He is to go to the island of Aphallin (also spelled "Abhalljin"), in the world of Perelandra (368). It is only there, he says, that his wound may be healed (367). (It may be significant, as well, that the island is described as "cup-shaped," perhaps representing the Grail in some way and providing another link to the Fisher-King story in *Perceval.*) Since Arthur is there, still alive (along with "Enoch and Elias and Moses and Melchisedec," and possibly Barbarossa), we may safely conclude that "Aphallin/Abhalljin" is Avalon, where Arthur also went for the healing of *his* wounds (Ashe 32-35). And there we will leave them both. ☙

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