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Tending the Heart of Virtue: How Classic Stories Awaken a Child's Moral Imagination, second Edition, by Vigen Guroian

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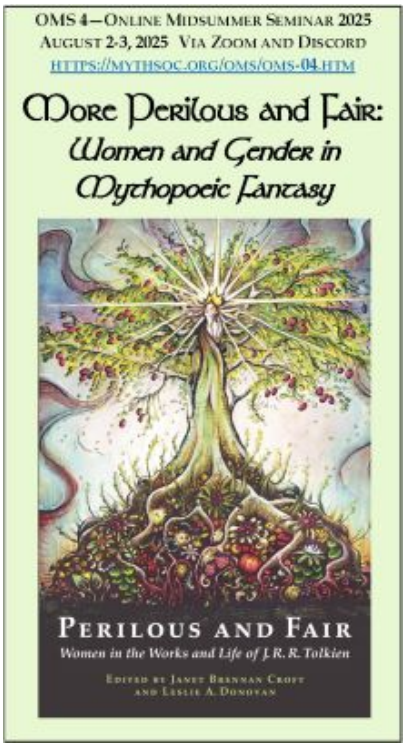

Tending the Heart of Virtue: How Classic Stories Awaken a Child's Moral Imagination, second Edition, by Vigen Guroian

BBC History? The 1955-56 Radio Dramatization of *The Lord of the Rings*" is a useful bit of media history, discussing the earliest adaptation of Tolkien's work which has largely been lost in the shuffle of large-screen films. This chapter is also illustrated with examples of Tolkien's correspondence with the radio producers as well as the scripts. It's an intriguing set of documents, and one can hope that a more thorough examination and reproduction may one day be forthcoming. Tom Shippey's "'King Sheave' and 'The Lost Road'" focuses on minor texts that aren't fully connected with the legendarium, but do connect deeply to Tolkien's philological fascinations. This is a chapter that a general reader might read with bafflement or skip altogether, while the scholarly reader may or may not find nuggets of use. And the final essay, Sibley's "'Down from the Door Where It Began . . . ' Portal Images in *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*" returns us to literary analysis, in this case examining doors in the legendarium—including Durin's Doors and the verbal incantation to enter ("Speak 'friend' and enter" as a kind of "Open sesame!") and the doors of Bag End as the locus of beginning and ending journeys.

Ultimately, *The Great Tales* is a peculiar book charged with performing multiple duties: as a memorial to an important figure, as a general work, and as a scholarly work. It never fully commits to being properly any one of these things. A memorial might have been more personal; a general work more entertaining; a scholarly work more erudite. And yet, perhaps its value is in its messiness, in that it underscores the unique and problematic place that Tolkien has in popular and literary culture and the equally strange place Christopher himself inhabited in it.

—Cait Coker

Tending the Heart of Virtue: How Classic Stories Awaken a Child's Moral Imagination. Second Edition. Vigen Guroian. New York NY: Oxford UP, 2023. 310 p. ISBN 9780195384314. $19.95.

Over twenty-five years have passed since the original publication of Vigen Guroian's *Tending the Heart of Virtue* (1998). As Guroian's own children have grown, so has the book: this new edition boasts an additional three chapters. While the rest of *Tending the Heart of Virtue* has received minimal edits, Guroian has clarified his audience—though still intended for "parents and teachers who want to explore the moral and religious significance of [fairy tales] with their own children and students" (5)—he highlights the book's renewed relevance for the "worlds of homeschooling and classical schooling" (xi).

Tending the Heart of Virtue therefore promises the surest fruits for Christian teachers and parents, although his focus on mythopoeic writers (including C.S. Lewis and George MacDonald) and the moral imagination will draw a larger audience.

The book's introduction outlines the gap Guroian is attempting to fill: children's moral imaginations require nurturing, and parents and teachers face insufficient resources to meet this goal. In seeking to answer this lack, *Tending the Heart of Virtue* offers an excellent primer on the moral imagination ("Awakening the Moral Imagination"), as well as eight chapters of reflection on classic fairy stories. The final three of these chapters—"The Triumphs of Beauty in "The Nightingale" and "The Ugly Duckling"; "The Goodness of Goodness: The Grimm's 'Cinderella' and John Ruskin's *The King of the Golden River*"; "Obedience and the Path to Perfection in George MacDonald's *The Wise Woman: A Double Story*"—are new to the second edition. The book concludes with a "Bibliographical Essay" providing additional story recommendations, as well as a brief list of suggested anthologies.

As a first chapter, "Awakening the Moral Imagination" provides the beating heart of Guroian's work. Drawing on the thought of G .K. Chesterton, Alasdair McIntyre, Martin Buber, and others, Guroian establishes the importance of imagination and narrative competency to ethical development. Mere instruction is not enough: an education that over-emphasizes propositional knowledge not only overestimates the role of reason in shaping behavior, but also de-emphasizes the crucial roles of the will and the imagination. Guroian's definition of the moral imagination animates his corrective:

> The moral imagination is not a *thing,* not even so much a faculty of the mind, but rather the very process by which the self makes metaphors out of images that memory supplies. It then employs these metaphors to suppose correspondences in experience and to make moral judgments. (20)

In short: metaphors enable moral action. Such metaphors derive from stories, whose images are translated into "the constitutive elements of self-identity" children use to interpret the world (25). Stories generate treasure-troves of images, narratives, and allegories, driving the creative acts of meaning-making that constitute behavior.

This process continues unchanged, although culture's capacity to nourish the moral imagination is not constant. If virtue is indeed the "'magic' of moral life," then a post-Nietzschean rhetoric of "values" is insufficient; if a "value is like a smoke ring"—prone to volatility and evaporation—a virtue "might be compared to a stone, whose nature is permanence" (17, 28). Not only

this, Guroian argues, but a values-based education obfuscates the unavoidable role of authority and influence in education. Following Chesterton's notion of the fairy-tale philosopher, he advocates for fairy tales as subtle instruments to "shape our moral constitution without the shortcomings of either rigidly dogmatic schooling or values-clarification education" (36). *Tending the Heart of Virtue* extends this foundation, offering reflections on a series of beloved fairy tales from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Throughout, Guroian focuses on the *original* stories, heartily rejecting bowdlerized Disney adaptations and picture-book abridgments alike.

"On Becoming a Real Human Child: *Pinocchio*" reads Pinocchio's transformation not as a reward but as the "visible sign of a moral task that has been conscientiously pursued" (40). *Contra* Maurice Sendak's interpretation (and aided by conversation partners such as Lewis and Josef Pieper), Guroian defends the inherent goodness of the puppet, illustrating his grace-filled transformation toward the maturity of self-sacrificial love. "Love and Immortality in *The Velveteen Rabbit* and "The Little Mermaid" builds upon these themes of love and deepens their sacramental significance. *The Velveteen Rabbit* provides both an instance of an I-Thou relationship between a person and a beloved inanimate object, as well as an "allegory of our translation into eternal life" (66). Similarly, Guroian rejects readings of "The Little Mermaid" that focus exclusively on romantic love or pose the tale as a "psychological cover for [Hans Christian Andersen's] personal insecurities about social status and acceptance" (68). Instead, he contextualizes the mermaid's love for the prince within the story's allegorical landscape (and seascape), underscoring her self-sacrifice and desire for immortality. Turning to more platonic forms of love, "Friends and Mentors in *The Wind in the Willows*, *Charlotte's Web*, and *Bambi*," explores the "spiritual reality of friendship" (85). The lives of Mole, Rat, Badger, and Toad evidence the formative power of peer relationships, providing a contrast to the mentor-mentee relationships of Charlotte and Wilbur as well as the old stag and the eponymous Bambi. The fifth chapter, "Evil and Redemption in 'The Snow Queen' and *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*" offers not a theodicy but a meditation on fall and redemption through the characters of Kay and Edmund, respectively. As the final chapter also included in the first edition, "Heroines of Faith and Courage: Princess Irene in *The Princess and the Goblin* and Lucy in *Prince Caspian*" details Irene's spiritual maturation—culminating in her "baptism" in the grandmother's mysterious silver bath—as well as explicates Lucy's portrayals of eucharistic refreshment, sight, and obedience.

While Guroian's methodology matches his intended audience—and reflects his theological training—his approach may not always satisfy the more academic or skeptical reader. He dismisses literary criticism focused on children's literature as not only largely irrelevant but also a "relatively new

field" (4), a phrase which—strangely enough—remains unaltered and unchallenged from 1998 to 2023. In seeking to "demonstrate how fairy tales nourish the moral imagination with the best food," Guroian also rejects readings deemed social constructionist or ideological in nature—namely "Marxist, Freudian, Jungian, [or] feminist" interpretations (268, 5). His own readings hinge on taking the (often explicit—and perhaps, as he suggests, oft-neglected) religious dimensions of these stories at face value, refusing to read their religiosity as incidental or as mere symptom. His willingness to *enter into* the allegorical and parable-like dimensions of fairy stories is a consummate strength; however, his readings—particularly the unedited chapters from the first edition—are often weakened by a refusal of interpretive nuance. For instance, Guroian dogmatically rejects any association between *The Princess and the Goblin*'s "spot of blood" and menstruation, particularly as it signals Irene's maturation into womanhood. While Guroian's polemical stance indicates a particular rhetorical distance from an age considered "obsessed with supposed psychological and sexual connotations" (141), his all-or-nothing approach risks marginalizing embodied experience in favor of a stark body/soul dualism. In trying to swing the interpretive pendulum, Guroian demonstrates a tendency to over-allegorize and fall into strict "either/or" interpretive dichotomies. In *The Christian Imagination* (2002), Gene Edward Veith Jr. describes the "balance" that ought to characterize Christian scholarship such as Guroian's: "If Christian doctrine works by 'both/and,'" Veith notes, "Christian scholarship works by 'yes/but'" (133). Perhaps reflecting this shift, the final three chapters demonstrate an increased appreciation for nuance and ambiguity, evident in a subtle tendency toward "yes/but" models of scholarship.

Reflecting this change, Chapter Seven—"The Triumphs of Beauty in 'The Nightingale' and 'The Ugly Duckling'"—begins with a simple assertion: "Never is a good story merely about one thing" (168). The resulting analysis is luminous and capacious: Guroian reveals "The Nightingale" as an account of the redemptive power of beauty—the gift of the nightingale fosters both physical and spiritual healing—as well as a caution against inordinate attachment to technological objects (particularly those that claim control over beauty or nature). His analysis of "The Ugly Duckling" perceptively highlights the story's under-emphasized mystical and religious dimensions, drawing on Lewis's articulation of *sehnsucht* to understand the gosling's longing for beauty. "The Goodness of Goodness: The Grimm's 'Cinderella' and John Ruskin's *The King of the Golden River*" turns its attention to Aristotelian and Thomistic notions of happiness, focusing on the tales' virtuous protagonists while also exploring the difficult justice that befalls their sibling antagonists. Finally, "Obedience and the Path to Perfection in George MacDonald's *The Wise Woman: A Double Story*" gracefully tackles the thorny discipline of the titular Wise Woman, revealing the

story not only as a hyperbolic parable but also—in the obscured intersection of divine grace and human freedom—a narrative whose continued duality leaves room for hope. Guroian's concluding bibliographical essay presents an expanded reading list of classic stories, grouped under the thematic categories of the preceding chapters (e.g., "Becoming Real" or "Evil and Redemption").

In arguing for the transformative value of fairy stories, *Tending the Heart of Virtue* offers a compelling apologetic for mythopoeic literature in the educational sphere. While the work will likely prove a beloved resource for parents and educators, Guroian's staunch Christian perspective may prove a barrier to more secular readers. Readers of *Mythlore* may also be surprised by Guroian's neglect of J.R.R. Tolkien's "On Fairy-stories," especially given his reliance on Chesterton, MacDonald, and Lewis. Nonetheless, Guroian's analyses provide a steady counterpoint to reductive readings that, in neglecting the spiritual dimensions of classic fairy tales, betray biases of their own. His inclusion of multiple stories by MacDonald is also encouraging, prompting hopes that MacDonald's works may see a resurgence of popularity in the realm of children's literature. If, as Guroian writes, "[e]very true nursery or playroom is a piece of fairyland, a place where metaphors may shade into full-blown allegories of the world outside" (63), then he has done well to remind us of these imaginative translations.

—Sarah O'Dell

Veith, Gene Edward. "Reading and Writing Worldviews." *The Christian Imagination: The Practice of Faith in Literature and Writing*, edited by Leland Ryken, Waterbrook Press, 2002, pp. 117-34.

ROBERT HOLDSTOCK'S MYTHAGO WOOD: A CRITICAL COMPANION. Paul Kincaid. Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022. 102 p. ISBN 9783031103735. $44.99.

Robert Holdstock's *Mythago Wood* was honored with multiple awards, including the World Fantasy Award both as a novelette and as a full-length novel. Paul Kincaid's brief treatment of Holdstock's work is compact in length but substantial in the depth of its analysis. Kincaid's work is part of the Palgrave Science Fiction and Fantasy: A New Canon series and includes a comprehensive bibliography.

While Kincaid's focus is primarily on the *Mythago Wood* story as related in the original novelette and re-worked in the full-length novel, he does touch on the subsequent novels in the sequence. In the "Introduction," Kincaid notes