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## Lord Dunsany and the Great War: *Don Rodriguez* and the Rebirth of Romance

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## Mythcon 51: The Mythic, the Fantastic, and the Alien

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### Abstract

Considers Lord Dunsany's response to the Great War and modernized conflict in general in Don Rodriguez. In a pivotal section of this Quixotic romantic adventure, the character of Rodriguez is shown visions of modern war that cause him to question not just his heroic warrior ideals, but the purpose of Creation itself; his following adventures are increasingly in the ironic mode. Rodriguez is able to transcend his experiences in the end.

### Additional Keywords

Dunsany, Lord. Don Rodriguez; World War I in Lord Dunsany

## Lord Dunsany and the Great War: *Don Rodriguez* and the Rebirth of Romance

David J. Carlson

In his classic cultural history of the First World War, *The Great War and Modern Memory*, Paul Fussell reminds his readers that “[i]rony is the attendant of hope, and the fuel of hope is innocence” (18). Fussell goes on to point out that the greatest casualty of four years of carnage at places like Ypres was precisely this spirit of innocence. The “Great War,” as those who lived through the conflict came to call it, became “a hideous embarrassment to the prevailing Meliorist myth which had dominated public consciousness for a century. It reversed the Idea of Progress” (8). Of course, attempts were made at the time (as they still are) to perpetuate the kind of romantic views of warfare that held sway during the glory days of European imperialism. Such idealism proved difficult to sustain, though, especially when confronted with the recent memory of thousands of miles of muddy graves in France and Belgium. The result was that much of the greatest English writing of the time came to reflect a profound sense of loss and disillusionment. Wilfred Owen’s “Dulce et Decorum Est” eulogized English patriotism with a quiet and dignified pathos. In *Goodbye to All That*, Robert Graves offered up a representative autobiography of declension and cynicism. Finally, just a few years after the war, T.S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land* claimed its preeminence as the greatest poetic lament for the chaotic implosion which the modern age had just experienced. In Great Britain, certainly, spiritual malaise, cultural fragmentation, and a profound skepticism about the old “heroic” ideals seem to have been the defining characteristics of the literary age.

On the surface, this particular *zeitgeist* would seem to offer the most inauspicious of all backdrops for the development of modern fantasy literature, especially heroic fantasy. Yet as some critics have begun to point out, the Great War seems in fact to have spawned some of the most seminal works of the 20<sup>th</sup> century—texts that would go on to define the shape of the genre of fantasy for decades to come. The relationship between these works

and the war varies, of course, but one common thread seems to be an attempt to resuscitate some form of faith in heroic idealism. E.R. Eddison's *The Worm Ouroboros* (1922), for example, speaks quite directly to the First World War's legacy of brutal futility. In Eddison's romance, the endless struggle between the opposing forces of Demonland and King Gorice is presented as noble, albeit tragic. This tale of a perpetual cycle of violence (the ouroboric circle suggested by the book's title) becomes, in the end, a story of heroic grandeur, suggesting that a sense of higher purpose in life might be found through martial valor. To take another example, the influence of World War I on the imagination and subsequent writings of J.R.R. Tolkien has been well-documented by a number of writers (including Humphrey Carpenter, Tom Shippey, Jane Chance, and Janet Croft). While Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* offers a less laudatory vision of heroic death than Eddison's romance, it nevertheless does seem to stress the potential for meaningful sacrifice in the context of war. The moral clarity of Tolkien's Middle-earth provides the kind of structure, the ethos, that was missing in such struggles in 1917.

Writers such as Eddison and Tolkien engaged with the legacy of the Great War by writing their own novels of "global" war. Their fantasies take us, quite literally, into conflicts that engulf the entirety of their invented worlds. But what about the more isolated hero—the individual questing "knight" in search of fame and honor? How could this kind of "fantastic" character continue to resonate after the "war to end all wars"? To begin answering that question we must turn to the work of a different kind of fantasist, the Irish nobleman, sportsman, and author Lord Dunsany. In 1922, after having written a series of brilliant fantastic short stories in the first phase of his literary career, Dunsany published his first novel-length fantasy, *Don Rodriguez: Chronicles of Shadow Valley*.<sup>1</sup> As in the works of many of his contemporaries (both in fantasy and mainstream English literature), we can find in *Don Rodriguez* a pointed confrontation with the post-war *zeitgeist*. In the novel, Dunsany directly attempts to cultivate an audience culled from a war-weary and disillusioned readership. With its highly self-conscious narration and selective renovation of the romance-tradition, *Don Rodriguez* thus stands as a remarkable (and underappreciated) attempt to re-

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<sup>1</sup> The title of the British edition, published six months before the American, was *The Chronicles of Rodriguez*. For a survey of the shape of Dunsany's career, see Joshi (1995, 1996) and Schweitzer (1980, 1989). For a general biography of Dunsany, see Amory.

legitimize a specific form of fantasy in the most unpropitious of historical moments. In the end, I would argue that the book reflects Dunsany's conviction that fantastic literature in the romance tradition *could* resonate in the post-war world, provided that the writer remain in careful rhetorical control of his material. In the reading that follows, then, I would like to explore Dunsany's careful attempt to bring about a rebirth of romance and to offer his own commentary on the meaning of the Great War.



A key element of any rhetorical performance, be it in speech or fiction, is an awareness of potential resistance by the audience to the message being conveyed. The likelihood of such resistance to heroic fantasy in nations which had just lost an entire generation of young men should be obvious, even to those of us born into a very different era. It is not surprising, then, given its context, that *Don Rodriguez* establishes itself within its first two pages as a carefully crafted rhetorical performance, constantly foregrounding the issue of its own reception. The first gesture in this vein addresses the question of genre.<sup>2</sup> At the outset, Dunsany's playful choice of subtitle for the work, *Chronicles of Shadow Valley*, reveals his gently ironic manipulation of audience expectations regarding the kind of book they will read. The term "chronicle," of course, recalls a specific body of historical writing produced during the Middle Ages and Renaissance, texts ranging from the 9<sup>th</sup> century *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* to the early 17<sup>th</sup> century *A Mirror for Magistrates*. In thus labeling his work, Dunsany associates his fantasy novel with a form of episodic history, a claim he further develops in the one-page "Chronology" that functions as a kind of preface. "After long and patient research," he writes, "I am still unable to give to the reader of these Chronicles the exact date of the times that they tell of. Were it *merely* a matter of history there could be no doubts about the period; but where *magic* is concerned, to however slight an extent, there must always be some element of mystery" (my emphasis, xiv). Novelists' claims to be historical truth-tellers are hardly uncommon in the history of English literature; they often appear when the writer wishes to fend off criticism about the lack of moral value in the work. Dunsany's particular variation on the topos,

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<sup>2</sup> Reader-response theory provides useful insights into the relationship between an awareness of genre and patterns of textual reception. On this issue, see Jauss.

defining his book as a *magical* history, serves a similar kind of rhetorical function. Clearly no reader would actually credit the assertion that *Don Rodriguez* is an "historical" work, so why even use the term? In my view, Dunsany's phrasing represents a canny appeal to ethos, one that begins to reveal his understanding of the challenges involved in writing fantasy for a modern audience. The Chronology authorizes a range of reader responses to the text that follows. First, with an ironic tone of worldliness, Dunsany foregrounds his text's fictiveness, anticipating post-war cynicism and suggesting the possibility that the book might be read as a kind of fantastic satire (perhaps in the vein of his more cynical American contemporary James Branch Cabell): "This text really is a history (wink, wink)," the first sentence seems to say. At the same time, the introduction of "magic" licenses an alternative approach to reading the work. The second sentence suggests that we might indulge in the escapist pleasure of reading a dream-vision of a mythic past. This kind of attempt to balance conflicting responses to the very idea and appeal of fantasy seems to undergird *Don Rodriguez* from the start. Indeed, I would argue that the rhetorical approach of the novel as a whole is to subtly undermine modern cynicism and *gradually* restore a more idealistic faith in at least some of the values of the romance tradition.<sup>3</sup>

Moving beyond the Chronology's cagey treatment of generic reception, we can see Dunsany's choice of setting and tone to be another key element in his careful courtship of audience. Here, the appeal relies upon that audience's awareness of Western literary history and affection for one of its classics. Setting *Don Rodriguez* in "the later years of the Golden Age of Spain" (vii), Dunsany transports the reader back to the Spain of one of the greatest fantasists in the Western tradition, Don Quixote. Once there, though, *Don Rodriguez* stealthily begins to restore some of the luster to the romance tradition that Cervantes had so brilliantly satirized. Dunsany's novel *starts* with the assumption that readers will share Cervantes's skepticism of romance, but the book seeks to gradually overcome that skepticism, restoring that tradition in a way designed to be palatable to a world-weary post-war reader. In this sense, Dunsany cleverly reverses the

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<sup>3</sup> The juxtaposition of magical and familiar, the tonal blending of comic and serious passages is a hallmark of Dunsany's prose style. For a helpful general introduction to that style, see Anderson. For a discussion of the "decadent narcissism" of Dunsany's "language-conscious mode of writing" see Duperray.

historical shift from what Northrop Frye calls the “high mimetic” to the “low mimetic,” the shift that led Western writers from the romance to the modern novel.<sup>4</sup> We can see the process gradually taking place from the very first pages of the opening chronicle, “How He Met and Said Farewell to Mine Host of the Dragon and Knight,” which I would like to consider in some detail.

At first, it would seem that readers expecting a quixotic satire will not be disappointed in Dunsany’s writing. Indeed, the text begins in a comic mode Cervantes would have appreciated, with Rodriguez’s marginally senile and dying father, the Lord of the Valleys of Arguento Harez, summoning his eldest son to discuss his inheritance. In the course of a conversation interrupted by confused and amusing digressions, the Lord of the Valley inverts both the traditional laws of primogeniture and the conventions of romance by giving his lands and title to his youngest son, whom he describes both as “dull” and as one “on whom those traits that women love have not been bestowed by God” (3). To his eldest son Rodriguez, the rightful heir, he offers instead two gifts (which later prove to be central symbols in the book)—an ancient Castilian blade and a mandolin. These represent skill in war and love, traits that are “most needful in a Christian man” (5). With these bequests, the Lord sends Rodriguez out into the world to conquer, both in the wars and on moonlit balconies, and then abruptly, almost absurdly, “[falls] back dead” (6). Our young hero has been sent on his way, but the tone of the opening (characterized by the rambling of an old man needing to be frequently “reminded of his discourse” [4]) is likely to leave the reader more bemused than enchanted by his quest. Four pages into the novel, then, Don Rodriguez’s story shows a strong, tonal resemblance to Don Quixote’s. A few paragraphs into the opening chronicle, though, things begin to change. Whereas the death of Quixote in Volume 2 of Cervantes’ novel signals the *end* of romantic *illusions* (and a literary tradition) here the death of the quixotic Lord of the Valley signals the *beginning* of romantic *adventure* (and the resurgence of the tradition). Dunsany’s tale quickly begins to read as a kind of parody of the earlier parody. (It is here that we can most clearly see the author’s self-conscious reversal of the “low mimetic” mode). Almost as soon as Rodriguez assumes

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<sup>4</sup> On this distinction, see Frye’s “Theory of Modes” in *Anatomy of Criticism* (33-67). See also Frye’s *The Secular Scripture* (35-61).

the role of a romance-hero, he begins to infuse it with dignity, a dignity marked also by a tonal shift to Dunsany's more characteristic, lyrical prose style. When Rodriguez departs home in search of love and adventure, he strides forth into the Spain of springtime, a world whose distance from the modern reader's (both geographically and temporally) is clearly indicated, but which is nevertheless presented lovingly, poetically, and without a hint of derision or satire.

Now the time of the year was Spring, not Spring as we know it in England, for it was but early March, but it was the time when Spring coming up out of Africa, or unknown lands to the south, first touches Spain, and multitudes of anemones come forth at her feet. [...]

And all the way as he went, the young man looked at the flame of those southern flowers, flashing on either side of him all the way, as though the rainbow had been broken in Heaven, and its fragments fallen on Spain. All the way as he went he gazed at those flowers, the first anemones of the year; and long after, whenever he sang to old airs of Spain, he thought of Spain as it appeared that day in all the wonder of Spring; the memory lent a beauty to his voice and a wistfulness to his eyes that accorded not ill with the theme of the songs he sang, and were more than once to melt proud hearts deemed cold. (7)

There is nothing like this kind of ecstatic, lyrical description to be found in Cervantes, whose novel is dominated by its (low mimetic) comic situations and dialogues. In contrast, Dunsany gives us an imagined Spain that is both exotic and fecund, one designed to appeal to his reader's dreams and desires. His anemones mark the beginning of a rebirth of idealism and beauty. This early into the book, of course, it remains only a beginning. With strong memories of the trenches and of a generation of dead sons and husbands, the rebirth of romance will be hard won. It is to Dunsany's credit, though, that *Don Rodriguez* avoids becoming a naive retreat into an idealized past. Instead, the book builds on this opening to offer a kind of critical re-investigation of the romance tradition.

The narrator's talk of Rodriguez's wistful songs and descriptions of the quest's idyllic setting mark the initiation of a process that will span the novel's entire length, giving some shape to its otherwise episodic plot. The novel takes both reader and hero on a journey of self-discovery; having re-initiated us into the world of romance Dunsany then induces us (and the protagonist) to gradually interrogate *which* values of that literary world are



truly essential and worthy of faith. This revision of the romance tradition begins as soon as Rodriguez steps out into his world of anemones and old airs. It is probably not a coincidence that at this stage of the novel Rodriguez's "memorable servant," Morāno, joins him, staying for the remainder of the book. Playing Sancho to Rodriguez's Quixote, Morāno is largely what readers familiar with Cervantes would expect him to be—a paradoxical mixture of earthy common sense, comic relief, and idealistic aspiration. Initially, his primary function in the novel seems to be satiric: he repeatedly reminds Rodriguez, for instance, to do something that few romance heroes ever seem to do—eat a simple meal. In this respect, Morāno's presence first seems another example of the rhetorical hedging in the novel. Through him, Dunsany offers cynical readers another bone to chew on, with the intrusive narrator periodically chiming in to reinforce the effect. When Morāno initially joins Rodriguez, for example, that narrator describes the servant's expressions of gratitude to his new master as being "in keeping with that flowery period in Spain, and might appear ridiculous were I to expose them to the eyes of such an age in which one in Morāno's place on such an occasion would have merely said 'Damned good of you old nut, not half,' and let the matter drop" (29-30). However, if the figure of Morāno *initially* reinforces a sense of distance between the modern world and the world of romance (and also ridicules certain aspects of the latter), he soon comes to represent a strangely "rational" faith in the dream-world of adventure. We have already seen that "flowery" is not a contemptible adjective in Dunsany's golden age. Not surprisingly, then, before long Morāno's belief in Rodriguez's quest seems stronger even than his master's. By the end of the Second Chronicle and his first few days with Rodriguez we find "gross Morāno" lying curled up on the ground on his humble bed of straw, dreaming peacefully of walking on "golden shoes" in Aragon, "proud among lesser princes" (47). Most significantly, our narrator sees no need to comment critically on those dreams.

The narrative strategies, the invocation of an extant literary tradition, and the tonal shifts between high and low mimetic styles that I have been discussing thus far provide the recurrent pattern for *Don Rodriguez* as a whole. As the pair of adventurers journeys on together, our narrator periodically hedges about whether readers should commit themselves wholly to his re-invented world, while the narrative itself encourages us to sift through elements of the received tradition, keeping

some and discarding others. The final issue we need to consider then, is how specifically Dunsany wishes to re-work the romance-mode. With few exceptions, it seems to me, it is the naive idealization of heroic violence that comes under the strongest criticism, a point that makes sense when we recall the novel's post-war context. The place where we see this most clearly is in Chronicles III and IV, where Rodriguez and Morāno happen upon the "House of Wonder," the mysterious mountainside dwelling-place of a powerful enchanter. In Chronicle III, the aforementioned enchanter asks Rodriguez about the nature of his quest. Told that the young man seeks the wars, he offers to show him battles of past and future through a pair of magic windows. If there were any doubt that the shadow of World War I looms large over this novel, this point in the narrative dispels it. Turning his eyes to the past, Rodriguez comes face to face with the fraudulent idealization of combat in myth, legend, and history. "Retreats" turn out to have been "routs," and "heroes" win victories through merest accidents and "without knowing that they had won." The narrator sums up *our* hero's experience by noting that "never had man pried before so shamelessly upon History, or found her such a liar" (64). Yet this is not the end of Rodriguez's (and the reader's) re-education. Next he turns to look at the wars of the future, a sight that leaves Rodriguez stunned into silence. He sees man make a new "ally," one "who was only cruel and strong and had no purpose but killing" (69). The ally is, of course, the machine. With this revelation, and with Rodriguez standing silently and blocking faithful Morāno's view, our narrator intrudes with the bitterest lines of the entire book: "Blame not the age," he says, "it is now too late to stop [...] we cannot stop content with mustard-gas; it is the age of Progress, and our motto is Onwards" (71). With such a view of the past and future of war, readers are forced to question Rodriguez's present purpose. It is difficult to imagine a more striking, pointed assault of the heroic warrior-ideal that motivates at least half of his quest.<sup>5</sup>

Yet Rodriguez and Morāno are not finished in the House of Wonder. The next Chronicle relates how the enchanter sunders their spirit forms from their bodies through alchemy, sending them on a mystical journey to the mountains of the sun. Here their very dreams are called into question by the immensity and chaos of solar energies. What starts out as a

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<sup>5</sup> For a brief discussion of some of Dunsany's other fictional critiques of violence, see Pashka.

potentially positive, mystical experience (human eyes are described as a “barrier between us and the immensities”) quickly turns into something terrible. Up close, the sun suddenly appears as an enormous catastrophe, and Rodriguez and Morāno begin to believe that “the purpose of Creation is evil” (83). Significantly, the timeless, almost unreal horror of the experience is compared to that of World War I:

There is nothing in the empty space between the Sun and Mercury with which time is at all concerned. Far less is there meaning in time wherever the spirits of men are under stress. A few minutes’ bombardment in a trench, a few hours in a battle, a few weeks’ traveling in a trackless country; these minutes, these hours, these weeks can never be few. (80)

The connection between the spiritual insight provided by the mysterious enchanter and the legacy of World War I is further reinforced by the ending of the journey to the sun. Rodriguez and Morāno fall into despair, feeling both a sense of utter insignificance before the energies of the cosmos and a fear that the tendency of the universe is to destruction. Aptly enough, upon their return to their Earthly bodies, both master and servant appear to suffer from a form of shell-shock. What allows their earthly journey to go on and redeems them, if only marginally, is the suggestion that the enchanter may either be a kind of diabolical agent or, at the very least, an unappealing representative of a world without faith. (As he prepares to send them off on another spirit-journey, Morāno drives him off with a makeshift cross, a moment that can be read either literally, as an exorcism, or symbolically, as the conquest of faith over thoughts of a meaningless universe.) In the end, then, the reader is left to wonder how much of these lessons should be credited. If we are to question the ideals of heroic combat, are we also to abandon all dreams and aspiration before a Schopenhauerian universe bent only on our destruction? It seems to me that the balance of the novel argues against such a notion. Indeed, the very impulse to despair that Rodriguez and Morāno feel in the House of Wonder seems to necessitate the continuation and completion of their quest. And besides, as we should recall, Rodriguez was given another gift besides his Castilian blade—the mandolin.

The middle chronicles of the book re-introduce the theme of love and, in doing so, set up a climactic conflict between the central chivalric virtues—love, loyalty, and martial valor—that shapes the remainder of the

narrative. Rodriguez and Morāno arrive at the village of Lowlight, where the young hero falls in love with the beautiful Serafina, whom he sees briefly on a balcony. Singing to her in the moonlight, he is challenged to a duel by a man who proves to be her brother. As the two fight, Morāno repeatedly interferes, clubbing Rodriguez's opponent into insensibility with his iron frying pan. Although it is obvious that Rodriguez was outclassed and likely to be killed in the combat, he berates his servant for violating the laws of chivalry and drives him away for a time. Clearly the overall effect of this comic interlude is to provide yet another critique of the martial side of the romance tradition. Two strangers fighting a moonlit duel for no real purpose (a duel ended only by a pan-wielding rustic) raises serious questions about the role of violence in the heroic tradition. In contrast, though, love and the mandolin seem to represent more timeless values. The balance of the novel, consequently, shifts our focus there, onto the significance of the virtues of love and loyalty, faith and friendship.

In later chronicles, Rodriguez rescues a mysterious stranger about to be hung by soldiers (not doing so through violence, but through cleverness). This stranger proves to be the King of Shadow Valley, a man who will eventually provide him with his castle—not for his martial prowess, but as a reward for his fidelity and compassion. Rodriguez's subsequent experiences in the wars provide his final lessons in the false promises of chivalric violence. As he passes into France, he encounters refugees and fearful civilians ravaged by the memories of war—hardly a scene from the romance tradition. Finally locating an army which he can join, Rodriguez chooses and defeats an opponent in single combat, sparing his life in exchange for his “castle in Spain.” Journeying back across the mountains with Morāno and his prisoner, though, Rodriguez again experiences disappointment. As readers might have expected, the prisoner's castle turns out to be a humble cottage, and our hero leaves the wars with no tangible reward. Yet Rodriguez *does* leave with a renewed aura of virtuous nobility; he refuses to punish his prisoner for his obvious deception, choosing instead to accept his ridiculous explanation that a mysterious enchanter has stolen the castle that once stood where the cottage now rests. (We should note that Rodriguez is no Don Quixote here, for the narrator strongly implies his awareness of the lie.) But if Rodriguez walks away, finally, from the empty promises of warfare and “romantic” violence, he does not abandon all of the chivalric virtues. In the penultimate

Chronicle ("How He Turned to Gardening and His Sword Rested"), Rodriguez returns to Serafina, who avows her love for him despite his failure to win a castle. Finally, in a blend of a fairy-tale happy ending and logical allegorical closure, Dunsany provides our hero with his just reward. The mysterious King of Shadow Valley builds Rodriguez a woodland palace, names him his heir, and serves as godparent to the children of Serafina's and Rodriguez's consummated (not courtly) love.

In the end, Rodriguez discovers that faith, friendship, and love represent ideals worthy of devotion. The joy he experiences in Serafina's garden and, subsequently, in his sylvan realm has a solidity to it, born of experience. If Rodriguez's giants proved to be windmills, his Dulcinea, in contrast, is real. For this reader, at least, that fact that such a conclusion feels both earned and satisfactory is a testimony to Dunsany's great rhetorical skill in crafting his fantastic tale in the shadow of world war. Contemporary reviews of the work were mixed, but in my view, Dunsany's awareness of literary tradition, historical context, and audience—issues I have tried to trace here—makes *Don Rodriguez* an important and successful early example of modern fantasy, as well as a commentary on the defining event of its age. Dunsany's belief that "timeless," archetypal narratives and high ideals have a role to play in even the darkest moments of human history strikes me as a powerful insight, one worth continued exploration. As the carefully orchestrated rebirth of romance in *Don Rodriguez* seems to suggest, well-crafted modern myths can demonstrate a vital kind of critical and moral intelligence. Thankfully, many other writers of modern fantasy seem to share this conviction.

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