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Abstract

Locates parallels to the broad outlines of Arthurian myth in the character of Prince Caspian, in his conflicted path to his rightful throne, his advisor Cornelius, and his rejuvenation in Aslan's country. Also considers Reepicheep's quest for Aslan's country as a parallel to the Grail quest.

Keywords

Arthurian myth in C.S. Lewis; Grail (legend) in the Chronicles of Narnia; Lewis, C.S.—Characters—Prince Caspian; Lewis, C.S.—Characters—Reepicheep; Lewis, C.S. Prince Caspian; Lewis, C.S. The Voyage of the Dawn Treader

Arthurian Themes in the Narnia Books ~

by Bruce McMenomy

The idea of the primary allegory in the Narnia books is much discussed and well known. However, there are also a multitude of analogies to other works of literature in general. We find a Prince-Pauper theme in *THE HORSE AND HIS BOY*. We find themes of mediaeval literature throughout. Among these are definitely the Arthurian themes.

Literary themes, especially those of mediaeval literature, are not very difficult to discover in the Narnia books. It is, however, somewhat more difficult to prove that their appearance is intentional. Due to the fact that the great bulk of Narnia material is Biblical in origin, and because many mediaeval themes were also restatements of essentially Christian material, we cannot always determine whether Lewis drew some of these themes from sources from the Middle Ages, or took them from the Bible and, by following a process similar to that of mediaeval authors, arrived at a similar result. We know that either case is possible, as Lewis was very familiar with the literature of the Middle Ages and Renaissance. Therefore it is not unreasonable to think that Lewis might draw upon the tremendous literary wealth of these times, nor is it inconceivable that he might be inclined to develop older themes into those holding a great resemblance to mediaeval themes.

For the reason just stated, there are many lines of comparison which will be drawn here in which we are treading on extremely uncertain ground. There are, however, a few which seem to be rather firm. We shall consider these first.

In comparing Arthurian themes to Narnian, our first task is obviously to find a parallel to Arthur. While certain individual considerations could lead us into the selection of a number of characters, by far the broadest parallel can be drawn with Caspian. While we read with this in mind, other parallels make themselves apparent.

The first line of comparison between the two is their childhoods. Both were rightful heirs to the throne. Both, however, were at an early age dissociated from the direct line to the throne. Both, being rightful heirs, strive to regain their proper position, and both are successful. And, after declaring his kingship, each has to fight the political structure to enforce his position, Arthur against a group of lesser feudal monarchs, and Caspian against the Telmarines.

The above parallel is further strengthened by the introduction of another. We notice that throughout these stages of realization and affirmation of the kingship, each of these characters was aided by an old wise creature. Though power and mythical background may differ, the alignment of Cornelius to Merlin with re-

spect to their natures and their relationship to the Arthur-figure is unmistakable. Examining certain features within this parallel leads to the discovery of ever-strengthening ties. First, both were magic. Second, we find that while they were advisors during the period of ascension to the throne, there is very little mention of either with respect to the later lives of the Arthur-figure. Third, we find the origin of these two to be quite similar. Each is half human and half some other creature. In Malory's account, Merlin is said to have been the offspring of the devil. However, in other accounts, probably earlier, Merlin is said to have been fathered by Incubus, a spirit of the air, who was neither entirely good nor entirely evil. While the good/evil alignment is very slender, we can also consider that that was the nature of the Narnian dwarfs of the time.

From the "rise to power" theme, we turn to examine some of the others. In the theme of the Grail quest, we find our relationships a bit less certain. We have to do a bit of tugging and rearranging to get the Narnian quest theme to fit into the mold of the Grail quest. From the Narnia quest, as questing is the central theme of THE VOYAGE OF THE DAWN TREADER, we have two ideas. Each is suited in some ways. The first is Caspian's quest for the lost lords, in which we would find our Arthur suddenly transformed into a Galahad. This is highly unlikely in itself; however, to further disprove this theory there is more than one argument.

The second quest is that of Reepicheep for Aslan's country. This is probably the most likely in that it provides for a separate character for the Galahad parallel. Further pursuing this, we may note that we find embodied in Reepicheep many Galahad type virtues. Within him was embodied almost the entire idea of chivalry. Also their deaths are somewhat parallel. While Galahad actually died, his death was as close to being physically taken to Heaven as possible short of an Elijah-type miracle. Reepicheep also went to Aslan's country in a similar way, except, as far as we know, it was completely physical. The parallel of the Reepicheep quest with that of the Grail also has some serious defects. Among the greatest is the absence of the Grail or anything to directly parallel the Grail.

There is a serious consideration which should also be considered with respect to a parallel to the Grail. We find on Ramandu's island a great table with a renewing feast, a fairly direct Grail symbol, and the stone knife, a symbol for the spear which pierced the side of Christ. However, this does not fit in with either of the two Narnian quests for a number of reasons. First, these two things were come upon in the course of the travels, but were definitely not the object of any great search or quest. Furthermore, once found, these things were not taken. Finally, if we accept the Reepicheep alignment, these things did absolutely nothing to influence the outcome of the quest.

It seems more likely that these two articles were parallel to the Grail and spear, but that their existence was drawn from the Biblical phase of the Narnia books rather than the Arthurian, and that their appearance in the context of the quest is either coincidence or a shadowy suggestion of a relation rather than a complete analogy.

There are a few other things in the Narnia books which may or may not be thought to fit within the framework of analogy drawn here. Some are more certain than others, and more likely to have been drawn from the Arthurian cycle.

One is semi-historical. The records and/or tales of Arthur, if he ever really lived, tell us that he helped and led defenses against the Angles and Saxons when they were beginning their invasions of England. It is an interesting note to remember that Caspian fought invaders also. He was, however, one of the invaders himself.

A final aspect which we may consider is the tale of the death of Arthur in the earlier accounts. According to early sources, Arthur, dying, was transported to Avalon, where he was healed and lives, immortal, to return one day in the hour of his country's greatest need. While the fact of Caspian's death is modified, intentionally, to carry out the Christian allegory of death and life after death, it is wrapped in the same semi-mystical quality, as is the rejuvenation of Caspian in Aslan's country.

It is to be hoped that we may all benefit from the drawing of comparisons in this way, for by analysing literary themes we may learn more of Lewis, his ideas, and his writings. Furthermore, we may, by using Arthur as a mirror, see more deeply into the character of Lewis, and by looking into Caspian we may learn more about the ideas of a great mind with respect to Arthur and the entire cycle.

