

MAGIC AND FANTASY IN FICTION

by G. K. Chesterton

IT MAY seem but a mild form of dalliance to trifle with the word Magic as a term of criticism, when it has recently been so useful to the clergy as a term of abuse. A worthy Bishop of the Church of England has shown all the ancient activity of a witch-smeller, in pursuing those suspected of believing it, as the witch-smellers pursued those suspected of practising it. He does this, I understand, to show that he is a Liberal Churchman. I have no intention of discussing such matters here; but it does happen that this use of the term, considered as a text, throws some light on the first facts of its relation to literature, and especially to legend. The ecclesiastic in question always uses it as covering all the rather wide field of religious doctrines in which he does not happen to believe. But in this we have at the start the neglect of an important and rather interesting distinction. The word Magic was widely used as a term of abuse, because it was really a question of abuse in more senses than one. Magic was the abuse of preternatural powers by lower agents whose work was preternatural but not supernatural. It was founded on the profound maxim of *diabolus simius Dei*; the devil is the ape of God. Magic was a monkèy-trick of imitation of the divine functions; and there was therefore nothing strange in either the similarity or the dissimilarity. But to talk of the higher mysteries or miracles as forms of magic, or as coming forth from magic, is

to reverse the whole story. It is as if we were to say that the Black Mass gradually evolved into the Mass. It is like saying that an abbot establishing the rule of St. Benedict was a parody of the Abbot of Misrule. It is like saying that the disciples who said the Lord's Prayer had borrowed it from the witches who said it backwards.

But in all that mythology and popular poetry out of which our written literature sprang, this distinction is dimly felt long before it was clarified by Christianity. There is always the sense of one sort of magic which is an enemy and an enslaver. We all know that there are jokes of philology, or examples in which a word has been turned upside down and come to mean the contrary of itself. The learned will readily grow gay over the history of the word "buxom"; or the word "nervous". There is almost as comic a contradiction in our use of the word "enchantment" when we say "I was enchanted to meet Mr. Miggs", or "The view of Brixton from the station is simply enchanting". But in the vast unwritten literature of mankind enchantment was almost always regarded as a curse. There is in enchantment almost always an idea of captivity. Sometimes the stricken victim is literally struck motionless, as when men are turned to stone by the Gorgon or the prince in the Arabian Tale is clamped to the earth in marble. Quite as often the victim of enchantment wanders through the woods as a white hind or flies



From "*Fairy Tales from the Arabian Nights*". (Putnam.)

with apparent freedom as a parrot or a wild swan. But he always talks of his very freedom as a wandering imprisonment. And the reason is that there is always in such witchcraft the note of travesty; the man is disguised and in a double sense "guyed"; as when the youth in Apuleius feels literally that the witches have made an ass of him. In contrast with this, it will be noted that the good miracles, the acts of the saints and heroes, are always acts of restoration. They give the victim back his personality; and it is a normal and not a supernormal personality. The miracle gives back his legs to the lame man; but it does not turn him into a large centipede. It gives eyes to the blind; but only a regular and respectable number of eyes. The paralytic is told to stretch forth his hand, which is the gesture of liberation from fetters; but not to spread himself as a sort of Briarean octopus radiating in all directions and losing the human form. There runs through the whole tradition the idea

that black magic is that which blots out or disguises the true form of a thing; while white magic, in the good sense, restores it to its own form and not another. St. Nicholas brings three children alive out of a pot when they have already been boiled down into soup; which may be said to mark the extreme assertion of form against formlessness. But Medea, being a witch, puts an old man into a pot and promises to bring out a young man; that is, another man. Also Medea, being a witch, does not keep her word.

This division even in the deep roots of legend and primitive literature would help critics very much in judging the real principles of uncanny or fantastic fiction. There is no reason within reason why literature should not describe the demonic as well as the divine aspect of mystery or myth. What is really remarkable is that in modern fiction, in an age accused of frivolity, in an age perhaps only too headlong in its pursuit of happiness, or at least of hedonism, the only popular sort of fantasy is the unhappy fantasy. There is a certain amount of fantasy that is avowedly fantastic, in the sense of unreal; mostly in the form of fairy tales ostensibly written for children. But, on the whole, when the serious modern novel has dealt with the serious preternatural agency, it has not only been serious but sad. This contrast appears first and most vividly in the comfortable and even convivial Victorian novelists. They often thought it enough to make their human characters comfortable; but if they did suggest any superhuman characters, they were generally uncomfortable as well as uncanny. These humanitarians of the nineteenth century were haunted by no spirits, except a few thin ghosts; but these were the lost spirits of Calvinists of the seventeenth century. In their philosophies, the humanitarians believed in heaven but not in hell. In their novels, they believed in hell but not in heaven. Dickens did indeed attempt in *A Christmas Carol* to make a positive polytheism of three versions of Father Christmas;

a curious temporal Trinity. But the warmest Dickensian (and I hope I am one of the warmest) will admit that these solid guides are far less convincing than the visions that they reveal. They have not that purely poetic reality that does belong to the hints of horror and the glimpses of nightmare in the novels of Dickens. The man with the waxen face, in one of his short stories, is by every definition a ghost; but he is a ghost in whom we can believe, as compared with these gods in whom we cannot believe. It was even more marked in Wilkie Collins, who had less sense of the serious need of spiritual things. He could indulge himself in dubious superstition; he would have thought it superstitious to indulge in the symbols of positive religion. The whole point of *Armadale* is a family curse as frankly psychic as a family ghost. But we should be much disconcerted, in wandering through a Wilkie Collins story, to meet an angel with wings and a halo when we were looking for a gentleman with whiskers and a high hat.

In short, in so far as humanity became once more heathen, it believed more and more in the old dehumanizing spell, the freezing of the will by trance or terror, and less in the other legend of the hero or the helper who can break the spell. There has lately been a return to the more heartening heroic legend; but that is exactly in so far as there has been a reaction against the merely heathen spirit. A story like *The Bridge of San Luis Rey* is strictly supernatural and not merely preternatural. But even here the habit of the nineteenth century persists into the twentieth, especially in the instinctive selection of form. No man has done more to bring back a breath of happiness into fantasy than Mr. Walter de la Mare. He has testified that even when we do look through magic casements it is not absolutely necessary that the faerie lands should be forlorn. But, by something almost like a sense of delicacy, he has generally brought his good news in the form of rhymes; and,

in a sense, merely of nursery rhymes. It gives a note, not exactly of irresponsibility, but of a certain shyness and appeal to innocence. But when it is a matter of more massive treatment, even he inherits something of the now established "modern" spirit, which can deal most decisively with the darker experience. And few things that he, or indeed anybody else, has written have so much of what can really be called realism as the diabolism of "Seaton's Aunt".

It is perhaps a symbol that Henry James called one of his books *The Two Magics*; but entirely forgot to mention any magic except one. For in the other case the word is a mere metaphor, used of some trick or tact; and the only tale that is really about magic is about black magic. It was a horrible and powerful story about two children practically possessed of devils. I wish somebody with the genius of James could really write a book on the two magics; and say something in the other of the gesture that can cast out devils. As it is, even the most sensitive and spiritual modern fiction leaves us rather with the Swinburnian impression that "even

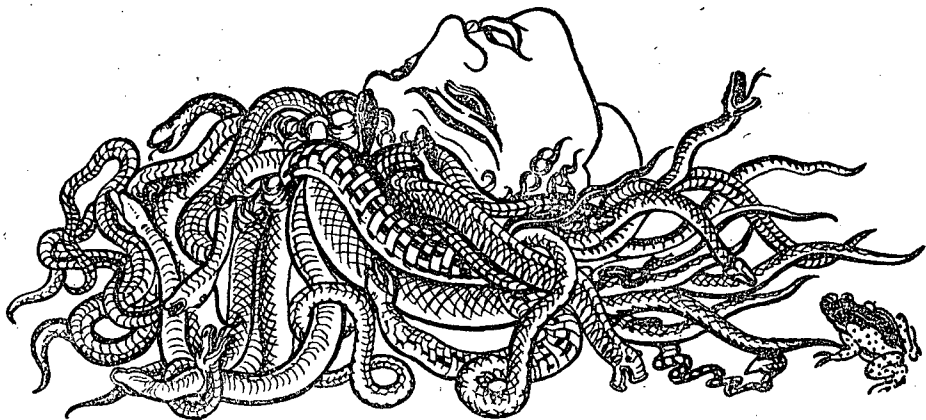


S. NICHOLAS

From a MS in the Bodleian Library, Oxford.

He who cast seven devils out of Magdalene" could scarcely do the same for Seaton's Aunt. I am well aware that there has been an interlude of a rather different sort of magic, which professed for a time to be neither black nor white. If I call it colorless magic, I do not mean it in contempt; but rather as crystals are colorless, or diamonds or clear water. It came with what was called the Celtic School, when Victorian ethics, always rather exhausting, were rather exhausted. In that reaction it was rational enough for Mr. W. B. Yeats to bid us "Come clear of the nets of 'wrong and of right'; and so ignore even the two kinds of positive magic, the net of St. Peter and the snare of Satan. But I, who have an inexhaustible admiration for everything that Mr. Yeats says and writes, may be allowed to testify that any attempt to live entirely in the crystal of colorless magic ends in the very convincing exclamation of the elf in his own play—"I am tired of winds and waters and pale lights". So were we; and so eventually was Mr. Yeats; for his powerful mind seems to have turned more and more of late to structural visions of the whole course of history and humanity; social and rather sweeping statements, like

intellectual cyclones, which must nevertheless in their nature be not only mystical but moral. And though I do not care very much myself for the cabalistic games and cryptograms that seem to amuse him at present, they have a certain mathematical solidity like Babylonian bricks. It is a good thing in that sense to be a Cubist, when winds and waters have tempted you too much to be a Curvist. But in any case I am convinced that every deep or delicate treatment of the magical theme, from the lightest jingle of *Peacock Pie*, which may seem as nonsensical as *Lear*, to the most profound shaking of the phenomenal world, as in some of the best stories of Algernon Blackwood, will always be found to imply an indirect relation to the ancient blessing and cursing and it is almost as vital that it should be moral as that it should not be moralizing. Magic for Magic's sake, like art for art's sake, is found in fact to be too shallow, and to be unable to live without drawing upon things deeper than itself. To say that all real art is in black and white is but another way of saying that it is in light and darkness; and there is no fantasy so irresponsible as really to escape from the alternative.



THE SAME FALLACY OF HUMANISM

A REPLY TO MR. ROBERT SHAFER

by *Allen Tate*

THE editor of this journal has generously allowed me space in which to reply to an essay by Mr. Robert Shafer entitled "Humanism and Impudence", which appeared in *THE BOOKMAN* for January, 1930. Mr. Shafer's essay was a criticism of a paper of mine, "The Fallacy of Humanism", in which I analyzed some of the mental habits, and certain metaphysical assumptions, of the leading Humanists—More, Babbitt, and Foerster—and attempted to point out the logical consequences of their position.* Mr. Shafer's defence of the Humanists is long and studied, and I can scarcely hope to compete with its ingenuity in this brief reply.

Mr. Shafer misunderstands the main argument of my essay; he does not, apparently, even misunderstand it; he either does not see it or will not allow it to exist. His refutation therefore employs a device time-honored among expert debaters. He recognizes the argument only in its detail, and by refusing to see the evidence as a whole and the object for which it is offered, and even by presenting me with conclusions that I had no intention of reaching—conclusions not implied by the evidence—he easily reduces the whole essay to absurdity. His formula is about as follows: There are five oranges on the table—but such evidence is absurd in a proof that it snows in July. Mr. Shafer does not mention the fact that the modest induction is only

meant to show that oranges are yellow. I will ask the reader to bear this formula in mind.

Since the subject of my essay, ignored by its critic, was the relation of Humanism to the idea of authority, I will enlarge only upon two instances of his misunderstanding of my chief argument; for they are crucial. Beyond this, disputed points of detail must be left to the curiosity of the reader, who may refer to my essay and to Mr. Shafer's reply. It is my desire to reestablish here only the true issue of the controversy, an issue that is now all but totally obscured.

I

Mr. Shafer misstates my religious position, and to do so he asserts that I attack Humanism "in the name of religion", and that I "profess to speak as a Christian". He says specifically: "Indeed, he seeks quite plainly to imply that he speaks from the haven of Catholicism (Roman or other)". What I actually said was this:

It must be understood that this essay urges the claim of no particular Western church, and it is in no sense a confession of faith; but the connection between the Reformation and Naturalism, and what I conceive authority to be, define the position that the Humanists must occupy if they wish to escape intellectual suicide.

The intention of this passage is clear enough; it should have been even clearer in the light

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