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978-1-107-60470-4 - The Discarded Image: An Introduction to Medieval and Renaissance Literature

By C. S. Lewis

Excerpt

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## CHAPTER I

## THE MEDIEVAL SITUATION

The likeness of unlike things

MULCASTER

Medieval man shared many ignorances with the savage, and some of his beliefs may suggest savage parallels to an anthropologist. But he had not usually reached these beliefs by the same route as the savage.

Savage beliefs are thought to be the spontaneous response of a human group to its environment, a response made principally by the imagination. They exemplify what some writers call pre-logical thinking. They are closely bound up with the communal life of the group. What we should describe as political, military, and agricultural operations are not easily distinguished from rituals; ritual and belief beget and support one another. The most characteristically medieval thought does not arise in that way.

Sometimes, when a community is comparatively homogeneous and comparatively undisturbed over a long period, such a system of belief can continue, of course with development, long after material culture has progressed far beyond the level of savagery. It may then begin to turn into something more ethical, more philosophical, even more scientific; but there will be uninterrupted continuity between this and its savage beginnings. Something like this, it would seem, happened in Egypt.<sup>1</sup> That also is unlike the history of medieval thought.

<sup>1</sup> See *Before Philosophy*, J. A. Wilson, etc. (1949).

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The peculiarity of the Middle Ages can be shown by two examples.

Some time between 1160 and 1207 an English priest called Lazamon wrote a poem called the *Brut*.<sup>1</sup> In it (ll. 15,775 sq.) he tells us that the air is inhabited by a great many beings, some good and some bad, who will live there till the world ends. The content of this belief is not unlike things we might find in savagery. To people Nature, and especially the less accessible parts of her, with spirits both friendly and hostile, is characteristic of the savage response. But Lazamon is not writing thus because he shares in any communal and spontaneous response made by the social group he lives in. The real history of the passage is quite different. He takes his account of the aerial daemons from the Norman poet Wace (c. 1155). Wace takes it from Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia Regum Britanniae* (before 1139). Geoffrey takes it from the second-century *De Deo Socratis* of Apuleius. Apuleius is reproducing the pneumatology of Plato. Plato was modifying, in the interests of ethics and monotheism, the mythology he had received from his ancestors. If you go back through many generations of those ancestors, then at last you may find, or at least conjecture, an age when that mythology was coming into existence in what we suppose to be the savage fashion. But the English poet knew nothing about that. It is further from him than he is from us. He believes in these daemons because he has read about them in a book; just as most of us believe in the Solar System or in the

<sup>1</sup> Ed. F. Madden, 3 vols. (1847).

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anthropologists' accounts of early man. Savage beliefs tend to be dissipated by literacy and by contact with other cultures; these are the very things which have created Lazamon's belief.

My second example is perhaps more interesting. In the fourteenth-century *Pèlerinage de l'Homme* by Guillaume Deguileville, Nature (personified), speaking to a character called Grâcedieu, says that the frontier between their respective realms is the orbit of the Moon.<sup>1</sup> It would be easy to suppose that this is the direct offspring of savage mythopoeia, dividing the sky into a higher region peopled with higher spirits and a lower region peopled with lower. The Moon would be a spectacular landmark between them. But in reality the origins of this passage have very little to do with savage, or even with civilised, religion. By calling the superior *numen* Grâcedieu the poet has worked in something of Christianity; but this is merely a 'wash' spread over a canvas that is not Christian but Aristotelian.

Aristotle, being interested both in biology and in astronomy, found himself faced with an obvious contrast. The characteristic of the world we men inhabit is incessant change by birth, growth, procreation, death, and decay. And within that world such experimental methods as had been achieved in his time could discover only an imperfect uniformity. Things happened in the same way not perfectly nor invariably but 'on the whole' or 'for the most part'.<sup>2</sup> But the world studied by astronomy seemed quite different. No *Nova* had yet been

<sup>1</sup> In Lydgate's trans. (E.E.T.S. ed. F. J. Furnivall, 1899), 3415 sq.

<sup>2</sup> *De Gen. Animalium*, 778 a; *Polit.* 1255 b.

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observed.<sup>1</sup> So far as he could find out, the celestial bodies were permanent; they neither came into existence nor passed away. And the more you studied them, the more perfectly regular their movements seemed to be. Apparently, then, the universe was divided into two regions. The lower region of change and irregularity he called Nature (φύσις). The upper he called Sky (οὐρανός). Thus he can speak of 'Nature and Sky' as two things.<sup>2</sup> But that very changeable phenomenon, the weather, made it clear that the realm of inconstant Nature extended some way above the surface of the Earth. 'Sky' must begin higher up. It seemed reasonable to suppose that regions which differed in every observable respect were also made of different stuff. Nature was made of the four elements, earth, water, fire, and air. Air, then (and with air Nature, and with Nature inconstancy) must end before Sky began. Above the air, in true Sky, was a different substance, which he called *aether*. Thus 'the *aether* encompasses the divine bodies, but immediately below the ethereal and divine nature comes that which is passible, mutable, perishable, and subject to death'.<sup>3</sup> By the word *divine* Aristotle introduces a religious element; and the placing of the important frontier (between Sky and Nature, Aether and Air) at the Moon's orbit is a minor

<sup>1</sup> There is a tradition that Hipparchus (*fl.* 150 B.C.) detected one (see Pliny, *Nat. Hist.* II, xxiv). The great *Nova* in Cassiopeia of Nov. 1572 was a most important event for the history of thought (see F. R. Johnson, *Astronomical Thought in Renaissance England*, Baltimore, 1937, p. 154).

<sup>2</sup> *Metaphys.* 1072 b. Cf. Dante, *Par.* xxviii, 42.

<sup>3</sup> *De Mundo*, 392<sup>a</sup>. Whether this essay is Aristotle's or merely of the Aristotelian school does not matter for my purpose.

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detail. But the concept of such a frontier seems to arise far more in response to a scientific than to a religious need. This is the ultimate source of the passage in Deguileville.

What both examples illustrate is the overwhelmingly bookish or clerkly character of medieval culture. When we speak of the Middle Ages as the ages of authority we are usually thinking about the authority of the Church. But they were the age not only of her authority, but of authorities. If their culture is regarded as a response to environment, then the elements in that environment to which it responded most vigorously were manuscripts. Every writer, if he possibly can, bases himself on an earlier writer, follows an *auctour*: preferably a Latin one. This is one of the things that differentiate the period almost equally from savagery and from our modern civilisation. In a savage community you absorb your culture, in part unconsciously, from participation in the immemorial pattern of behaviour, and in part by word of mouth, from the old men of the tribe. In our own society most knowledge depends, in the last resort, on observation. But the Middle Ages depended predominantly on books. Though literacy was of course far rarer than now, reading was in one way a more important ingredient of the total culture.

To this statement a reservation must however be added. The Middle Ages had roots in the 'barbarian' North and West as well as in that Graeco-Roman tradition which reached them principally through books. I have put the word 'barbarian' in inverted commas because it might otherwise mislead. It might suggest a

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far greater difference in race and arts and natural capacity than really existed even in ancient times between Roman citizens and those who pressed upon the frontiers of the empire. Long before that empire fell, citizenship had ceased to have any connection with race. Throughout its history its Germanic and (still more) its Celtic neighbours, if once conquered or allied, apparently had no reluctance to assimilate, and no difficulty in assimilating, its civilisation. You could put them into togas and set them to learning rhetoric almost at once. They were not in the least like Hottentots dressed up in bowler hats and pretending to be Europeans. The assimilation was real and often permanent. In a few generations they might be producing Roman poets, jurists, generals. They differed from the older members of the Graeco-Roman world no more than these differed from one another in shape of skull, features, complexion, or intelligence.

The contribution of the barbarian (thus understanding the word) to the Middle Ages will be variously assessed according to the point of view from which we study them. So far as law and custom and the general shape of society are concerned, the barbarian elements may be the most important. The same is true, in one particular way, of one particular art in some countries. Nothing about a literature can be more essential than the language it uses. A language has its own personality; implies an outlook, reveals a mental activity, and has a resonance, not quite the same as those of any other. Not only the vocabulary—*heaven* can never mean quite the same as *ciel*—but the very shape of the syntax is *sui generis*. Hence in the

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Germanic countries, including England, the debt of the medieval (and modern) literatures to their barbarian origin is all-pervasive. In other countries, where the Celtic languages and those of the Germanic invaders were both almost completely obliterated by Latin, the situation is quite different. In Middle English literature, after every necessary allowance has been made for French and Latin influences, the tone and rhythm and the very 'feel' of every sentence is (in the sense that we are now giving to the word) of barbarian descent. Those who ignore the relation of English to Anglo-Saxon as a 'merely philological fact' irrelevant to the literature betray a shocking insensibility to the very mode in which literature exists.

For the student of culture in a narrower sense—that is, of thought, sentiment, and imagination—the barbarian elements may be less important. Even for him they are doubtless by no means negligible. Fragments of non-classical Paganism survive in Old Norse, Anglo-Saxon, Irish, and Welsh; they are thought by most scholars to underlie a great deal of Arthurian romance. Medieval love-poetry may owe something to barbarian manners. Ballads, till a very late period, may throw up fragments of prehistoric (if it is not perennial) folklore. But we must see these things in proportion. The Old Norse and Celtic texts were, and remained till modern times, utterly unknown outside a very limited area. Changes in language soon made Anglo-Saxon unintelligible even in England. Elements from the old Germanic and the old Celtic world undoubtedly exist in the later vernaculars.

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But how hard we have to look for them! For one reference to Wade or Weland we meet fifty to Hector, Aeneas, Alexander, or Caesar. For one probable relic of Celtic religion dug out of a medieval book we meet, clear and emphatic, a score of references to Mars and Venus and Diana. The debt which the love-poets may owe to the barbarians is shadowy and conjectural; their debt to the classics, or even, as now appears, to the Arabians, is much more certain.

It may perhaps be held that the barbarian legacy is not really less, but only less flaunted and more disguised; even that it is all the more potent for being secret. This might be true as regards the romances and ballads. We must therefore ask how far, or rather in what sense, these are characteristically medieval products. They certainly loomed larger in the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century picture of the Middle Ages than in the reality. There was a good reason why they should. Ariosto, Tasso, and Spenser, the lineal descendants of the medieval romancers, continued to be 'polite literature' right down to the age of Hurd and Warton. The taste for that sort of fiction was kept alive all through the 'Metaphysical' and the Augustan Age. Throughout the same period the ballad also, though often in a somewhat degraded form, had kept alive. Children heard it from their nurses; eminent critics sometimes praised it. Thus the medieval 'Revival' of the eighteenth century revived what was not quite dead. It was along this line that we worked back to medieval literature; following to its source a stream which flowed past our door. As a result, Romance and Ballad coloured



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men's idea of the Middle Ages somewhat excessively. Except among scholars they do so still. Popular iconography—a poster, a joke in *Punch*—wishing to summon up the idea of the Medieval, draws a knight errant with castles, distressed damsels, and dragons *quant. suff.* in the background.

For the popular impression, as often, a defence can be made. There is a sense in which the Romances and Ballads perhaps really deserve to rank as the characteristic or representative product of the Middle Ages. Of the things they have left us these have proved the most widely and permanently pleasurable. And though things which in varying degrees resemble them can be found elsewhere, they are, in their total effect, unique and irreplaceable. But if by calling them characteristic we mean that the sort of imagination they embody was the principal, or even the very frequent, occupation of medieval men, we shall be mistaken. The eerie quality of some ballads and the hard, laconic pathos of others—the mystery, the sense of the illimitable, the elusive reticence of the best romances—these things stand apart from the habitual medieval taste. In some of the greatest medieval literature they are wholly lacking: in the Hymns, in Chaucer, in Villon. Dante can take us through all the regions of the dead without ever once giving us the *frisson* we get from *The Wife of Usher's Well* or *The Chapel Perilous*. It looks as if the Romances and such Ballads were in the Middle Ages, as they have remained ever since, truaneries, refreshments, things that can live only on the margin of the mind, things whose very charm depends on their not

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being 'of the centre' (a locality which Matthew Arnold possibly overvalued).

At his most characteristic, medieval man was not a dreamer nor a wanderer. He was an organiser, a codifier, a builder of systems. He wanted 'a place for everything and everything in the right place'. Distinction, definition, tabulation were his delight. Though full of turbulent activities, he was equally full of the impulse to formalise them. War was (in intention) formalised by the art of heraldry and the rules of chivalry; sexual passion (in intention), by an elaborate code of love. Highly original and soaring philosophical speculation squeezes itself into a rigid dialectical pattern copied from Aristotle. Studies like Law and Moral Theology, which demand the ordering of very diverse particulars, especially flourish. Every way in which a poet can write (including some in which he had much better not) is classified in the Arts of Rhetoric. There was nothing which medieval people liked better, or did better, than sorting out and tidying up. Of all our modern inventions I suspect that they would most have admired the card index.

This impulse is equally at work in what seem to us their silliest pedantries and in their most sublime achievements. In the latter we see the tranquil, indefatigable, exultant energy of passionately systematic minds bringing huge masses of heterogeneous material into unity. The perfect examples are the *Summa* of Aquinas and Dante's *Divine Comedy*; as unified and ordered as the Parthenon or the *Oedipus Rex*, as crowded and varied as a London terminus on a bank holiday.