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The Narnia Books of C. S. Lewis: Fantastic or Wonderful?

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

The Narnia Books of C. S. Lewis: Fantastic or Wonderful?

Dennis B. Quinn (bio)

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literature by adult standards, although not every good book is necessarily good for children. The current adult enthusiasm for fantasy, both popular and critical, has led to a rather uncritical acceptance of it, together with a certain recklessness concerning its nature and history. The editors of the *The Good Book Guide to Children's Books* (Penguin, 1983) declare that "the crowning glory of children's books is fantasy." Before we all plunge helter-skelter into the enchanted forest of fantasy, however, I should like to offer a few cautionary words about the genre itself and about one of its most popular practitioners, C. S. Lewis.¹

The word *fantasy* has meant many things in the history of English. A survey of the various *Oxford English Dictionary* entries, however, reveals two basic meanings. In its earliest uses fantasy meant pretty much what it had meant in Greek and Latin—a mental picture or the faculty of forming such pictures. In short, fantasy was nearly synonymous with imagination. Very early on, however, the word took on some negative coloration. A classical Greek derivative of fantasy meant an apparition; and from that idea it is an easy step to something with no extramental reality or to something illusory, hallucinatory, extravagant, capricious, or even insane. On the whole, one may say that from Plato to Dryden fantasy meant either a mental image or appearance or (often with a negative implication) something unreal. In more recent times, while the word *imagination* has replaced fantasy in its neutral sense, the association of fantasy with unreality has persisted, though with lessening disapproval.

As a name for a genre of literature, the term *fantasy* was used at least as early as Addison's *Spectator* paper number 419. Although not entirely disapproving, Addison obviously regards it as a minor species of fiction, and he uses the word to mean pretty much what it had always meant—something unreal, something belonging entirely to **[End Page 105]** the imagination and deriving ultimately from superstition. To Addison and Dryden, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and the Arthurian stories were fantastic.

In 1927 E. M. Forster used *fantasy* to describe a wide range of serious

literature from *Tristram Shandy* to *Moby-Dick* and Joyce's *Ulysses*. He defined this species of literature as one that asks the reader to accept the supernatural as playing some role, whether implicitly or explicitly:

It implies the supernatural, but need not express it. Often it does express it, and were that type of classification helpful, we could make a list of the devices which writers of a fantastic turn have used—such as the introduction of a god, ghost, angel, monkey, monster, midget, witch into ordinary life; or the introduction of ordinary men into no man's land, the future, the past, the interior of the earth, the fourth dimension; or divings into and dividings of personality; or finally the device of parody or adaptation.²

Thus Forster admits fantasy as a respectable (if not central and hardly essential) aspect of the novel, and I believe his definition is widely accepted today. I find it both inconsistent and unacceptably broad. Monkeys and midgets are not supernatural nor are dividings of personality or parody; and if the supernatural is the *sine qua non*, then *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* is not fantasy and *Hamlet* is.

Still more recently J. R. R. Tolkien carried the emancipation of fantasy a step further by defining it as a subcreation that has an inner consistency of its own and hence a sort of reality independent of the real world; moreover, he claims for fantasy a status equal if not superior to other literary modes. This definition retains the old association of fantasy with unreality (though this issue is rather evaded), but it adds the highest approval and prestige. I can accept the definition but not the evaluation. In doing so I believe I am following the central tradition of Western literature, both in theory and in practice. It might be assumed, then, that I must classify...

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