

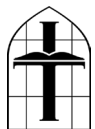
Hail, Thou Once Despised Jesus!*John Bakewell (1721–1819)*

Hail, thou once despised Jesus!
 Hail, Thou Galilean king!
 Thou didst suffer to release us;
 Thou didst free salvation bring.
 Hail, Thou universal Savior,
 bearer of our sin and shame!
 By Thy merit we find favor;
 life is given through Thy name.

Paschal Lamb, by God appointed,
 all our sins on Thee were laid;
 by almighty Love anointed,
 Thou hast full atonement made:
 all Thy people are forgiven
 through the virtue of Thy blood;
 opened is the gate of heaven;
 peace is made 'twix man and God.

Jesus, hail, enthroned in glory,
 there forever to abide!
 All the heav'nly host adore Thee,
 seated at Thy Father's side.
 There for sinners Thou art pleading;
 there Thou dost our place prepare;
 ever for us interceding,
 till in glory we appear.

Worship, honor, pow'r, and blessing
 Thou art worthy to receive;
 highest praises, without ceasing,
 meet it is for us to give.
 Help, ye bright angelic spirits,
 bring your sweetest, noblest lays;
 help to sing our Savior's merits;
 help to chant Immanuel's praise!



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ΤΩ ΚΡΟΝΟΥ ΚΑΙΡΩ

In the Nick of Time

The Christian and Fantastic Literature, Part 7: Good and Bad Fantasy

Kevin T. Bauder

We have seen that fantasy can be a powerful tool for communication. It allows us to suggest ideas imaginatively that might be resisted if they were stated explicitly. It allows us to engage sensibilities that might remain unaffected by more prosaic discourse. It enters consciousness beneath the level of mere reason, grips us, and directs us before we have fully realized what we are doing. Fantastic literature is indeed a powerful medium.

Because it is so powerful, writers of fantasy have a special obligation to use it rightly. It is possible to use fantasy in right ways, but it is also possible to use it in wrong ways. People who write fantastic literature—and people who read it—ought to be able to tell the difference.

The author who writes a fantasy is responsible to create an imagined world of his or her own (such an invented world is sometimes called a *legendarium*). As the creator, the author enjoys a great deal of liberty. She or he can structure a legendarium in which the sun is green, the sky is pink, gravity repels instead of attracting, or people have tails and can read minds. The writer can populate this world with fantastic beings such as unicorns, dragons, talking horses, disembodied intelligences, or bizarre beasts with seven heads and ten horns. When it comes to the material reality of the invented world, the writer can create almost anything.

To some extent, however, the creator must justify what she or he has created. Unless the imagined world is intended as a mere spoof, some rationale must exist for the pink sky or the repulsive nature of gravity. This rationale may consist of the merest pretext offered as a sop to the intellect. It may even be left unexpressed. Unless the writer has some rationale, however, the pretense of reality will become difficult to maintain. The story will lapse into inconsistency.

Inconsistency is the bane of all fantastic writing. The author can regulate an invented world with many kinds of imaginative laws, but if those laws are not consistently maintained, the whole creation edges toward incoherence and smacks of fraud. To uphold the laws of the invented world, the writer must be able to explain (at least to her or his own satisfaction) why these

laws exist. Green suns and pink skies cannot be arbitrary. To the extent that they are, the invented world becomes implausible and loses its grip on the reader.

In other words, a good fantasy (*good* in the sense of being well executed and useful) must always operate according to the same inward laws. These laws may (and often will) differ from the laws of metaphysical reality, but within the *legendarium* they must operate as uniformly as our law of gravity. A good fantasy writer has great liberty to create the laws of the imagined world, but no liberty at all to violate those laws once made (unless, of course, some higher law comes into play within that world).

One kind of law exists, however, that no fantasy can rightly alter. That is *moral* law. A good fantasy must never change what is right and good into what is not. A world of monstrous appearances is not immoral, but a world of monstrous conduct is. The writer of fantasy never has the right to confuse good with evil.

A fantasy in which murder or profanity were virtuous would be an immoral story. A fantasy in which genuine piety was depicted as a vice would also be immoral. Unfortunately, many works of fantasy do exactly these things. They offer the reader some invented world in which morality itself becomes fantastic.

I am not suggesting for a moment that good stories must never depict sinful behavior. Even the Bible shows people's sins, so the depiction of vice cannot by itself be bad. Nevertheless, vice must always be shown to be vice, just as virtue must always be shown as virtue. Furthermore, the real badness of vice and the true goodness of virtue must be recognized within the fantastic world.

Neither am I suggesting that good characters must never be shown doing bad things, nor that evil characters can never do good. Human nature is flawed. Indeed, it is fallen. In their brokenness, even virtuous people can do vicious things. Furthermore, because they still retain at least some of the image of God, even vicious people can do some virtuous things. Allowing readers to see the limitations—including the moral limitations—of protagonists is not a sign of bad fantasy. What *is* a sign of bad fantasy is the failure to recognize that the vice is really a flaw, perhaps even a gravely damaging one.

Given the foregoing, what should we make of fantasies that employ witches, wizards, or magic? Are these things not forbidden in Scripture? If a fantasy allows its protagonists to participate in such things, is it not doing something morally subversive?

Clearly God does forbid His people to practice the “curious arts” (Lev 19:26–31; 20:6, 27; Deu 18:9–12; Jer 27:9–10; Acts 19:19). In the Bible

words like *witch*, *wizard*, *necromancer*, *enchantments* and the like have specific meanings. No believer should ever have anything to do with any of these things.

Does this prohibition stand against the practice of magic in imagined worlds? Answering that question will involve comparing and weighing several considerations. We shall turn to those in the next essay.



This essay is by Kevin T. Bauder, Research Professor of Historical and Systematic Theology at Central Baptist Theological Seminary. Not every one of the professors, students, or alumni of Central Seminary necessarily agrees with every opinion that it expresses.
