
Two hundred and twenty-three pages to present the vast genre-bundle called Fantasy, to differentiate its various sub-genres and celebrate its major achievements, doesn’t seem much. And Richard Mathews has been set, or set himself, a much harder job than that: by page 153 he’s into the end-notes of his study! Then he gives us a 13-page Bibliographic Essay on reference works, historians and theorists of the genre, then an annotated list of anthologies, then a brief comment on texts about each of his five chosen fantasy writers, then a 17-page annotated list of Recommended Titles by other authors, and finally a scrupulous 24-page Index.

This is not very satisfactory, in practice. It means that the book’s treatment of each of its five star authors – Morris, Tolkien, T. H. White, Robert E. Howard and Ursula K. Le Guin – is quite brief. As for the paraphernalia that follows, the Bibliographic comment is courteous and even disarmingly generous towards critics and theorists, some of whom are themselves savagely or stubbornly tendentious. However, the coverage will be of help to few; it runs out in the mid-1990s, with a cosy reference to a *Magill’s Guide* ‘expected this year’, which actually appeared years ago.

Similarly, the anthologies are those of the 1970s and ’80s, and only one Recommended Text is after 1990; information about texts, biographies and studies of the five authors is hopelessly out-of-date. This is especially grievous in the case of William Morris, since the extraordinary activity connected with his centenary year is too recent for Mathews to include. My comment here includes personal umbrage, because I contributed two editions of crucial Morris romances to The William Morris Library around that, quite distant, time!

It’s clear what has happened. Mathews completed this study in about 1995, and it was published by Twayne in New York a couple of years later without being brought up to date. Now, six further years on, Routledge have re-issued it as a paperback, again without any attempt to update it to be of service to contemporary readers. The back cover describes it as ‘this landmark survey’, but the land has undergone major upheavals, and road-building and mapping have been radically reformed – especially where approaches to Morris and Le Guin are concerned – since this landmark was set up.

And a word of caution. Do not expect linguistic perceptiveness of this critic. He is no Morris – or a Tolkien or Le Guin – in his responsiveness to words and naming. Among his egregiously unscholarly guesses one curious theme is detectable: he asserts that Thiodolf, hero of *The House of the Wolfings*, contains the Greek word Theo-, god-, where in fact it is the Anglo-Saxon word Theod-, people-. Later he asserts that the name Ged, protagonist of Le Guin’s *The Earthsea Trilogy*, is ‘approximating God but for a vowel’. Both authors, and the roles of these characters in their stories, make impossible such misleading Christian misreadings. There are other slips: the often repeated ‘Gramayre’ for Gramarye, ‘epigram’ for epigraph, the claim that Wart ‘is short for Art’, and so on. So why devote valuable space in the Reviews pages of this Journal to this book? There are three answers.
First, Richard Mathews is a responsive reader of Morris, who served the Society as resident scholar at Kelmscott House in the 1970s; his approach here is essentially the same as in his Borgo Press pamphlet of 1978, *Worlds Beyond the World: The Fantastic Vision of William Morris*, but better written and far more accessible. Here he again focuses on *The Well at the World’s End*, the longest of the Prose Romances and an admirable example of Morris’ fantasy in everything except pace and economy.

Second, William Morris is in pride of place. Mathews’ argument that ‘English fantasy literature begins with William Morris’ is nourishing, purposeful, and in essence true. ‘In essence’, because it applies only to alternative-world fiction, and not to (for example) *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, *Gulliver’s Travels* or *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* – or even to *At the Back of the North Wind*. The achievement of William Morris is not properly understood even by some of his most enthusiastic admirers, because their reading responses are conditioned by the influence of modernist aesthetics, rather than by inventive story-telling.

Third, although Mathews’ attempt to promote Robert E. Howard to the representative rank that Morris, Tolkien and Le Guin undoubtedly occupy (and White can be argued for) is a lost cause, it shows he is no literary snob, and takes seriously even the blood-boltered heroism of sword-and-sorcery. For him, the writer of romances deserves respect and, as Frank Kermode points out,

> Romance shows the action of magical and moral laws in a version of human life so selective as to obscure, for the special purpose of concentrating attention on these laws, the fact that in reality their force is intermittent and only fitfully glimpsed.²

Thus the achievement of a reader like Mathews is to testify to the health of romance at a spiritual and ecological level (the more than human), at a social and familial level (the wholly and communally human), and at the level of self-discovery and self-achievement (the inwardly human).

NOTES


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