

TALES FROM ETERNITY, by Rosemary Haughton. George Allen and Unwin, 1973. £3.65. 191 pp.

I enjoyed *Tales from Eternity*; indeed, I rather suspect I enjoyed it more than Rosemary Haughton did, because I am profoundly convinced by her thesis, and found it most enlightening and helpful, but am still left with a lurking suspicion that she herself is only half persuaded. Her thesis is that we tend, most of us, to inhabit unnecessarily cramped imaginative space, and that fairy tales (which she regards as different from myths) can lead us back to a symbolic universe whose ethos brings us to the very brink of the gospel. Tolkien is, of course, called in to help demonstrate this. It is a world whose heroes tend to be rather inept younger sons, whose very incompetence and the meagreness of their expectations of life make it possible for them to persevere long after their clever and serious elder brothers have abandoned those mysterious quests people in fairy stories are always going on, generally for no very clear reason. These inept and often pretty unattractive and immoral younger sons succeed largely because of accidents and other people's magic. They are helped by animals and princesses—we must learn, as Rosemary Haughton interprets, to accept and live with the beast in us and the 'eternal feminine', we must not cut ourselves off from our material context (appropriate ecological morals are drawn), nor from our intuitive roots.

Now I agree wholeheartedly that this is just the kind of imaginative space which enables us to appreciate the values of the gospel, and this book could help many people in this way. It is put together with Rosemary Haughton's customary brilliance, and is eminently readable, if rather expensive.

Isn't she right to suggest that this is the kind of world which makes sense of our Lord's approach to life, and not least of his utterly unsuitable appointment of Peter, of all people, as the Rock on which his church is built? Isn't this the literary milieu of the story of the prodigal son?

But this is where I begin to wonder whether Rosemary Haughton is not having us on. After telling us, in a most convincing way, what a

wretch the fairy tale 'younger son' usually is—and this is precisely the kind of view of ourselves inculcated by traditional asceticism, even if sometimes it has been presented in a rather tasteless way: we have no redeeming features, except that we have been redeemed—after all this, she suddenly discloses that, after all, he is really that hero of modern morality, the man motivated, not by self-interest or desire for power, but simply by love. Presumably this is why Rosemary Haughton does not mention the prodigal son, who illustrates her main thesis so well: he certainly was *not* motivated by love.

Then again, I do not for a moment believe that all the fairy tale princes and princesses are royal chiefly because that way their stories acquire political, public significance! And the world of 'faery' is class-conscious through and through, as well as showing no signs of belief in the equality of the sexes (whatever that is supposed to be); nor can it be acquitted of that 'warrior mystique' which Rosemary Haughton finds so 'repulsive' in C. S. Lewis's children's books. It is also radically conservative; I cannot see how Rosemary Haughton manages to find that in it everything is, as she says, always being called in question. (And incidentally what it means to say that the baptized are 'chosen and sealed by the community' I cannot imagine. I always thought it was Christ who did that.) If I may adopt the language of the slogan makers, I rather fear that Rosemary Haughton has been a little bit blinded by certain modern deracinated bourgeois myths, and has not seen the real strength and significance of her own thesis. These things which she finds repulsive surely reflect, in however warped a way, something of the basic structure of human imagination; and fairy tales can help us to integrate and humanize them, even if this still only brings us to the brink of the gospel.

But all in all it is a thoroughly successful book, a fine pointer to a most promising locus for natural theology.

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