

History and the Suspended Middle in *Prince Caspian*

“To judge between one *ethos* and another, it is necessary to have got inside both, and if literary history does not help us to do so it is a great waste of labour.”— *English Literature in the Sixteenth Century, Excluding Drama*

“I do not suppose that the sixteenth century differs in these respects from any other arbitrarily selected stretch of years. It illustrates well enough the usual complex, unpatterned historical process; in which, while men often throw away irreplaceable wealth, they not infrequently escape what seemed inevitable dangers, not knowing that they have done either or how they did it”— *English Literature in the Sixteenth Century, Excluding Drama*

Rival Histories

In the Narnian chronicle *Prince Caspian* there are three rival histories:

- 1) the official version that the Telemarines pass along in education;
- 2) the ancient (apparently oral) accounts passed along in old wives' tales and fairy stories are also the subject of scholarly arcanity;
- 3) and those shared ancestral memories of the Old Narnians.

Even these last ones are divisive, because there is a heritage of opposition as well as loyalty to Aslan, and not everyone believes the accounts with the same conviction. Trumpkin the red dwarf, in particular, is a skeptic about Aslan. He lacks the faith of Trufflehunter the badger.

It is hard not to read into the basic division between Telemarine history and Old Narnian memory the division that Lewis saw between modern historiography and the “taste” of “the discarded image” of the medieval world-picture. In the Epilogue of *The Discarded Image* Lewis makes the suggestion that various eras have particular ideological preferences and that they seek out the evidence that confirms these desires. (Paradigms are epistemically built out of aesthetic and ethical proclivities.) Trumpkin is a skeptical pragmatist, but he is also a loyalist to a larger royalist vision. Nikabrik, on the other hand, is cynical and acerbic. His version of the past is one of oppression and victimization.

The return of the four children to Narnia is also a kind of history, though one built around their specific memories, including bodily memories. They are figures out of history come into the present, yet their own memories do not entirely serve them well. They don't know how to account for geological time and historical change. What they remember is ancient history, and the world has aged and altered.

History and Justice

The debate over histories is not just about getting the past correct; it is also about the matter of justice and right:

- To whom does Narnia belong?
- And which vision will offer justice?
- And not just reparative justice but the future flourishing society?

To be a witness (a martyr) for Aslan is not only to be a loyal testament to the Lion himself but also to his plan for Narnia, past and future.

What do the following suggest about history in the novel?

Caspian 18-28, 130—geological time and change

Caspian 28—the children also have bodily memory that they begin to recover

Caspian 42—desire for another time [like the medieval world-picture in *Discarded Image*]

Caspian 46-48—Telemarine history versus the real history of Narnia

Caspian 52—seeking control of memory. Doctor Cornelius must recount for Caspian the history in secret.

Caspian 55—the obligation not to forget, the desire and hope for recovery of what was lost.

Caspian 72—what kind of history do we believe in? (Trumpkin, Nikabrik, and Trufflehunter)

Caspian 96—“an even older Narnia”

Caspian 120-122—“the thrill of memory,” “Dear old Leopard,” i.e. the desire for the trees to talk again

Caspian 139—memories of the Battle of Baruna; they sound like old campaigners

Caspian 150—Aslan lets Lucy know that providence does not deal in repeatability

Caspian 173—argument over how the campaign so far should be recounted.

Caspian 178—Continued debate about how history should be understood—Nikabrik’s versus Trufflehunter’s version

Caspian 197-198—Hereditary right must be honored, even when inconvenient, such as the bears’ right to be a marshal of the lists.

Caspian 213—dull, school history versus true and delightful history. In the following pages Aslan honors those who have been faithful to his memory (the old wives’ tales).

Caspian 230—The Telemarines don’t remember Telmar.

Caspian 233—the honor and shame of being of the lineage of Lord Adam and Lady Eve