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## Charles Williams, *The Chapel of the Thorn: A Dramatic Poem.* Review by Paul Blair

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Charles Williams, *The Chapel of the Thorn: A Dramatic Poem.*  
Edited by Sørina Higgins with a Preface by Grevel Lindop and an  
essay by David Llewellyn Dodds. Berkeley: Apocryphile Press,  
2014. 147 pp. ISBN 978-1940671536.

Sørina Higgins has done an excellent job bringing Charles Williams' play *The Chapel of the Thorn: A Dramatic Poem* to the light of day. One of his earliest and least known works, originally written in 1912, *The Chapel of the Thorn* has lain unpublished for over a hundred years. Williams was a prolific writer and many of his writings remain unseen except by scholars at work in the bowels of the Bodleian at Oxford and in the Wade Centre at Wheaton. A growing interest in his life and work has precipitated a renewed effort in republishing his well-known works, exploring his vast unpublished materials, as well as an up to date biography incorporating the latest scholarship. Higgins' publication can be seen as a vital contribution to this growing interest in Williams' unpublished work.

The opening epigraph—"Think not that I am come to send peace on earth: I come not to send peace but a sword . . . a man's foes shall be they of his own household" (Matt. 10:34, 36)—sets the stage for the drama surrounding a small chapel containing a relic of the crown of thorns of Christ. The action is set in the early Middle-Ages in an unknown place. The Thorn, like the Fool in the Tarot card, does not move, but affects each of the major protagonists thus revealing their inner motives in relation to the Thorn and each other. Joachim the mystic wants the chapel to be free for all to visit while Innocent the Abbot wants to enclose the chapel within the walls of the monastery to benefit from pilgrimages. Arael, singer and priest of the cult of Druhild, knows that the chapel is built over the tomb of a Druhild and so opposes Christianity vehemently. As the play unfolds the Abbot and Arael try to manipulate

all others to their own desires, including the villagers who seem to accept the chapel so long as they can keep to their old pagan customs.

The preface to the play is adapted from Grevel Lindop's new biography, *Charles Williams: The Third Inking*, and discusses the possible influence of Williams' Uncle Charles Wall's 1910 book, *Relics of the Passion*, citing at least fifty-six places where a relic of Christ's crown of thorns is displayed. Lindop provides a brief synopsis of the major tensions, sources, and themes within the play and refers to the play as a prelude to Williams' more mature Arthurian poetry.

Most helpful in corroborating Higgins' conclusion that *The Chapel of the Thorn* is a valuable example of Williams' early work is her inclusion of David Llewellyn Dodds' article "The Chapel of the Thorn: An Unknown Dramatic Poem by Charles Williams" in the appendix.<sup>1</sup> Dodds' evaluation of the play is significant because it substantiates Higgins' current analysis that the play merits both the interest of the occasional Williams reader as well as the scholar. As an established voice in Williams' scholarship whose critical offerings range from this early play to Williams' later and more mature Arthurian poetry, Dodd's essay connects the publication of *The Chapel of the Thorn* to the larger critical interest in Williams' work. Drawing upon the knowledge of both Grevel Lindop and David Llewellyn Dodds is a serious enrichment of Higgins' own contribution to current Williams' scholarship.

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<sup>1</sup> Originally published in *Inklings-Jahrbuch* 5 (1987), pp. 133-154.

Higgins' critical introduction gives the reader a thorough history of the manuscript and attends more closely to how the play compares to some of Williams' other early works. Higgins effectively demonstrates that in his earliest efforts as in his later works, Williams uses objects and persons—in this story some of the thorns from the crown of thorns of Christ—as his central image around which the drama revolves. While in later works he will utilize a stone, a tarot card, a picture, or the Grail, as well as the persons of Arthur, Galahad, and a priest, here also Williams' can be seen using images or symbols to reveal the nature of his characterizations. Whether the image is a person or an object, Higgins says, "The drama is nearly all spiritual, as characters find their true natures revealed through their responses to the Thorn and the dispute." The paramount image, in this case the crown of thorns, functions as the 'revelatory catalyst' revealing each character's motives (11). Understanding that this is what Williams is doing through the imaging of his objects and characterizations is absolutely critical to deciphering his fiction. C. S. Lewis argued the same in his defence of Williams against critics who charged his work with weak characterizations. As Lewis writes, "One must study Williams' characters closely to understand what he is doing."<sup>2</sup> The image, whether it be an object or a person, will embody and personify a movement towards love and the good, or manipulation of others and evil.

In this play, as in all Williams' fiction, the character's choices are the determining factors in a character's relation to the principal image. Thus the character's decisions reveal the essence of the character's motives and the resulting nature of the character's ontological condition. However, in *The Chapel of the Thorn*, as in Williams' first novel *Shadows of Ecstasy* (although published fifth), Williams leaves the denouement ambiguous. Lindop suggests that the play's thematic tensions are an exposé of Williams's own doubts and growing inner turmoil. Williams' work has always included man's inner struggles and the many ontological questions concerning life. Whether or not this relates to the effects of Williams' own personal problems (of which his regular participation in

the Fellowship of the Rosy Cross, his troubled marriage, and emotionally inappropriate relationships with female colleagues and students are examples) is up for debate. There are plenty of critics who deconstruct Williams' work to their opinion that his work is a direct reflection of the problems in his inner world. However, it is also recognized that his work still speaks universally to man's condition.

Regardless of the failures in his personal life, it is especially important to remember that in the last ten years of his life, 1935-1945, his poetry and prose are clear in regards to his theological commitments. While the same thematic elements that are present in *The Chapel of the Thorn* are present also in his last play *The House of the Octopus*—as is also the case with his first novel *Shadows of Ecstasy* in comparison to his last novel *All Hollows Eve*—the later works are much more developed, mature, and without any equivocation as to his commitment to Christianity or the final outcome of his characters.

With a fresh enthusiasm for understanding Williams' early work, Higgins has made a valuable contribution to a growing interest among scholars and in the public at large. Although most of Williams' plays have been performed at one time or another, they are best appreciated and understood by a slow reading and study of the thematic elements, embodied and imaged, through his characterizations. Higgins' labour on *The Chapel of the Thorn* is an important step forward in the study of Charles Williams' canon and further reveals the timelessness of his work. It is a good place for anyone to begin to see the genius and naissance of his iconography.

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<sup>2</sup> C. S. Lewis, *On Stories and Other Essays on Literature* (London: Harcourt, 1982), 21, 25.