

Illuminations: Pauline Baynes's fancies of another world

by [Carol Zaleski](#) in the [September 23, 2008](#) issue

Pauline Baynes died on August 1 at the age of 85—one more light gone out from the golden age of children’s book illustration, an age that gave us Arthur Rackham’s fairies, Edmund Dulac’s Cinderella, Beatrix Potter’s spirited rabbits and E. H. Shepard’s Toad and Pooh. Not so celebrated in her own right, Baynes deserves to be remembered as the definitive cartographer of Narnia and Middle-earth, and quite possibly the best medievaesque illustrator of her time. Except where her work is supplanted by movie tie-ins and updated looks, it endures as a winsome portal into secondary worlds we long to imagine as real.

If you’ve seen only muddy paperback reproductions of her Narnia line drawings, it’s worth searching out Baynes’s illustrations to Grant Uden’s *Dictionary of Chivalry*, which won her the Kate Greenaway Medal in 1968, and her other Tolkieniana (such as *The Adventures of Tom Bombadil* and *Bilbo’s Last Song*), not to mention the enchantment she has spread over *The Arabian Nights*, Henri Pourrat’s French fairy tales and the Nicene Creed.

What is so striking is her very original way of being unoriginal. We see what looks like an authentic medieval miniature—a mouse in a coracle, a dragon guarding its hoard—drawn with delicate precision and accuracy as to costume and theme. Yet there is no garish dungeons-and-dragons faux medievalism here: the image twinkles back at us with a humorous regard, playfully suspending disbelief.

Baynes spent her early years living in Agra, where she may have caught a glimpse of Indian miniatures. Later in life she made a study of Persian and Anglo-Saxon manuscripts, admiring the delicate lines and gemlike colors with which traditional illuminations serve their sacred or secular themes. Closer to home, she was inspired by her older sister’s drawings and by the example of golden-age illustrators like Rackham and Dulac, and contemporaries Rex Whistler and Shepard.

Her childhood ambition was to be a book illustrator, not in any grandiose sense an artist. It may have helped that she was forced by World War II to interrupt her academic training at the Slade School. Wartime art was a practical occupation; her contribution was to make camouflage models and hydrographic maps, and she met other artists similarly employed. After the war, she supported herself as a teacher and freelance illustrator, also designing tea towels, embroideries and biscuit tins. She lived alone until a German ex-prisoner of war, who had come to the door selling dog food, stayed to bring her the joy of a happy, companionable marriage.

It was J. R. R. Tolkien who launched Pauline Baynes's career. After rejecting Milein Cosman's sophisticated drawings for *Farmer Giles of Ham*, he chanced to see Baynes's marginalia for the Luttrell Psalter and immediately gave her the commission. A gifted visual "subcreator" himself, Tolkien maintained that it was better to have no illustrations at all than to overdetermine the reader's imagination. He found in Baynes an unselfconscious artist with the delicate drollery and craftsmanlike approach he admired, who could provide "bright and clear visions of things that one might really see"; he pronounced her Frodo and Bilbo just right. C. S. Lewis, on the other hand, never fully appreciated the service Baynes rendered to Narnia. Though politely encouraging (for he found her a lovely, timid creature, easily devastated by criticism), he complained to friends of her "total ignorance of animal anatomy." He admired Baynes's mice, but seriously doubted whether she could draw a lion.

I prefer to see in Baynes's imperfect lions a reminiscence of medieval heraldry. A realistic lion, however magnificent, is less capable of suggesting something other than itself. Surely Lewis, master interpreter of the medieval imagination, should have known not to mistake meaningful ambiguity for weak draftsmanship.

As a religious artist, Baynes shines brightest in her illumination of the hymn "All Things Bright and Beautiful," and in *I Believe*, which softens the hieratic language of the 1662 Book of Common Prayer version of the Nicene Creed with images of tender devotion. A sweet manger scene, in which a peacock and cat join the usual farm animals, plays off the sublime archaism of "And was incarnate by the Holy Ghost of the Virgin Mary." Cheerfully grotesque monstrosities illuminate "And he shall come again with glory to judge both the quick and the dead," while "Whose kingdom shall have no end" trails off into a paradise of flower, bird and vine. No didactic Christian artist—her Qur'an illustrations are scheduled to appear next year—Baynes aimed to decorate and to please rather than to catechize. But for modern sensibilities dulled

by technological realism, there is deep instruction in such witty and finely wrought fancies of another world. R.I.P.