

Notes for Podcast: “John Uskglass and the Cumbrian Charcoal Burner” by Susanna Clarke

Susanna Clark is the author of the novel *Jonathan Strange and Mr. Norrell* which is set in the same universe as this story, though later in time. The novel, which has been made into a TV mini-series, is about a rivalry between two magicians, each of whom wants to revive “English magic.” Mr. Norrell is the established scholar and practitioner of magic. Jonathan Strange is the younger, talented, newcomer. The Raven King, the John Uskglass of this story, does not appear in the novel, but he is often discussed and elements of his magic are rediscovered.

Unlike the novel, this story is told in a quasi-fairy tale manner. The narration is omniscient in the fairy tale style.

Our main viewpoint character is the unnamed Charcoal Burner. Charcoal burners create charcoal by heating wood in a kiln to remove all water and some other component. This produces a fuel that can burn at much higher temperatures than wood. This is useful for producing iron and other metals. In the medieval period, charcoal burners were usually poor, solitary people like our viewpoint character.

Our unwitting antagonist is John Uskglass, the Raven King, the greatest magician who ever lived, who rules over the north of England and parts of Faerie. On a hunt, he and his men trample the Charcoal Burner’s hut and store of charcoal. When the Charcoal Burner’s only companion, the pig Blakeman, gets tangled in the hooves of John Uskglass’s horse, the magician king turns the pig into a salmon who jumps into the river and swims away. The poor Charcoal Burner has lost everything. John Uskglass rides away.

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The Charcoal Burner is simple and cheerful unless he is crossed. He goes to various churches and asks for help from clergy and from saints. The story becomes a contest between the Raven King’s magic and the heavenly power of various Christian saints. The saints are more powerful. One of John Uskglass’s transgressions against the Charcoal Burner is to eat his toasted cheese. The Charcoal Burner complains to St. Bridget, who causes all of the animals and objects around John Uskglass to lecture him in Latin about the wickedness of stealing.

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However, the Raven King think she is dealing with a more powerful magician than himself, who for some reason takes the shape of a charcoal burner and lives in a hut. Eventually, he is forced to apologize and give the Charcoal Burner a new pig, though Blakeman has already been returned to him by Saint Kentigern. The most delightful improvement the Charcoal Burner can imagine in his life is having two pigs. So the story has a happy ending. Two pigs!

On one level, this is a story about a conflict between two stubborn people, one at the very peak of the hierarchy and power, the other at the very bottom. In this story, the poor man wins, with the help of the church and the saints.

On another, it is a conflict between pagan magic and divine power. In the story, as in history, Christianity wins.

One question we might ask that gets to the theme of the story is, “What are the qualities that cause the Charcoal Burner to ultimately defeat the Raven King? What does this say about the reality of having power?”

The Charcoal Burner presents his grievances to various clergy and saints. He states his grievances and demands particular remedies. However, the saints don't give him exactly what he wants. They help him, but in a different manner than he demands. Why do they not give him exactly what he wants? What kind of logic is behind the things that they end up doing?

Finally, in this strange time when we are all supposed to be under lockdown because of the virus, what does the character of the Charcoal Burner have to tell us?