

Phi Kappa Phi Annual Student Paper Competition

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Femininity in Narnia

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## Femininity in Narnia

Many critics have accused Lewis of being sexist in his theological writings and works of fiction. Some have shown particular concern for the apparent discrimination against females in *The Chronicles of Narnia*, Lewis's works of fiction for children, and for the negative influence they can have on modern young readers. While these claims have some validity, especially with the depiction of ultimate evil as feminine as found in the characters of the White and Green Witches, it is important to contrast these representations with those of other strong female characters in *The Chronicles* such as Polly, Susan, Lucy, Aravis, and Jill. A brief analysis of the witches and the girls in Narnia will help determine whether or not Lewis discriminated against women in these works.

While many critics see the witches as evidence of Lewis's belief that the feminine is somehow more evil than the masculine, some writers have shown that in representing evil through the character of a witch, Lewis is only conforming to conventional structures of fairytales. In these types of tales, most of the forces of evil are witches, either hideous hags or beautiful queens, who possess extremely magical powers. This theory is not without merit, for Lewis himself indicates in his essay "Sometimes Fairy Stories May Say What's Best to Be Said" that *The Chronicles of Narnia* are in fact fairy stories (Lewis, "Stories" 46-47). Since *The Chronicles* are fairytales, one almost expects them to have witches.

Lewis also uses aspects of Greek and Hebraic Mythology in addition to using aspects of fairytales in his works of fiction. As Jean E. Graham notes in her article, "Women, Sex, and Power: Circe and Lilith in Narnia," the White Witch and the Emerald Witch originate from the Greek myth of Circe, the nymph who seduced Odysseus and kept him from returning home, and the Jewish myth of Lilith, Adam's first wife who rebelled against him and became a demon. As

a professor of Medieval and Renaissance Literature at Cambridge, Lewis was very familiar with ancient mythology and its influence on later texts. “The White Witch and her successor, the Emerald Witch,” Graham says, “possess dangerous qualities...that can derive only from Circe and Lilith in their mythological, Renaissance, and Victorian manifestations” (Graham 32). Consequently, Lewis’s use of the witches in Narnia is also to integrate the motifs of classic mythology.

In addition to his use of classical mythology, Lewis uses extensive symbolism and employs aspects such as gender and color to get his ideas across. As Graham explains, “Good and evil become polarized along gender lines: the deity remains masculine, while the two witches replace male characters in assuming responsibility for...the crucifixion of mankind’s Savior” (Graham 32). By using opposite genders to symbolize good and evil, we are able to see a greater contrast between the lion Aslan, who represents Christ and whose golden color signifies goodness and majesty, and the two witches, who represent Satan. It is interesting to note that the witches’ colors have almost as much symbolism as Aslan’s, and each employs her color to symbolize something she is not. For example, the color white is usually a symbol for purity, and is frequently associated with femininity. As the White Witch is neither pure, nor perhaps truly feminine, she may be using the color white to con the inhabitants of Narnia into believing that she is. Likewise, the Emerald Witch employs the color green, which usually represents life or fertility and is also associated with femininity, to deceive. Through her color and beauty, she is able to trick Prince Rilian into thinking that she is the perfect bride for the future King of Narnia, while in reality she is the evil serpent who killed his mother.

From these examples, we can see that both witches are out to deceive and consequently employ good things, such as positive feminine attributes, for their evil purposes. Each, then, is a

false representation of goodness. Thus, the witches are not evil because of their feminine qualities, but rather, because of their twisted or false feminine qualities. For Lewis, there is no such thing as natural or original evil. As his character Screwtape bemoans to his nephew Wormwood in *The Screwtape Letters*, “Everything has to be *twisted* before it's any use to us. We fight under cruel disadvantages. Nothing is naturally on our side” (Lewis, *Screwtape* 118). Like Screwtape and his fellow devils, the witches have to twist or falsify good things before they can be used. Therefore, the witches are evil because they are falsely feminine instead of truly feminine.

Although the Chronicles of Narnia present at least over five strong female characters that have very active and positive roles, critics have downplayed this fact by arguing that Lucy and Jill, the strongest female protagonists, never reach mature womanhood and consequently never obtain true feminine characteristics. As Candice Frederick and Sam McBride state in their book *Women Among the Inklings*, “Whereas Tolkien decreases sexuality in *The Lord of the Rings* by virtually eliminating women, Lewis more pragmatically eliminates it by making his characters children” (Frederick and McBride 146). Another argument against the strength of the female characters is their rejection of feminine qualities and their attempt to imitate the masculine attributes of the male characters. Karin Fry in her article “Gender in Narnia” explains, “Because the most admired girls are those who challenge the typical gender roles associated with their sex, it would be a mistake to say the Narnia stories are entirely sexist. . . . However, the problem is that many of the positive qualities of the female characters seem to be those by which they can rise above their femininity” (Fry 157). In addressing these two concerns, it may be helpful to examine the individual girls that appear throughout the chronicles.

Lucy Pevensie and Jill Pole are perhaps the two most well developed female characters in the Narnian Chronicles, for they appear the most throughout the series. Lucy is a prominent character (if not *the* prominent character) in three of the seven books, *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, *Prince Caspian*, and *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*, while Jill is the heroine of the last two books, *The Silver Chair* and *The Last Battle*. Indeed, Lucy may very well be Lewis's favorite character, for she is named after his goddaughter, Lucy Barfield, and it is to her that *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* is dedicated. Lucy is also the character who is closest to Aslan, and in the words of Karla Faust Jones, "she is the medium through which Aslan is best known" (Jones 15). Jill is also close to Aslan, for she is the only female character besides Lucy who has a one-on-one encounter with him in his own country. In addition, she is the only female character who is appointed as the leader of a quest, namely the quest to find Prince Rilian in *The Silver Chair*, which is told almost entirely from Jill's point of view. This is significant, because in the rest of the books, the leadership is always given to the male characters, such as Peter or Prince Caspian.

While it is true that Lucy and Jill do not grow up into mature adulthood and are admittedly the most tomboyish of all the female characters in the series, it is important to realize that their youth and courage are what make them such strong characters. In response to Father Christmas's statement that she is not to fight in the battle, Lucy asks, "Why, sir? I think—I don't know—but I think I could be brave enough" (Lewis, *Narnia* 160). Later, in *The Horse and His Boy* the reader discovers that as Queen, Lucy does fight in the wars and that she is "as good as a man" (Lewis, *Narnia* 290). Jill too is also very brave and fights alongside Eustace and King Tirian in *The Last Battle* declaring, "I'd rather be killed fighting for Narnia than grow old and stupid at home" (Lewis, *Narnia* 720).

Yet, although both girls exhibit masculine characteristics and pursuits, they also display many feminine attributes and interests. For example, both express an interest in clothes. Lucy, when she first meets Aravis in *The Horse and His Boy* talks about “getting clothes for her, and all the sort of things girls talk about on such an occasion” (Lewis, *Narnia* 305). Jill also shows an interest in womanly attire when she smuggles her Narnian clothes home and later wears them at “a fancy-dress ball” during the holidays (Lewis, *Narnia* 663). In addition, Lucy is probably the most tender and loving of all the characters. She readily forgives Edmund for his treachery, weeps for Aslan’s death, takes care of Eustace when he is sick and unkind, and shows immense compassion and patience for the stubborn dwarves at the end of *The Last Battle*. She also shows a motherly affection for the brave mouse Reepicheep, and always has to resist the temptation to cuddle him in her arms (Lewis, *Narnia* 539). Likewise, Jill displays great tenderness towards Puzzle the Donkey, and Jewel the Unicorn throughout *The Last Battle*. Both girls are also more prone to tears than some of the other female characters, though this may stem from the fact that they are the youngest of all the other characters. Consequently, even though Lucy and Jill do not grow up physically and seem to embrace masculine pursuits, they grow emotionally and spiritually and display feminine characteristics.

Other female characters in *The Chronicles of Narnia* are more complex than Lucy or Jill. Lucy’s sister, Susan Pevensie for example, is the most problematic female character in the chronicles. Although she plays prominent roles in both *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* and *Prince Caspian*, she is the only heroine who is left behind in the Shadowlands and not allowed to enjoy eternal salvation in the “real” Narnia with the rest of her family and friends. Many see this as clear evidence that Lewis is discriminating against women, for Susan is excluded on the grounds that “she is no longer a friend of Narnia,” because she is only interested

in superficial things like nylons, lipstick, and invitations (Lewis, *Narnia* 741). In other words, Susan is apparently excluded because she, like Aravis' shallow friend Lasaraleen in *The Horse and His Boy*, is only interested in clothes, gossip, and parties, and is consequently too feminine. Karin Fry describes her as the most "girly" of the female characters for she is the most beautiful, motherly, and tender (Fry 158). Also, as Queen of Narnia, Susan becomes known throughout the land as "the Gentle," which starkly contrasts with Lucy's name, "the Valiant" (Lewis, *Narnia* 194-195).

Unlike Lucy and Jill, Susan does grow up into adulthood, thereby embodying mature womanly characteristics, and does not participate in any of the Narnia battles, thus showing a definite fear and dislike for what are traditionally manly pursuits. It is very easy to agree with Fry that Susan is the most "girly," and even more tempting to conclude that her interest in girlish things is what prevents her from living in the real Narnia with all of Lewis's other protagonists. However, this may not necessarily be the case. According to Karla Faust Jones, "The reference to Susan's preoccupation with lipstick and nylons is not an attempt to identify her with female frivolity," but rather, "Lewis is using Susan to demonstrate the 'hesitant convert,' lured away from Christianity by worldly conventions of the time. Her defection is a question of loyalty, irrespective of age or sex" (Jones 16-17). If one remembers that there are many Christian parallels in *The Chronicles of Narnia*, this makes absolute sense. Frederick and McBride also point out, "Of course, the idea that women are more likely than men to experience eternal damnation has no precedent in the Bible...therefore, if Lewis is not attempting to suggest this about women, he must simply see losing Susan as the most expedient option for achieving the perfect number of seven and for illustrating the Christian truth that not every follower of Jesus will stay a follower" (Frederick and McBride 149). In other words, even though Susan neither

becomes a tomboy nor remains a child, Lewis does not exclude her from Narnia on these grounds. Rather, she is excluded because it is the simplest and most powerful way to demonstrate that not all Christian converts obtain salvation.

There are two other strong female characters who, like Susan, reach mature adulthood, but who, unlike Susan, are allowed to bid farewell to the Shadowlands (Lewis, *Narnia* 761). Polly Plummer and Aravis of Calormen are perhaps the most interesting female characters. Each is featured in only one book, Polly in *The Magician's Nephew*, and Aravis in *The Horse and His Boy*, both of which were written after *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, *Prince Caspian*, and *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*, though chronologically, they take place prior to and in between these three books. What makes these two books especially distinct, however, is that much of the plot evolves around the relationship between the two central characters, Digory and Polly in *The Magician's Nephew*, and Shasta and Aravis in *The Horse and His Boy*. For the first time in the Narnian Chronicles, the hero and heroine are equally matched. Differences in age, family relations, or sibling rivalry do not complicate the relationship between the protagonists in *The Magician's Nephew* and *The Horse and His Boy* as they do with the Pevensie children in *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*. Also, because most of the action occurs outside of Narnia, the protagonists Digory and Polly and Shasta and Aravis experience Narnia for the first time together. The heroes and heroines are consequently placed on equal grounds, unlike in *The Silver Chair*, where Eustace has the advantage over Jill because he has experienced Narnia first.

Polly and Aravis are also unique in that they are the only two females who challenge conventional gender roles without rejecting their femininity. For example, Polly takes the leadership role on many occasions. First, when she boldly enters Uncle Andrew's attic before Digory, second, when she insists that they test the rings before using them to explore other

worlds, and finally, when she strongly disagrees with Digory about whether or not to ring the bell in the world of Charn. In this argument, Digory and Polly exchange many gender-based insults until Digory finally resorts to physically restraining Polly in order to ring the bell. In doing so, he awakes Queen Jadis and consequently introduces evil into Narnia. Karla Faust Jones comments on this situation in her article “Girls in Narnia: Hindered or Human?” and states, “The link between mindless stereotyping and irrational behavior seems evident. When the children refuse to deal rationally with one another as equals, the penalties are extreme” (Jones 18). On the other hand, there are many incidents when Polly refuses to take on the leadership role and defers many of the decisions to Digory. She even asks Aslan permission to accompany Digory on his task to fetch the silver apple, showing her willingness to share the consequences of Digory’s poor decision. She also does not interfere with Digory’s decision to resist the Witch’s temptation of using the apple to cure his mother, recognizing that it is Digory’s own battle to fight.

Like Polly, Aravis is also able to go against many gender conventions while still retaining her femininity. Jones rightly calls her the most “unconventional” of Lewis’s heroines for she runs away from home in order to escape an arranged marriage, and when she first meets Shasta, she is disguised as a man (Jones 17). At first, Shasta thinks she is a great Calormene lord; however, when he finds out she is “only a girl,” he immediately loses all respect for her (Lewis, *Narnia* 218). On the other hand, Aravis looks down on Shasta because he is of low class. Jones later explains, “Lewis uses the relationship between Aravis and Shasta to demonstrate the negative effects of cultural stereotyping” (Jones 17). In other words, Aravis and Shasta possess the prejudiced opinions of their cultures and therefore make incorrect assumptions regarding the opposite gender. Jones continues, “As they leave Calormen, where

women are forced to marry against their will and are compensated with luxuries and leisure, and approach Narnia, where false restrictions based on sex are scorned and women are free to behave as they please...the relationship between Shasta and Aravis evolves into one of mutual respect” (Jones 17). While Shasta learns to respect Aravis’ femininity, Aravis also has to learn to respect Shasta’s masculinity, even if Aslan has to stage an attack on Aravis in order to give Shasta the opportunity of rescuing her and thereby gain her esteem. Naturally, by the end of the book Aravis and Shasta learn to respect and even love one another.

Perhaps the most interesting aspect of Polly and Aravis is that they are the only two female characters that reach mature adulthood and therefore obtain true feminine qualities, and yet are still saved in the real Narnia at the end of *The Chronicles*. Clearly, this is evidence that Lewis is not at all sexist in either the exclusion of the girly Susan or the acceptance of the tomboyish Lucy or Jill. Polly and Aravis do not fit into either of these categories. Nor does Lewis seem to believe that all women have to marry and bear children in order to gain eternal salvation, as is implied in some of his other writings, for Polly remains unmarried.

In conclusion, I think it is both unfair and inaccurate to say that Lewis was sexist in *The Chronicles of Narnia*, especially in comparison to many other popular works of fantasy written for children that preceded Lewis, such as *Alice in Wonderland*, *Peter Pan*, and *The Wizard of Oz*. Perhaps the reason why Lewis is so heavily criticized is related to the fact that there are so many Christian parallels in the Narnian Chronicles. Consequently, it is possible to believe that what *The Chronicles* say about gender is what Christianity says about gender, which may not necessarily be true. However, it is true that *The Chronicles of Narnia* are one of the most popular and influential of children and Christian literature, and therefore it matters what they say because they have the potential to affect how children and Christians think about gender roles.

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