

MALE CHAUVINIST LIONS



BY

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SEX DISCRIMINATION IN TOLKIEN & C. S. LEWIS 2

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n discussing C. S. Lewis' books, I shall limit myself to the "Narnia Chronicles" only. I know that his attitude to women is revealed in many of his books, articles and letters, most noticeably in the novels "That Hideous Strength" and "Till We Have Faces", and the short story "The Shoddy Lands", together with the Christian writings "The Four Loves" and "A Grief Observed", to name but a few. However, this article

is about what children read - children's books are the main target of the anti-discrimination lobby - and the Narnian fantasies are the best parallel to the Tolkien epic already discussed. Before I go over to Narnia, I must indulge myself with a quotation from the Letters,

(18th April, 1940) TO A LADY: "... if marriage is a permanent relation ... there must be a head ... do you really want the Head to be a woman? ... do you really want a Matriarchal world? ... Do you really like women in authority? ... My own feeling is that the Headship of the house is necessary to protect the outside world against the family ... What do nine women out of ten care about justice to the outer world when the health, or career, or happiness of their own children is at stake?"

And on 'sober and goldy matrons': "It means Married women (matrons) who are religious (godly) and have something better and happier to think about than jazz and lipstick (sober)". (If he had written that today I'm sure 'jazz' would have been replaced with 'pop music' to capture the meaning he intended.)

I couldn't resist that! After giving that ammunition to the enemy, I'll turn to Narnia, and a few more quotations about the nature and spirit of women:

"Polly had used the bit of the tunnel just beside the cistern as a smuggler's cave ... here she kept a cashbox containing various treasures, and a story she was writing, and usually a few apples." (Magician's Nephew, pp 11-12)

Father Christmas: "battles are ugly when women fight"
(The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe, p 103)

Lasaraleen: "There's no point in having a new dress on if one's

to go about shut up like this ... some of the Narnian men are lovely."
(The Horse and his Boy, p 90)

"She remembered now that Lasaraleen had always been like that, interested in clothes, and parties, and gossip. Aravis had always been more interested in bows and arrows, and horses, and dogs, and swimming."

(The Horse and his Boy, p 91)

But Aravis is pleased to relax later on: "They ... soon went away together to talk about Aravis' bedroom, and Aravis's boudoir, and about getting clothes for her, and all the sort of things girls do talk about on such an occasion."

(The Horse and his Boy, p 189)

We must, of course, have part of that concluding paragraph: "Aravis also had many quarrels ... (and fights) with Cor, but they always made it up again; so that years later, when they were grown up, they were so used to quarrelling and making it up again that they got married so as to go on doing it more conveniently."

(The Horse and his Boy, p 199)

"In ruling that land, I shall do all by the counsel of my lady, who will then be my queen too. Her word shall be my law ... ' "

'Where I come from ... they don't think much of men who are bossed about by their wives'

'Thou shalt think otherwise when thou hast a man of thine own, I warrant you.' "

(The Silver Chair, p 138)

" 'I am glad ... that the foul witch took to her serpent form at the last. It would not have suited well either with my heart or with my honour to have slain a woman. But look to the lady.'

'I'm all right, thanks', said she.

'Damsel', said the prince, bowing to her, 'you are of a high courage, and therefore, I doubt not, you come of a noble blood in your own world ...'

(The Silver Chair, p 167)

"She was the best pathfinder of the three ... he was astonished to find how silently and almost invisibly she glided on before them."

(The Last Battle, p 64)

" 'Oh Susan! ... she's interested in nothing now-a-days except nylons and lipstick and invitations. She was always a jolly sight too keen on being grown-up.'

'Grown-up, indeed ... Her whole idea is to race on to the silliest time of one's life as quick as she can and then stop there as long as she can.'

I have given you there a selection of quotations which indicate Lewis' attitude to girls in the Narnia books. I have tried to find those which might be considered to have overtones of chauvinism, and to balance them with others which go the other way. Obviously, it would be easy for Women's Libbers to pick such quotations out and make us hang our heads - in shame - but I do not hide them away, either; I intend to prove that C. S. Lewis had more in common with

them than they imagine.

When I dealt with Tolkien, I needed only to consider fantasy creatures, and adults at that, so that two lines of argument were considered: Historical Accuracy, and writers' preference. By contrast, Lewis' main characters are children, and females are far more prominent in the Narnia books, so that we have much more evidence for his attitudes. It looks as if the historical setting has established women's rôle in Narnia - but it is the Earth children, their attitude to one another and what their author lets them achieve, which is most relevant, and instructive. Girls have an equal, and often SUPERIOR, share, in the great deeds. The story is more often told from the girl's point of view, than the boy's - think of Polly, Jill and especially Lucy, heroine of three books. Where Lewis narrates an episode with the boy at the centre, that boy is usually due for a come-uppance - Digory (striking the bell), Eustace, and of course Edmund. Where the boy is definitely the hero, HE IS NARNIAN: Shasta/Cor, Caspian and Tirian. When the girl is the main character she is often, but not always, blameless of really wicked deeds. An exception is Jill on the cliff at Aslan's country, but she never loses our sympathy. The girl is always capable of understanding Aslan's nature far better than the boy - you can't imagine the boys watching by Aslan's dead body in "The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe", and Aslan chooses Lucy to experience his return in "Prince Caspian" first of all. After Eustace has reformed in "The Voyage of the Dawn Treader", Lucy becomes the heroine for the rest of the book and performs the feat of the Magician's Book.

It's obvious from what I have just said that Lewis was hardly antipathetic to girls. Whence then this rumour of his misogyny? He seems to prefer girls to boys as hero-figures, and I'll suggest a reason now. Lewis was a bookish lad, and hated the bullying and gang-life of a boy's school. He would have more in common with a lonely girl than with the majority of boys that he met. Such a girl, like Polly, who is writing her own story, could have been an ideal companion, were it not for the teenage preoccupations that seize upon the female sex, ever earlier and earlier. For girls, whether by nature or social conditioning, make better readers than most boys, and carry on far longer before they break the habit. I won't go into details of his own life, beyond saying that he chose to live in the same household as a couple of petty-minded females, and he found married happiness very late in life. He did not hate females as such, but he detested the whole round of fashion that drives women to forsake independent thought and vigorous outdoor activities in favour of 'dolling' themselves up to impress their men-folk. As also do our contemporary women's libbers, who have forsaken such trappings as lipstick and other make-up, just as Lewis advocates in the letter I first quoted!

The women's movement are fond of decrying women who enjoy being 'sex objects', and although Lewis would deplore their outspokenness, he offers an excellent sketch of an empty-headed 'sex object' in Lasaraleen, who would persuade Aravis to marry Ahsoshta for his wealth. Susan, too, comes in for attack, and although I see that she wouldn't fit in, I feel it's cruel for her to lose her whole family in the railway accident. Will she get to Heaven at the end of her life? R.L. Green thought she wouldn't be capable of experiencing it.

A femininity consisting of empty-headedness does not appeal to Lewis, and he prefers women who develop their individual characteristics without worrying about their effect on men. So do modern-day liberated women, whom I have often complain that men restricted women's development. However, Lewis would not agree with the marital disorder resulting from female liberation: he would say that a woman should choose one way or another, but being married should submit to her husband!

Returning to Narnia, we have seen that the children take equal shares in the story, they even share in battle. Lewis's ideas changed about this: at first Father Christmas forbade Lucy and Susan to fight, but then Susan develops her archery anyway and saves Trumpkin from drowning (and beats him in a contest). Come "The Horse and his Boy", Lucy rides to battle with the archers (she won't actually take part in hand-to-hand fighting). Jill keeps away while the others finish off the witch-snake in "The Silver Chair", but in "The Last Battle" she shoots to kill. Jill is a good scout as well, and so far from being empty-headed. she has to pretend to be so, so as to put the giants off the scent at Harfang.

Whereas the English girls get fair shares when it comes to adventures, Narnian females are well in the background, and the usual historical conventions apply, modified by the conventions of fantasy, of course, just as in Tolkien. The same fantasy archetypes crop up: the Princess, the Enchantress, and the Amazon.

The Amazon first: Aravis dons her brothers clothes to escape an unpleasant marriage and run away to Narnia. Note that the plot of "The Horse and his Boy" is doubled, as Susan must also run away from an unwelcome husband. Aravis takes an equal part in the adventure, and is rewarded with a new home, and later marriage to the King of Archenland, and it's clear that she retains all her independence of spirit and never becomes subservient to Cor. (see earlier quotations). Aravis and Eowyn are parallel examples of the traditional fantasy amazon.

Next the Princess: Caspian and the other voyagers are immediately struck by the beauty of Ramandu's daughter: "When they looked at her they thought they never before had known what beauty meant" ("The Voyage of the Dawn Treader"). Caspian loses no time in telling her that he would like to kiss her in order to break the enchantment. We approve Caspian's choice of an unglamourised and independent lady, and forgive him his insult of the Duke of Galma's daughter, who "squints and has freckles" - is that really her fault? With this princess, as with Aravis, Lewis brings in the heredity factor - both become Queen and also mother of a King. As in Tolkien's Middle-earth, it is important that Kings chose fitting mates to provide the best possible parentage for the future monarch.

In the Narnia Chronicles, all marriages take place "off-stage", and only Narnian characters marry. The wedding of Caspian and the Star-Daughter, Cor and Aravis, are brief mentions in the final paragraph. By "The Silver Chair", Rilian's mother has died, Frank and Helen are already married. As Professor Kirke is single in "The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe", he can't very well marry Polly, and they are the only Earth couple who are grown-up in real life. I feel this is a pity, but Lewis may have thought that the subject was taboo in a children's book. Maybe his own celibacy influenced his writing, and his mother's early death would have deprived him of the experience of domestic happiness when young, on which to model later life.

David Holbrook connected this absence of a mother with the extreme evil displayed by the leading female characters. In Lewis, the two Enchantresses are both wicked, and beautiful, using their attractiveness for temptation and seduction; but in Tolkien, as we have seen, the Enchantresses Galadriel and Goldberry are good beings. Note that in Lewis the most evil characters are always female, whereas in Tolkien they are always men. Now in Narnia (and on Earth) the women are the worst. There are bad men - but they are generally bunglers and blunderers, and don't use wicked magic on the whole.

The reason for this opposing treatment by Tolkien and Lewis are many and complex, and I cannot properly analyse them here, only mentioning a few possible explanations: Tolkien's father died when he was very young - so did Lewis's mother; Tolkien enjoyed a happy romantic marriage - Lewis was celibate when the books were

written, but lived with a ménage of unsympathetic females; Tolkien's literary influence would seem to be more Celtic than Lewis's, and to draw from the lovely Irish Goddesses; whereas Lewis's witches resemble the fairy Queens of Arthurian romance, especially Morgan-Le-Fay, who was just as evil. Uncle Andrew's godmother was a Mrs. Lefay! Finally Tolkien's religion claims a central position for a female figure; whereas Lewis's Protestantism is centred on the Trinity and leaves the Virgin Mary on the side-lines. But don't fall into the trap of thinking that Lewis's witches show a hatred of women - though they are female, they are not human, but giantish! I won't go into the apocraphal legend of the Lady Lilith now, but remember that Mrs. Beaver said that Jadis was descended from her, not from Eve.

There is no space here for a long analysis of the witches' crimes, which anyway you are all familiar with, but I shall mention some of the worst: all of them blaspheme against the true God. Jadis eats the apple, and tries to make Digory take one too; she kills Aslan; the Snake-Witch tries to make the others believe that there is no Narnia, and there are many other evil deeds. Although technically the witches are not human, they possess their characteristics, of many wicked women, and although we may concede that Lewis portrays them as dominating and superior, he also shows them evil and hated. If a Women's Libber is determined to take against Lewis for his treatment of the witches, it would be hard to argue the opposite. All one can say is that he agrees with the fantasy archetype, and that in the girl characters provide plenty of balance.

I hope that from this article you, the reader, may have gathered useful arguments to employ when you find Lewis and Tolkien insulted as male chauvinists. They both hated the way women are degraded by today's fashion scene, just as the Women's movement does. However, their view of marriage is definitely traditional. A woman may chose to develop her personality outside marriage, but once committed, she must be mother and home-maker, and let her husband be the head. It is a tragedy that today's society offers less chance for a woman to combine 'work' with this rôle than in the past; a housewife in the feudal worlds we have examined would have had many responsible tasks beside child-minding, and of course, schools not being universal, even that chore would have demanded the systematic approach. Today women are supposed to be liberated, but it is a sad case when women fear and hate the arrival of a child.

So to conclude: Lewis and Tolkien are NOT sexist in the superficial sense, both their mediaeval fantasy worlds present a traditional attitude to women, who are 'equal but different' and are treated chivalrously. The individual woman may fulfill her destiny and perform great deeds, but to create children is still the most magical act of all.

