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The Style and Diction of Till We Have Faces: Medieval and Renaissance Undertones

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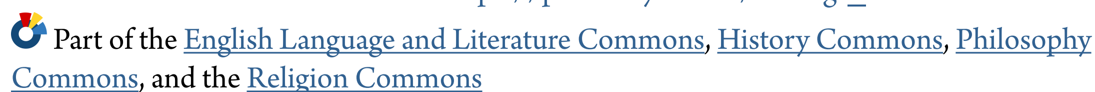
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The Style and Diction of *Till We Have Faces*: Medieval and Renaissance Undertones

Larry E. Fink

This exploration began with a single word noticed in a happy coincidence. I was reading *Till We Have Faces* with my C.S. Lewis class and teaching an independent study on the Medieval period when I ran across the word "swap" in the novel and in Chaucer's *Second Nun's Tale*. The sense of the word in each work is identical; it is a sword stroke used to decapitate or dismember. This got me to wondering if Lewis used other Middle English words with their Middle English senses, and eventually, whether the novel might have other medieval qualities. The process of rereading the novel with close attention to its diction, and alertness for medieval elements, has provided new insights for me as a student and teacher of Lewis. When looking closely for one thing, we notice other items—items we are not looking for. In addition to some of the same diction, I found similarities in the creation, purpose, setting, tone and narrative style of *Till We Have Faces* and certain Medieval and Renaissance works.

Till We Have Faces has a Chaucerian genesis, according to Lewis's own description of Chaucer's work; as Chaucer used Boccacio, Lewis used the myth of Cupid and Psyche. Lewis wrote that Chaucer's "procedure is, if not universal, at any rate normal, medieval procedure. The characteristic activity of the medieval—perhaps especially the Middle English—author is precisely 'touching up' something that was already there" (Genesis 37). Lewis "touches up" the myth by adding the crucial plot element—". . . making Psyche's palace invisible to normal, mortal eyes . . ." (Lewis, "Note" Till 313). On the other hand, he observes that medieval writers

> are so rebelliously and insistently original that they can hardly reproduce a page of an older work without transforming it by their own intensely visual and emotional imagination, turning the abstract into the concrete, quickening the static into turbulent movement, flooding whatever was colourless with scarlet and gold. (Genesis 37-8)

The detailed, nearly-naturalistic description in *Till We Have Faces* is interesting in light of this comment. For instance, Lewis's blunt treatment of sexual matters finds precedence in Chaucer. Of Chaucer Lewis writes, "It is a lesson worth learning, how Chaucer can so triumphantly celebrate the flesh without becoming delirious like Rossetti or pornographic like Ovid. The secret lies, I think, in his *concreteness*." [Lewis's emphasis] (Allegory 196). While Lewis does not exactly celebrate the flesh in this novel, his vivid details and stark diction in *Till We Have Faces* show that he learned well the lesson of concreteness.

Till We Have Faces could also be called Chaucerian in its theme and purpose. According to Lewis, Chaucer's genius is shown in his "psychology of love" (Allegory 168). Chaucer—in *Troilus*—". . . recalls the 'younge freshe folkes' of his audience from human to Divine love: recalls them 'home,' as he significantly says" (Allegory 179). Few writers have done more than Lewis to teach the fine distinctions between the types of love and the differences between genuine and counterfeit loves, *Till We Have Faces* being of primary importance in this teaching.

Lewis's setting—the kingdom of Glome—is a barbarian country located somewhere to the north of Greece. Greek culture and values are represented by Lysias, "The Fox," and his philosophy, stoicism. However, the atmosphere of the kingdom has a medieval feel, complete with kings, knightly lords, beautiful princesses, step mothers, drunken feasts, chess games, and never-ending church-state politics. The list continues with sword play, single combat determining the fate of kingdoms, the succession of monarchs, political marriages, conniving servants, and superstitious peasants. Lewis notes that "Chaucer . . . reverences knighthood" (Allegory 158). So, clearly,

does Lewis if we consider his memorable character, Lord Bardia, Captain of the King's Guard and, later, trusted counselor to Queen Orual.

Lewis's tone in this book is unique among his fiction. George Musacchio writes, it "stands off to itself in Lewis's canon" (145). One of the novel's other close readers, Peter Schakel, notes that "a few readers are put off by the sentence structure and word choice." Schakel describes these features as

> part of the total fiction Lewis is creating. We are to imagine not Lewis writing this in the twentieth century, but the character Orual writing it, more than 2,200 years ago. And we are to imagine she is writing it in Greek, which is a second language for her, and a language for conducting business and legal matters, thus more formal and less flowing for her than if she were writing in her native language. To give some sense that one is reading an ancient document, in Greek, Lewis slips into a slightly stiff, artificial tone. (6-7)

Schakel goes on to discuss the narrator's unreliability, concluding that the book "requires, then, an adult level of reading . . . but it will yield, therefore, adult-level understandings of Lewis, of life, and of oneself" (8).

One of the most obvious stylistic similarities between *Till We Have Faces* and a Chaucerian tale is the inseparability of the narrator from the content. Only the Wife of Bath could tell her tale—her Prologue, anyway; and *only* the Miller *would* tell his tale. Only Orual could tell her tale, complete with her near-total blindness to self in Part One. Lewis's choice of a female first person narrator is part of what sets the book apart from the rest of his fiction. His other first-person narrations could—we can imagine—have been written in the third person, with the exception of *Screwtape;* however, its epistolary form overrides the author's choice of point of view. The Ransom books feature Lewis himself as narrator, which adds a bit of verisimilitude, but we would lose little more than the wonderful story of the reader who wrote to Lewis, wanting to meet Professor Ransom, were it told well from a third person point of view.

After looking closely at Lewis's diction we can make a few broad generalizations. Generalization one: his diction in this novel makes it the most challenging fiction he produced. It is likely that almost any reader will find a word that is new to him in this book. Generalization two: despite his successful effecting of a formal and ancient tone for the work as a whole, a certain Britishness creeps in by way of idioms and individual words. Generalization three: Lewis's intimacy with medieval and renaissance literature breaks out, consciously or unconsciously, in his word choice. He uses enough words in common with Chaucer and Shakespeare to suggest the following: in his attempt to evoke a sense of the ancient past for readers of English, Lewis chose words that for most readers suggest a very remote age, though they are words very familiar to Lewis the scholar. This convention is similar to that used in many films based on the Bible or classical mythology; that is, employing Shakespearean-style actors with British accents to play Hebrew patriarchs or Olympian gods. It makes no sense logically, but probably adds a certain weightiness and dignity, especially for many American viewers.

In addition to the creation, purpose, setting, tone, narrator, and diction, there are three other small reminders of the medieval world in this book. First, the manners and language in, for instance, the serving of a drink of water—or is it wine?—between Psyche and Orual. It suggests the tone of courtly love conversations:

> She jumped up, went a little way off, and came back, carrying something; the little cool, dark berries of the Mountains, in a green leaf. "Eat," she said. "Is it not food fit for the gods?"
>
> "Nothing sweeter," said I. And indeed I was both hungry and thirsty enough by now, for it was noon or later. "But oh, Psyche, tell me how—"
>
> "Wait!" said she. "After the banquet, the wine." Close beside us a little silvery trickle came out from among the stones mossed cushion-soft. She held her two hands under it till they were filled and raised them to my lips.
>
> "Have you ever tasted a nobler wine?" she said. "Or in a fairer cup?"
>
> "It is indeed a good drink," said I. "But the cup is better. It is the cup I love best in the world."
>
> "Then it is yours, Sister." She said it with such a pretty air of courtesy, like a queen and the hostess giving gifts, that the tears came into my eyes again. (104)

A second reminder or echo of the medieval world is Orual's describing "the gods' old tricks; [how they] blow the bubble up big before [they] prick it" (222). This sounds much like Boethius's description of Fortune's treatment of mortals in *The Consolation of Philosophy*, the work that not only permeates Medieval literature more widely that any but the Bible itself, but also a work Chaucer translated into Middle English and that Lewis alludes to repeatedly in his non-fiction. The third reminder is the charming description of the

Queen's entourage on their "progress" to see new lands. It sounds very like a group of pilgrims making their way across country; the Queen writes:

> The people I had with me were all young and took great pleasure in their travels, and the journey itself had by now linked us all together—all burned brown, and with a world of hope, cares, jests, and knowledge, all sprung up since we left home and shared among us. (239)

Before concluding, I offer a bit of parenthetical speculation; I think I detect an autobiographical thread in this tapestry-like novel. The depth of character development and the pain of self knowledge embodied in Orual amaze the reader. We would ask Lewis, "From what source did you draw such pathology, such distorted ideas about love?" And he might answer as he did about the production of *The Screwtape Letters*: "'My heart'—I need no other's—showeth me the wickedness of the ungodly'" ("Preface" xiii). Part One of the novel is Orual's complaint (3), her accusation of the gods. It is her cherished grievance about how she thinks she was mistreated. (Part Two, the account of her vision, her realization of her real nature of what she called her love for psyche.) Lewis wrote about grievances and spiritual blindness in the essay, "The Seeing Eye." He says all one has to do to avoid seeing God is to "Avoid silence, avoid solitude, avoid any train of thought that leads off the beaten track. Concentrate on money, sex, status, health, and (above all) on your own grievances" (169). Lewis may have been drawing from personal experience about the blinding power of dwelling on one's grievances to produce the character Orual. He certainly had grievances—with God for not healing his mother, with his father's difficult personality—to name two more significant issues in his life. He was blind to God's love for many years. And after his conversion, he still experienced his share of grievances—with the failure of Oxford to fully recognize his contributions, for instance. I doubt he preferred commuting to Cambridge for years, spending only weekends and holidays at "The Kilns." But as I said, this is mere speculation and not my primary focus.

In conclusion, Lewis was not trying to write a Canterbury Tale; however, an examination of the diction in the following list reveals *Till We Have Faces* as a medieval- and, often, renaissance-flavored work. Such an examination yields insights about the creation of Lewis's most fully developed character, his style, and his intimacy with medieval and renaissance literature.

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Interesting Diction in C.S. Lewis's *Till We Have Faces*: Briticisms, Archaisms, Idioms, Etc.

The numbers following each word are page numbers from Eerdmans 1966 edition of *Till We Have Faces*. The word or phrase that follows denotes the sense of the word in the context of Lewis's sentence.

Word	Page	Sense
byre	6	barn
stale	7	animal urine *The Tempest* IV i
salt bitch	26	a bitch in heat
chaplet	31	wreath or garland *Knight's Tale, A MidSummer Night's Dream* II, i
paps	42	nipples
bodkin	53	ME boydekin *Reeve's Tale; Hamlet* III, i
trull	55	female prostitute
quean	55	trollop, concubine *Manciple's Tale*
trice	55	pull, hoist *Monk's Tale*
faugh	57	exclamation of disgust
lass	57	ME las
play the man	59	idiom
swap	65	sword stroke (as in "swap off" a limb or head) *Second Nun's Tale*
betweenwhiles	83	
mountebank	84	charlatan
befall	86	to happen
slug abed	88	v. to be lazy cp "fresh abed" in *Wife of Bath's Tale*
make free with	90	idiom
by your favor	91	
That's very well thought of, Lady.	92	That's a good idea.
doxy	97	promiscuous woman *The Winter's Tale* IV, iii
faugh	124	exclamation of disgust
I make so free	131	idiom
ferly	134, 142	n. a wonder or marvel, Burns "To a Louse" adj. extraordinary, strange *Reeve's Tale*
"I was so dashed . . ."	137	to be confounded, abashed
beard to beard	138	face to face *Macbeth V, v*
starveling	142	adj. starving
graveled	155	perplexed
salt villain	160	Ben Jonson *Every Man Out of His Humor*
doxies	163	promiscuous women *The Winter's Tale* IV, iii
mastery	165	ME maistry—superiority, art—common in Chaucer; maistrie in Milton, *Paradise Lost* II, 900
oath on edge	166	cp *Hamlet* I v 146, 149
made little odds	171	idiom
rummage	173	n., confusion
trumped up foolery	173	
bemire	174	to soil with mud
corrupt	175	verb, become infected, *Merchant's Tale*
frippery	181	tawdry finery *The Tempest* IV, i
savoury	182	pleasurable (erotic) cp *Miller's Tale* (Absolom's kiss in the dark)
possets	182	spiced drink, hot sweetened milk curdled with wine *Hamlet* I, V
bawdy (n.)	182	
had the name of		had the reputation of
a weaponed man	186	not a eunuch
setting Glome by the ears	187	idiom
played the fool to admiration	192	acted unwisely
chary	195	very cautious
sharps	200, 213	sharp swords *Romeo & Juliet* III, v
taper	201	candle

tunnies	208	tuna
chain shirt	213	chain mail shirt
hauberk	214	long chain mail tunic *Knight's Tale*
"Queen's Lantern"	215	counselor to the queen
let the office sleep	215	deactivate
huzzaing	217	to shout huzza, to cheer
cross-patch	218	grouchy person
blackguardly	219	cowardly, unprincipled
hoplite	219	armed Greek foot soldier
daffing	223	flirting cp. *Much Ado About Nothing* V,i
faugh	223	exclamation of disgust
trenchers	230	wooden or bread "plates" (dishes) *Taming of the Shrew* IV, i
sluts	230	*Canon's Yeoman's Tale*
doves eyes they've made at one another	233	
pother	233	commotion, disturbance *King Lear III, ii; Coriolanus* II, i
byres	237	barns
go on a progress	237	take a trip
a plump of spears	237	a group of spearmen Sir Walter Scott
cockered and cosseted	248	spoiled and pampered
staunching		checking flow of blood ME stanchen *Boece*
Blindman's buff	249	19th-century parlor game
slug abed	257	v. to be lazy cp fresh abed *Wife of Bath's Tale*
dugs	258	breasts
beat the breast	259	idiom
hedgehog skins	259	reportedly used by extreme Medieval ascetics to mortify the flesh
in court fashion	259	conforming to court conventions
housewifely	260	domestic
doxy	264	promiscuous woman *The Winter's Tale* IV, iii
thrift	265	economics, money-saving
		cp *Hamlet* I, ii, 174-183; III, ii, 57-62; III, ii, 182-5
cock chafer-like	265	cockchafer, a European beetle destructive to plants
within an ace	267	on the verge of, very near to
towsing of girls	269	rumpling [?] Dryden, Burns; tawsing (?) To whip with a tawes—a leather strap used to punish Scottish school children
slut	269	promiscuous woman
slug abed	275	v. to be lazy cp fresh abed *Wife of Bath's Tale*
buff-naked	278	completely naked
dooms	285	judgments *Clerk's Tale, Boece*
chit of a girl	291	child*
cat-foot rogue	292	thief
battened	296	to become fat *Hamlet* III, iv; *Coriolanus* IV, v
fie	303	interjection expressing disapproval ME fi

*Compare to Lewis's sentence, "'A chit of a girl—a whipper-snapper of a boy—being shown things that are hidden from their elders?'" in his chapter titled "Affection" in *The Four Loves*.