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A Collection of Essays Presented at the Ninth
FRANCES WHITE EWBANK COLLOQUIUM
on
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Once a Queen of Glome, Always a Queen of Narnia: Orual and Susan's Denial of the Divine and Redemption Through Grace

Kat Coffin

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"In the dream, the lion and the witch come down the hill together.

"She is standing on the battlefield, holding her sister's hand. She looks up at the golden lion, and the burning amber of his eyes. "He's not a tame lion, is he?" she whispers to her sister, and they shiver.

The witch looks at them all, then she turns to the lion, and says, coldly, "I am satisfied with the terms of our agreement. You take the girls for yourself, I shall have the boys..."

The lion eats all of her except her head, in her dream. He leaves the head, and one of her hands, just as a housecat leaves the parts of a mouse it has no desire for, for later; or as a gift." (Gaiman, 189)

Neil Gaiman's short story, *The Problem of Susan*, explores what might have happened to Susan Pevensie after the events of C.S. Lewis' book *The Last Battle*, particularly in regards to Susan's penchant for lipstick and nylons and the death of her family. Gaiman's short story ends with the titular character's death, in both the real world, where she dies of old age, and in a disturbing fantasy sequence, where Aslan devours her. It is obvious from the graphic settings and explicit nature of the short story that Gaiman interprets Susan's exclusion from the final book of C.S. Lewis' *The Chronicles of Narnia* as damnation, for succumbing to adulthood and, most

particularly, to sex. While it is up for debate whether Lewis' omission of Susan from the final book is due to her gender, the amount of controversy 'the problem of Susan' has generated is undeniable.

Writers Philip Pullman and J.K. Rowling have both denounced *The Chronicles of Narnia* as misogynistic, displaying C.S. Lewis' supposed fear of women and sexuality. Pullman states that Susan "was sent to hell because she was getting interested in clothes and boys." (Pullman, 1) Rowling, while acknowledging her childhood love for the series, sadly comments that Susan "is lost to Narnia because she becomes interested in lipstick. She's become irreligious basically because she found sex." (Grossman, 39)

And yet, while scholars have debated whether Susan's treatment is misogynistic, very little consideration has been given to Susan in regards to Orual, from Lewis' final work of fiction, *Till We Have Faces*. Without a doubt, Orual is one of the most complex characters in all of Lewis' vast works. Similarly to *The Chronicles of Narnia*, *Till We Have Faces* relates a complex theological narrative through the use of myth, mainly concentrating on the story of Cupid and Psyche—with the unique perspective of having the narrative be told in first person, from Psyche's sister, Orual's, point of view. Orual eventually becomes queen of Glome, despite Glome's heavily sexist culture. While Narnia may not be progressively feminist in

the modern sense of the word, there is no denying that Lewis intended for Glome to be entrenched in misogyny and for his heroine to rise above it.

But when we closely examine the characters of Susan and Orual, we find striking parallels between the two. It is through these parallels that I propose we might see an alternative approach to ‘the problem of Susan’—that through Orual, we might find Susan’s redemption.

At first glance, Orual and Susan seem deeply contrasting figures. Susan’s beauty is referenced multiple times in various texts: “Grown-ups thought her the pretty one of the family and she was no good at schoolwork (though otherwise very old for her age) and Mother said she ‘would get far more out of a trip to America than the youngsters.’” (Lewis, 426) When Susan becomes queen in *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, Lewis describes her, writing, “And Susan grew into a tall and gracious woman with black hair that fell almost to her feet and the kings of the countries beyond the sea began to send ambassadors asking for her hand in marriage.” (Lewis, 194) The Tisroc’s wicked son Rabadash’s desire for Susan frames the plot of *The Horse and His Boy*. Susan’s beauty is *impressed* upon the series.

Orual’s ugliness is similarly stressed in *Till We Have Faces*. One of Orual’s earliest memories is her father ordering her and her sister, Redival, to sing a wedding hymn for his new bride. The King further commands that the women be veiled—“Do you think I want my queen frightened out of her senses? Veils of course. And good thick veils too.’ One of the other girls tittered, and I think that was the first time I clearly understood that I am ugly.” (Lewis, 11) When Bardia, the captain of the guard, begins teaching her how to sword fight, Orual overhears him say, “Why, yes, it’s a pity about her face. But she’s a brave girl and honest. If a man was blind and she weren’t the King’s daughter, she’d make him a good wife.” (Lewis, 92)

Curiously enough, though Susan’s beauty and Orual’s ugliness are both equally emphasized, Lewis does not provide detailed

descriptions. He mentions the color of Susan’s hair and that Orual is ‘hard-featured’, like a man. The King calls her ‘hobgoblin’ or other such insults—but none of these vague descriptions provides an image for either character.

Beauty and ugliness provoke the interchangeable reactions in each text. Indeed, when Orual chooses to wear a veil permanently, some believe, “...that I wore a veil because I was of a beauty so dazzling that if I let it be seen all men in the world would run mad; or else that Ungit was jealous of my beauty...” (Lewis, 229) And of course, one of the many themes of *Till We Have Faces* involves how we are all faceless before the gods—Orual’s ugliness is a metaphor for humanity’s corruption before God. It is her facelessness that separates her from the gods—similarly, it is Susan’s shallow vanity that separates her from Aslan.

Another parallel between Orual and Susan is the relationship each fosters with her younger sister. There is clear love and affection, but both Orual and Susan evidently believe they have their sisters’ best interests at heart, and that Psyche and Lucy are too young or naïve to know what’s best for them.

Susan has always tried to maintain the role of the sensible, mature sibling towards her family. One of her first lines in *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* is her bossily telling her younger brother Edmund that it was time he was in bed—to which Edmund snaps back to stop ‘trying to talk like mother’.

This dangerous tendency to ‘act like a grownup’ expands into a genuine character flaw—a fatal flaw, as it turns out, as Susan excludes herself from the final Chronicle, laughing at her brothers and sister’s concern over Narnia, deeming it a silly little game they used to play. This is not an abrupt change, as her struggles with this flaw are particularly evident in the book, *Prince Caspian*—it could even be interpreted as foreshadowing.

One of the sharpest turning points in the text involves Lucy attempting to convince her brothers and sister that she has seen Aslan—and that Aslan wants them to follow

Him. None of the Pevensies are able to see Aslan, and they doubt Lucy, choosing to make their own decisions. No one is more guilty of this than Susan.

The first time Lucy sees Aslan and she tries to persuade them to follow Him, the others outvote her and proceed a different route. The second time, Lucy makes it clear that she will be following Aslan whether they come or not. Susan insists Lucy was dreaming and progressively gets nastier as the group reluctantly begins to follow her. Lewis writes, "Susan was the worst. 'Suppose I started behaving like Lucy,' she said. 'I might threaten to stay here whether the rest of you went on or not. I jolly well think I shall.'" (Lewis, 384) The loyal dwarf Trumpkin sternly rebukes her, and Susan grudgingly follows.

This scene draws a striking parallel to a conversation between Orual and Psyche in *Till We Have Faces*. Orual's younger sister, the beautiful and pure Psyche, is sacrificed to the god of the Grey Mountain. Orual goes to the mountain to gather her sister's remains for burial and is shocked to find her sister, alive and well, claiming that she is the bride of the god of the Grey Mountain and lives in a beautiful palace, invisible to Orual. Orual dismisses her younger sister's tale and allows herself to be convinced that Psyche is delusional—though Orual initially cannot find any reason as to why her sister looks so healthy and well-cared for, despite being left to die on the mountain. Orual commands Psyche, who has never seen her husband's face, to wait till he slumbers, light a lamp, and look upon his face—something the god has expressly forbidden.

Orual's threat is similar to Susan's, though more drastic. "Listen. You have driven me to desperate courses. I give you your choice. Swear on this edge, with my blood still wet on it, that you will this very night do as I have commanded you; or else I'll first kill you and then myself." (Lewis, 163) This is the adult version of Susan's threat. Psyche refuses to heed her sister, citing her husband as the new authority in her life, and Lucy will not obey Susan either—Aslan's

command takes priority. But there is no Trumpkin or Peter to reprove Orual's behavior. Her love has become a twisted, possessive love. Blackmailed by her sister, Psyche vows to light the lamp and look upon her husband.

It is in this moment that both Orual and Susan are 'acting like a grown-up', the fatal flaw that spoils their lives. Because of course, Lucy *did* see Aslan. Psyche *was* married to the god of the Grey Mountain. Susan is the last of the Pevensie siblings to finally see Aslan and admits it shamefacedly to Lucy.

"Lucy," said Susan in a very small voice.

"Yes?" said Lucy.

"I see him now. I'm sorry."

"That's all right."

"But I've been far worse than you know. I really believed it was him—he, I mean—yesterday. When he warned us not to go down to the fir wood. And I really believed it was him tonight, when you woke us up. I mean, deep down inside. Or I could have, if I'd let myself. But I just wanted to get out of the woods and—and—oh, I don't know. And whatever am I to say to him?" (Lewis, 385-386)

Similarly, Orual admits convincing herself not to believe in the gods, despite evidence to the contrary. Just as Susan did not see Aslan, Orual could not perceive Psyche's palace. But when night falls on the Grey Mountain, Orual glimpses the palace for a brief moment. "For when I lifted my head and looked once more into the mist across the water, I saw that which brought my heart into my throat. There stood the palace, grey—solid, motionless, wall within wall, pillar and arch and architrave, acres of it, a labyrinthine beauty. As she had said, it was like no house ever seen in our land or age." (Lewis, 132)

The moment passes and Orual sees nothing but fog. Her vision of the great house filled her with remorse for not believing in

her younger sister and a zeal to beg forgiveness, but when the fog sets in, she convinces herself it was a dream. When she returns home, she tries to forget that she saw the palace, choosing instead to believe her old tutor's theory, that Psyche had been kidnapped by a brigand and had lost her mind.

Like Susan, Orual realizes her mistake far too late. She returns to the Grey Mountain, threatens her sister into submission. That night, she sees Psyche's lamp from across the valley and all around her erupts in light. "The great voice, which rose up from somewhere close to the light, went through my whole body in such a swift wave of terror that it blotted out even the pain in my arm. It was no ugly sound; even in its implacable sternness it was golden." (Lewis, 171)

For Lewis, it was never becoming an adult that kept his characters from God, (or sex or femininity for that matter) it was the pride in *being* adult. Matthew 18:2-4 reads, "And Jesus called a little child unto him, and set him in the midst of them, and said 'Verily I say unto you, Except ye be converted, and become as little children, ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven. Whosoever therefore shall humble himself as this little child, the same is greatest in the kingdom of Heaven.'" Susan, as Peter gravely states in *The Last Battle*, "is no longer a friend of Narnia". (Lewis, 741) Her dampening remarks about 'those silly games we used to play' convey this quite clearly—Susan has not humbled herself. So intent on growing up, she's forgotten that to see Aslan, she had to become like a little child again.

During the last days of Narnia, Susan is not present with her siblings to see night fall, to see Aslan end their secret world. It is the expanded mistake she made in *Prince Caspian*. The fog sets in on Susan's view of Narnia and she renounces divinity.

But while we are left to ponder the problem of Susan, Orual's fate is written quite clearly. The god of the Grey Mountain warned her, "You, woman, shall know yourself and your work. You also shall be

Psyche." (Lewis, 174) Orual seeks out her sister, who she hears weeping, but is unable to find her. For the rest of Orual's earthly life, throughout her reign in Glome (for she eventually becomes Queen), she is haunted by the sounds of chains rattling and Psyche's sobs.

The book chronicles Orual's worldly journey, where Orual, though a wise and just ruler, continually makes selfish choices to benefit only her. She loves her old tutor, a Greek slave called the Fox, but after her father's death, though she declares him a free man, her distress at the idea of him returning to his family, away from her, pressures him to remain. Orual spends most of her life resenting Ansit, Bardia's wife, because she possessed Bardia in a way Orual never had claim to. Ansit, accuses her of leaving 'what you had left of him'—of stealing most of his life, devouring it, in a way. She says bitterly to Orual, "Oh, I know well enough that you were not lovers. You left me that...You left me my share. When you had used him, you would let him steal home to me; until you needed him again...I'll not deny it; I had what you left of him." (Lewis, 262) Orual acknowledges this later in the text, bitterly comparing herself to the barbarian goddess Ungit: "It was I who was Ungit. That ruinous face was mine...that all-devouring womblake, yet barren, thing. Glome was a web—I the swollen spider, squat at its center, gorged with men's stolen lives." (Lewis, 276)

Susan's vague outcome is hinted upon, when Polly says in frustration, "I wish she *would* grow up. She wasted all her school time wanting to be the age she is now, and she'll waste all the rest of her life trying to stay that age." (Lewis, 741) Susan's struggles center more around vanity and a toxic desire to be 'act more grown up' than a craving to be loved. But nevertheless, the parallels between Susan and Orual are readily present. The climax of *Till We Have Faces* centers around Orual's redemption—could Susan have a similar redemption, despite the Chronicles' conclusion?

First, let's examine Susan's confrontation with Aslan in *Prince Caspian*.

"Then, after an awful pause, the deep voice said, 'Susan'. Susan made no answer but the others thought she was crying. 'You have listened to fears, child,' said Aslan. 'Come, let me breathe on you. Forget them. Are you brave again?'"

"A little, Aslan,' said Susan." (Lewis, 386)

Even after her fatal flaw nearly leads her to ruin, Aslan forgives her and welcomes her back—"Once a queen of Narnia, always a queen of Narnia." A taste of 'true reality', as Lewis would call it, a moment of the Lion's breath, and Susan is redeemed. But only because she has set aside her craving for a false maturity, her desire to have authority and control over her siblings' lives—only after she has become a child again.

This does not, however, resolve Susan's fate in *The Last Battle*. While her siblings join Aslan in his country and the new Narnia, she is left alone to live her frivolous, materialistic life on earth, presumably to make selfish choices that only benefit her. Lewis writes to one of his readers about Susan, saying, "She is left alive in this world at the end, having by then turned into a rather silly, conceited young woman. But there is plenty of time for her to mend, and perhaps she will get to Aslan's country in the end—in her own way." (Dorsett & Mead, 67)

Near the end of *Till We Have Faces*, Orual is summoned before the gods to put them on trial. She spent the majority of the text claiming that the gods cursed her life, took away her dear Psyche, and that there was "no creature (toad, scorpion, or serpent) so noxious to man as the gods." (Lewis, 249) She has lived a materialistic life, putting her glimpses of divinity, the fate of her sister, behind her.

When scholars claim that Susan was damned, we should look at Orual. We should consider the final passages of *Till We Have Faces*, when Orual falls before her sister,

begging her forgiveness for forcing Psyche's hand, for craving her sister's love possessively at the cost of everything else. We should recall Psyche's tender words to her lost, elder sister: "Did I not tell you, Maia,' she said, 'that a day was coming when you and I would meet in my house and no cloud between us?'" (Lewis, 306) For Orual, the fog has finally lifted.

"The Problem of Susan' has touched a nerve with children, writers, and scholars alike. Lewis told his troubled readers that Susan's story was not over. The striking parallels in Orual and Susan's journey, their relationship with their sisters, and their confrontation with God can only lead me to conclude that Susan's redemption, while unwritten, mirrors Orual's redemption—and perhaps that was one of Lewis' intentions in writing *Till We Have Faces*. Just as the god of the Grey Mountain said to Orual in the final passages, "You also are Psyche," (Lewis, 308), so Aslan said to Susan—"Once a king or queen of Narnia, always a king or queen of Narnia."

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