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The Art of Detection in a World of Change: *The Silver Chair* and Spenser Revisited

Charles A. Huttar
(emeritus) Hope College, MI

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Abstract

Reflects on *mutabilitie* in the Narnian tale; weaves together an examination of the characteristics of the classic detective tale, Spenser's *Two Cantos of Mutabilitie*, and the plot and style of Lewis's novel into a satisfying whole.

Additional Keywords

Lewis, C.S. *The Silver Chair*; Mystery fiction; Spenser, Edmund. *The Fairie Queene*



THE ART OF DETECTION
IN A WORLD OF CHANGE:
THE SILVER CHAIR
AND SPENSER REVISITED

CHARLES A. HUTTAR

IT IS WELL KNOWN THAT C. S. LEWIS DID NOT SHARE the enthusiasm for detective stories exhibited by some other Oxford dons and his friends Charles Williams and Dorothy L. Sayers. But key elements of the detective genre lie at the center of one of his tales for children, *The Silver Chair*. To be more specific, Lewis illustrates in this book certain principles that detectives need to put in practice in order to succeed in their quest. Nor should his interest in this genre surprise us, remembering that he belonged to a writing circle (Glyer 9 and passim) that included several who did not disdain to use popular forms for their serious purposes.¹ Approaching *The Silver Chair* as a detective story will reveal aspects of Lewis's artistry that often escape notice, as well as shedding new light on the novel's themes. But simply to give it that label (among others, for of course it has affinities with other genres as well) is too limiting. Lewis is, at the same time, subjecting that genre to a critique that is rooted in a more than casual sense of what is meant by "mystery."

Many plots in fiction and drama, from ancient times on down, employ baffling situations that are only gradually elucidated, to draw their audience into an exploration of deeper philosophical or theological questions. Alongside such works, critic David Grossvogel considers most yarns popularly called mysteries today undeserving of that label. "Coy" and "mechanistic," they typically invite readers to play a "small game" (15-16), one based instead of mystery on a puzzle that by definition will end up being solved, thus leaving the reader free to remain unengaged. More interesting to Grossvogel is what he calls the "metaphysical mystery," a fiction that goes beyond the elucidation of a crime to "convey a sense" of things that can never be fully known, and that is truer to reality by arriving at "open-endedness," not "containment" (20). This nicely describes what Lewis does in *The Silver Chair*, using the instruments of detective

¹ Lewis suggests a rationale for such practices in "High and Low Brows."

fiction throughout his story but opening a door to the ultimately unknowable numinous.²

I hope that will become evident in the course of this discussion, but my primary aim is more modest: to show that, while *The Silver Chair* is not strictly speaking a detective novel—though that does happen to be a well-established subgenre within children’s literature—some of the essential elements of detective work play an important role in the book. I am using Spenser—whom Lewis felt a strong affinity with, besides knowing his poetry intimately—not as a possible source for anything in Lewis’s book³ but as providing convenient expression of the truism that we live in a world of change. This, as we shall see, can present the detective with special challenges. But even Spenser will finally prove not open-ended enough to suit Lewis.

Lewis starts his narrative with two narrow escapes, one of them at least—perhaps both—effected by unearthly power. Chased by schoolyard bullies, Jill Pole and Eustace Scrubb get out through a door that against all odds “happen[s] to be unlocked.” They find themselves not on “open moor” but in the Narnian world, a place one can reach “only [...] by Magic.” Just before that, they had started to pray to Aslan to be allowed there; is there a connection? Not long after, Eustace “with a terrified scream” falls off a cliff of unearthly height but is wafted by a lion’s breath and thus preserved. Jill has to admit being responsible for his near disaster (*Silver Chair* 18, 14, 16, 22-23, 28). When Eustace sees her again, down in Narnia proper, he is understandably angry (38) and accuses her of having “nearly murdered” him. “All right,” he repeats, “I said *murder*, and I’ll say it again as often as I like” (47; emphasis in the original). In that unobtrusive fashion Lewis sets a grim tone for his tale.

The story itself, taken in chronological order, begins with a murder. The consort of King Caspian X, a queen whose name is never revealed, has been killed while napping after lunch on a grassy bank beside a natural fountain. No one was present to witness the deed, but the queen’s cry when pricked in the hand brought her son Prince Rilian and others hurrying to her side in time to see a large, “shining” green serpent “gliding away” (57). The prince gave chase but it disappeared into thick shrubbery. He returned to see that the venom was

² Grossvogel identifies the ultimately unknowable as God, but the idea of *numen*, so central in Lewis’s thought (see *Problem of Pain* 4-9), seems foreign to him. His “God” is a human construct: he views monotheism as “the residual quandary after scientific investigation has dissipated a sufficient number of the former quandaries of which were born a multiplicity of divinities” (2n4). For Lewis, in contrast, divine self-revelation is a necessary starting point that may not be ruled out *a priori*, as it often is.

³ Not, however, through a lack of interest in sources, for along the way I do suggest several older texts that, with varying degrees of certainty, contributed (or may have contributed) to Lewis’s process of composition.

working quickly and to hear his mother's dying words, but not clearly enough to grasp her message.

Such is the account which is current in the Narnian court and is given to the two child protagonists once they have come on the scene ten years later. It is, however, deficient in one important respect. Although the evidence identifying the queen's killer left no room for doubt, that identification, as we will learn near the end of the story, was only partial; and reliance on incomplete knowledge soon led to another loss and another mystery. For a month Rilian rode out repeatedly to track down the green serpent and kill it, determined on revenge even if the idea of "vengeance on a witless brute" was meaningless. He searched without success and always came home "tired and distraught," until one day he saw, right by the "same fountain where the Queen got her death," a lady so beautiful as to make him nearly forget his quest for the serpent. "She was tall and great, shining, and wrapped in a thin garment as green as poison." As readers we easily catch these verbal hints linking the lady and the serpent, but the resemblance of course was lost on Rilian. Over the week following he continued to ride out, no longer now with thoughts of vengeance but only to have again this beautiful "vision." To his companion Drinian came a certainty "that this shining green woman was evil," but the Prince, staring "like a man out of his wits," could only see her beckon "as if she bade him come to her." The next day he failed to return from his riding, "and from that hour no trace of him was ever found," although many searches were made, in which "more than thirty champions" came to grief. King Caspian finally forbade further expeditions and gave up his son for lost, resigned to accepting that he now had neither queen nor heir apparent (58-59, 54, 60).

At the beginning of Lewis's narrative Aslan calls Jill and Eustace from their schoolyard into Narnia to find the lost prince and restore him to his father and, in due course, to his throne. They thought that going to Narnia was their idea and had resulted from their prayer to Aslan even though it was interrupted and never finished (16), but Aslan explains, "You would not have called to me unless I had been calling to you" (29). Even here Lewis employs a principle that is basic to the detective genre: that the real state of affairs may be, often is, quite different from what appearances might lead us to think. It is, of course, not just a literary convention but a fact of life, and the detective story becomes in Lewis's hands a vehicle for larger principles of epistemology and hermeneutics. One might say that a central theme of *The Silver Chair* is *knowing*, in its various aspects: *obtaining knowledge*, *remembering*, and *acting* on what we know. Obtaining knowledge includes *gathering* data and *interpreting* them: operations performed, too often, very imperfectly. This is where a detective begins, and much of the reader's interest lies in seeing how the detective overcomes serious *obstacles* in this part of the task—*false information* (whether given mistakenly or deliberately),

inattention, distraction, and expectations that fail to take into account how things thought familiar can change, even beyond recognition.⁴ All of these obstacles prove impediments as the child detectives in Lewis's story go about their quest. The present account will concentrate on the last of the four, unforeseen change, but notice will be taken of the other three as they affect the quest. The detective's work may start with gathering information, but remembering and, finally, acting are also essential, as Lewis's fourth Narnian chronicle clearly shows.

When the owls have finished telling the Rilian back-story with many a hooting sound (which Lewis adroitly minimizes by having his narrator paraphrase it⁵), Jill and Eustace each have something to say. Jill immediately has an intuition that fills the gap in the received account of the queen's death: "I bet that serpent and that woman were the same person" (60). Lewis thus introduces into his readers' minds a note of a different sort of mystery, a world that can contain such uncanny creatures as shape-shifters and figures that can suddenly vanish (59). Jill's is a powerful conjecture, one that goes beyond Drinian's foreboding that the shining woman is evil—but proof of it remains to be seen. The owls "think the same" and point to evidence that Narnia is indeed such an uncanny world, having suffered before under someone in human shape who was, instead, a witch; and this lady "may be some of the same crew" who has "some deep scheme against Narnia" (60).

That would raise by a good notch the urgency of the quest, but Eustace sets that question aside and returns to what he considers the main point: "Pole and I have got to find this Prince. Can you help us?" Notably, Glimfeather the chief owl hoots in reply his own question, one that is couched in detective story terms: "Have *you* any *clue*, *you two*?" [emphasis added]. What Eustace offers will at least point them in the right direction—"We've got to go north. And [...] reach the ruins of a giant city" (60)—at which the owls decline any further aid except to carry them north for an hour or so to the marshlands.

There are in fact four clues, the Four Signs Aslan had given to Jill. And they have something more, a piece of information that the owls lack. Prince Rilian is still alive. The owls had inferred as much since there was no evidence to the contrary, "no bones" (60), but Jill's is knowledge on a different level. It has the absolute authority of Aslan himself. There is thus in Lewis's tale something rare in the detective genre, knowledge that is unimpeachable. It cannot be

⁴ Our discussion will follow the course of Lewis's narrative rather than a possible alternative organization suggested by the key words in the foregoing sentence, which outline what I have called "the art of detection," its parts and pitfalls. These I have italicized to ensure that they are kept in mind, recurring as they do somewhat randomly as the plot moves forward.

⁵ He had let his humor play with the onomatopoeia enough (40-43, 49-56) and knew it was time to move on.

assumed, however, that the questers will always accord to Aslan's word its proper authority.

Aslan's Four Signs are essential clues, very specific in their way, precise, and yet rather mysterious. Their meaning is by no means obvious.

First; as soon as [...] Eustace sets foot in Narnia, he will meet an old and dear friend. He must greet that friend at once; if he does, you will both have good help. Second; [...] journey [...] north till you come to the ruined city of the ancient giants. Third; you shall find a writing on a stone in that ruined city, and you must do what the writing tells you. Fourth; you will know the lost Prince (if you find him) by this, that he will be the first person you have met in your travels who will ask you to do something in my name, in the name of Aslan. (29)

When Jill gives a conventional reply, "Thank you [...]. I see," Aslan cautions, "[P]erhaps you do not see quite as well as you think"—a sentence that encapsulates much of this theme in the book. It is by the light of the silvery moon that the children, carried by owls, begin their search for Prince Rilian. There is just enough light to make out features in the landscape such as the "partly ruinous tower" (52), disfigured by time, where they and the owls meet. Lewis gives us in the moonlight journey an emblem of the detectives' difficult task. Eventually they will get to the even darker Underland. It is here, in fact, that they find Prince Rilian, but they don't yet know it is he. More and more, in this scene and again in the midst of the Witch's sophistries, it becomes necessary to act on what they do know, even in the absence of full certainty. Part of what they know is that Aslan is utterly reliable.

The children fail to observe the first two clues and almost miss the third, and a good part of these lapses can be traced to mutability. Eustace's old friend, the first person he will see on entering Narnia, is King Caspian, with whom he had had many adventures in their eastward voyage only a few months before, in Earth time, but in Narnia it has been nearly fifty years, possibly more.⁶ Caspian is now in his mid-sixties and the years, as well as grief, have taken their toll. Naturally enough Eustace's glimpse of the old king doesn't jog his memory, but when he learns from Jill that Aslan says this person is an old and dear friend, the right thing for him to do would be to take another look immediately. Instead, not

⁶ Lewis's "Outline" gives 1942 as the date of both Eustace's first and second visits to Narnia, but 2306-7 and 2356 respectively in Narnian chronology. As Eustace confesses to Jill, the fact that Narnia and England worked in different time schemes was one of the things he, "like a fool, [...] forgot." Eustace of course has no access to the chronology that Lewis constructed, and he judges from Caspian's appearance as "an old, old man" that "apparently it's been about seventy years" since his earlier Narnian adventure (46).

realizing that he is in Cair Paravel, the Narnian capital,⁷ and having already been led by Caspian's change to misinterpret what he saw, he angrily refuses to let this new information—from Aslan, who should without hesitation be believed—modify his initial misplaced confidence (39).

Michael Ward has drawn attention to the association between *The Silver Chair* and long-standing lore concerning the moon (121-39 [chapter 6, "Luna"]), beginning with Lewis's title, for according to the astronomers of old the moon's influence reaches down into Earth's crust and "ripens silver" (Lewis, "The Planets," line 10) as the Sun produces gold.⁸ The epithet "inconstant," referring to the day-by-day changes through each lunar cycle, was used so commonly as to become a cliché. Such "unstable behavior" was thought to induce corresponding disorders in the world of humans, taking away their wits and causing lunacy (Ward 122).⁹ That comes close to happening in *The Silver Chair*—through the Witch's agency rather than the moon's, but in any case a serious obstacle to sound detective work. For this story's symbolism, however, the moon's most important attribute is its place in the heavens, defining a line of demarcation. Beyond it (in the Ptolemaic system), the stars and planets move with constancy, but in this sublunary world the only constant thing is change. One classic development of this idea is found in an author especially prized by Lewis, Edmund Spenser. Several critics have heard in *The Silver Chair* echoes of his writings; for example, the two horses of the Queen of Underland, one white and one black (82), have a parallel in the pair that draw the moon through the sky in Spenser's *Two Cantos of Mutabilitie* (395 [FQ 7.6.9]).¹⁰ We cannot stop here, however, given the central importance of mutability in both works, Spenser's *Cantos* and Lewis's tale. The theme attracted Spenser: near the start of his career he had written of the *Ruins of Time* and *Ruins of Rome*.¹¹ Unlike the modern "great myth" that equates change with improvement, over the ages till now and continuing into the future,¹² Spenser's understanding was closer to that of the early chapters of Genesis or that of Ovid, who in his *Metamorphoses* traced a

⁷ His previous experience of the realm was limited to the Eastern Sea and its islands; thus it is understandable that he doesn't even "know whether this is Narnia" (39) and that when belatedly, after the ship has left, he is told who the king is, he stops in mid-stride and looks sickened, "turn[ing] an extraordinary colour" (41).

⁸ Cited by Ward 127. On the Sun, see lines 53-55 and *Discarded Image* 106.

⁹ For Lewis's comments on the symbolism of the moon's inconstancy see "The Planets," lines 5-6, and *Discarded Image* 109.

¹⁰ Ward notes how this detail in Spenser particularly interested Lewis (131, 283n42). The *Mutabilitie cantos* were first published in 1609 as a fragmentary book 7 of *The Faerie Queene*; hence my citations (abbreviated FQ).

¹¹ Spenser, *Poetical Works* 471-78, 509-14.

¹² See Lewis, "Funeral."

succession of Ages from Golden through Silver and Bronze, down to Iron. Change is in the direction of deterioration and death.

A quick review of Spenser's narrative is in order. A minor divinity named Mutability, convinced that her power governs everything under the inconstant Moon, grows ambitious and challenges the throne of Jove. When the king of the gods refuses to abdicate in her favor, Mutability takes her appeal to the supreme court, "the highest him," which is Spenser's way of placing the classical machinery of his fiction within a Christian frame of reference.¹³ There follows an outdoor courtroom scene in a beautiful natural setting. Presiding as judge is Dame Nature herself, an allegorical stand-in for God (Lewis, *Spenser's* 15, 75). The plaintiff dominates the proceedings, brilliantly marshaling evidence for her claim to be supreme, since nothing is permanent, everything changes. She points to the constantly changing four elements, beginning with earth on which everything living proceeds toward death (7.7.18-19). She calls witnesses. The four seasons pass by in mute procession to prove her point, then the twelve months, Day, Night, the hours, Life, and Death (7.7.27-46), after which Mutability sums it up: Time preys on everything and even "Times do change and move continually" (7.7.47.5-6). Jove then is allowed a brief reply, that "Time himself" is under the gods' management, "compell[ed]" by them "to keepe his course," which means that Mutability is merely Jove's servant (7.7.48.5-6, 9). On the contrary, she replies: it is not just those things under the Moon that are unstable. The heavenly bodies themselves, which bear the gods' names, move erratically, suffer eclipses, and generally exhibit a "love" for "mutation." In short, "within this wide great Vniuerse / Nothing doth firme and permanent appeare" (55.8; 56.1-2). There seems to be nothing more the defense can say, and Mutability demands a judgment. The Judge sits silent, eyes on the ground, while onlookers at the scene "Did hang in long suspence" (57.6). And at this point we too may remain awhile in suspense, for Dame Nature's judgment will come best after we have observed what use Lewis makes of the mutability theme in *The Silver Chair*.

We've seen already how King Caspian's aging caused Jill and Eustace to miss the first Sign and thereby lose whatever "good help" they might have received. In accordance with a rule found repeatedly in the Narnian chronicles, one is never told what alternative history might have come about if one's choices had been different¹⁴ (nor is this revealed to the reader). Such mistakes, however, need not be fatal: it is perhaps better to speak of this as "providential," in the

¹³ The context clarifies this somewhat cryptic phrase: "But to the highest him, that is behight / Father of Gods and men by equal might: / To weet, the God of Nature, I appeale" (FQ 7.6.35.4-6)—that is, in theological terms, the Creator.

¹⁴ Rowan Williams comments on Aslan's (and by implication, Lewis's) "respect for the reality" of "things as they are" (75). Compare Lewis's remarks in *Experiment* (51) about escapist fantasizing.

etymological sense of the word, rather than a fall-back “Plan B.”¹⁵ In any event, once the children and Puddleglum start their journey, they do pay attention to the second clue, and it helps by saving time. Previous searches for Rilian had started from the fountain where he was last seen, but Puddleglum knows that the Ruined City lies “across Ettinsmoor” (70), the giants’ hill country, and that determines their path.

Still, the journey is long, there are many distractions, and the difficulty of converting observations into true knowledge quickly becomes apparent. Along the edge of a gorge Jill notices what she takes to be odd-shaped towers of rock, and she begins theorizing that these natural formations might have given rise to “all the stories about giants” (76), thus replaying in her own mind the way nineteenth-century thinkers dismissed ancient myths as prescientific superstition (as she probably had been taught at school). But the rock towers prove to be in fact the heads of giants—thankfully, not hostile ones;¹⁶ which perhaps gives the children a false sense of security, for when they meet giants later they will be insufficiently wary. Beyond the moor is mountain country, where a deep river gorge blocks their way. Eustace notices a massive bridge arching across, and again the need arises to interpret what they see. Do they dare venture onto the bridge? It could be enchanted, thinks Puddleglum, “a trap” that will “turn into mist and melt away just when we’re out on the middle of it” (80). He is mistaken, but his gloomy idea serves to remind the alert reader that sorcery can’t be ruled out, as the owls had explained in telling Jill and Eustace the back-story (60). Jill’s speculations are closer to the mark, that it is a real bridge built “hundreds of years ago” by giants “far cleverer” than those they had previously seen—perhaps “the same ones who built the giant city we’re looking for” (81). Its skilled construction out of stones as big as Stonehenge sarsens supports her guess that not all giants are stupid,¹⁷ and its dilapidated condition testifies to centuries of wind and weather. When crossing it Jill must have noticed the “mouldering” traces of “rich carvings,” “faces and forms of giants, minotaurs, squids,

¹⁵ We may be reminded here of a passage near the end of *Paradise Lost*, where Milton inverts Satan’s empty boast at the beginning that he aims to “pervert” Providence “and out of good still to find means of evil” (1.162-65) and affirms the “goodness infinite” shown in God’s creative power to produce good out of evil (12.469-73). See also Lewis’s discussion of Providence in Appendix B of *Miracles*.

¹⁶ Nor is the next giant they see hostile; he merely laughs and proceeds on his way (79).

¹⁷ That a giant’s brain power does not match its bulk was a cliché of children’s stories with which Lewis was familiar—see, for example, *Giant-Land* by “Roland Quiz” (Richard Quittenton), published in 1874 and numerous later editions, and mentioned twice in Lewis’s correspondence (*Collected Letters* 2:213, 594).

centipedes, and dreadful gods" (82),¹⁸ but she seems disinclined to process such data, or she might have been better prepared for the dangers of their next encounter. At the foot of the bridge they meet a lady and (as it seems) a knight out riding. The lady, who calls herself "She of the Green Kirtle," is dressed in "a long, fluttering dress of dazzling green." The adjective is significant: Jill is dazzled metaphorically as well as literally, dwells on how "scrumptious" the dress is (85, 83, 85), and apparently forgets that other account heard in the ruined tower, of a "beautiful lady [...] wrapped in a thin garment as green as poison" who had captivated the prince and whom Jill in a flash of insight had identified with the deadly snake, also "green as poison" (59, 57). Puddleglum is "on his guard" (83), but Jill, while commendably keeping in mind the second clue, rashly asks for directions to the ruined city. The Lady's answer is oblique. She directs them to the "gentle giants," as she calls them, of Harfang, who may be able to tell them where to find it.

It is worth pausing here to make a few general observations; first, about the acquisition of knowledge. In the data-gathering stage, accurate observation is essential. Jill and Eustace think they have seen two people on horseback. "I only saw one," says Puddleglum; that, and a suit of armor that might contain a knight, or a skeleton, "or perhaps [...] nothing at all [that] you could see. Someone invisible" (86). Appearances can be misleading. As to data gained from an informant, its value depends of course on whether that person is telling the truth. Puddleglum had sensibly warned that any stranger "in a place like this" is "likely as not [...] an enemy" (82), yet the children take at face value what the beautiful, well-dressed and well-spoken Lady tells them (helped perhaps by their eagerness for the promised comforts of warmth, food, and rest at Harfang). Second, revealed here is another side to Puddleglum's character besides the two usually dwelt on by critics, his chronic pessimism (given especial force both by the humor of Lewis's caricature and by the biographical association with someone Lewis knew and liked) and, later, his faithful heroism. That other quality, perhaps underrated by critics, is his cautious and methodical attention to the rules of logic. The children, in contrast, leap too quickly to conclusions. Having observed that matters were often better than Puddleglum had led them to believe, Eustace says glibly that "he's always wrong" (86), and with this attitude they feel free to insist on going to Harfang despite Puddleglum's reminder that (in the narrator's words) "Aslan's signs had said nothing about staying with giants, gentle or otherwise" (86-87). My third observation is really a

¹⁸ This description may be in the narrator's voice, but Jill's is the primary viewpoint in the book.

question. Might the children's ineptness at critical thinking be a part of Lewis's critique in *The Silver Chair* of modern educational philosophy?¹⁹

When they finally reach the Ruined City—the first goal in their journey—they fail to recognize it. Jill had begun to neglect her daily recitation of the Four Signs to keep them in memory, and when Puddleglum asks for the next clue they should look for, she gets the order wrong and is annoyed not only with him for demanding it but with herself for not knowing. Anyhow, they see nothing that fits their idea of a city. Just as the King had been changed by the passage of years till he could no longer be recognized as an old friend, so the city, or what they can see of it, has been metamorphosed by time into a large flat area with trenches that command their whole attention just to climb through or around. They catch “a glimpse of what might be [...] squarish rocks,” but no one “looked at them carefully” (90). Jill has “glimpses of other odd things,” some that “looked vaguely like factory chimneys” and “a huge cliff, straighter than any cliff ought to be. But she wasn't at all interested and didn't give them a thought,” being focused only on her freezing discomfort and the prospect of “hot baths and beds at Harfang” (91). Aslan had warned her at the outset that when the signs do appear, “they will not look at all as you expect”; therefore “pay no attention to appearances” (31). This too she has failed to keep in mind. Even when Puddleglum tries to call the children's attention to what might be the ruins of an old city, they both “crossly” insist on hurrying to the invitingly lit home of the giants and will not stop and look more closely at “this flat place” (94). Failing to recognize the city, they don't even think about the third clue, the promised “writing on a stone.” They are right in the middle of it, but to them it's just a labyrinth of oddly shaped walls, though these, rightly read, are the very instructions they must follow.

The detour to Harfang is almost disastrous. Even the cautious Puddleglum fails to catch the possible sinister meaning in the Lady's message to the King giant, that “you'd like to have us for your Autumn Feast” (102). But that side trip becomes a means of redeeming their third failure, for it is from a window of the castle that the writing is seen. Distance and height and bright sunshine combine to provide a second chance by revealing plainly what at the time they had been vaguely aware of but failed to connect with their mission: “the ruins of a gigantic city” and in its center “the words UNDER ME” (109). These two words, as we learn later, are the sole remnant of a proud king's boastful inscription.²⁰ All the Lady's deceit, then, and the king's vain claim to being

¹⁹ That critique may be found in developed form in the first chapter of Lewis's *Abolition of Man* (7-21; see also 29n).

²⁰ “Though under Earth and throneless now I be, / Yet, while I lived, all Earth was under me” (140). The situation resembles that in Shelley's sonnet “Ozymandias” in the king's claim to imperial sway and the present ruinous condition of his memorial, but since this

remembered forever, turn out, contrary to their intentions, to be instruments in the fulfilling of Aslan's purpose despite the team's initial failure. As Spenser's Jove had said—but it is now upgraded to a Christian observation—Mutability herself is the servant of a higher power. Puddleglum understands this and corrects the children's disappointment when they later are told the whole inscription. "There *are* no accidents. Our guide is Aslan" (140, emphasis in the original).

This remark echoes what Aslan had told Jill when sending her into Narnia: "These are the signs by which I will guide you in your quest" (29). As noted already, the explicit divine presence is a feature that places Lewis's story outside the strict classic detective tradition. But the effect of such a shift may be, as Sørina Higgins argues (with regard to a similar move by Charles Williams), to place "the merely human murder mystery" within a larger context of "deeper" mysteries concerning the presence of evil in the world and the ultimate triumph of good (Higgins 88). At the same time, Lewis is careful to respect the decorum of the genre, avoiding anything like a *deus ex machina*. The guidance Aslan here promises Jill consists simply of the Signs; the investigators are expected to use to the full their own resources—which so far they have failed to do. But with respect to the third clue's being thought merely accidental, Puddleglum carries the idea a step further: Aslan "was there when the giant King caused the letters to be cut, and he knew already all things that would come of them; including *this*" (140, emphasis in the original). Lewis in these chronicles is rarely so explicit in presenting a theological point. He foreshadowed it, but ambivalently, in Jill's dream the night before, when Aslan shows her from the window the words UNDER ME spread over space. This has a double meaning, both as a command, anticipating the instruction the group will see below them the next day, and as a statement in Narnian terms of the Christian doctrine of Providence.²¹ Nonetheless, Aslan's promise of guidance does not include a guarantee of either success or survival. In explaining to Jill her task, he had outlined three possible outcomes: "seek [...] until either you have found him"—and the Fourth Sign says again that this is not certain—"or else died in the attempt, or else gone back into your own world" (29). Once Rilian is released from his enchantment, he will restate, and accept, the second possibility.

unnamed king has acknowledged his mortality, his couplet lacks the irony of the Shelley poem.

²¹ See also note 15 above and accompanying text. Possibly the same principle is also illustrated in the fact that the delay of a day in the giants' castle brings the seekers to Rilian on the one night when the Queen is absent, a "chance that may never come again" (149). One may speculate (and it is no more than that) that Aslan, if not actually arranging what seem to be trivial events, has at least preternatural knowledge of them such as that implied in, for example, 1 Samuel 9:15-16, Luke 19:29-34, and Luke 22:10-12.

It remains for the trio to “make [...] sense” of the writing UNDER ME—which is by no means obvious—and follow its command, confident that “Aslan’s instructions always work” (111). By good fortune they escape from the castle²² and by strenuous effort—driven as much by fear of the pursuing dogs as by obedience to the Sign—they enter the world beneath the city, where their quest for Prince Rilian takes a new turn. Like ancient mythic heroes such as Orpheus and Hercules, the three now descend to the Underworld to bring out one who is imprisoned there. It is not exactly Hades, the realm of death, but Lewis’s imagery and allusions highlight several points of resemblance to the classical quest. Their descent is swift and long—“nearly a mile,” it seems (127)—into a world of total darkness and oppressive heat.²³ A gatekeeper accosts them with two questions, “who are you and what is your errand [...]?” Prudently, Puddleglum ignores the questions and simply says that they have fallen down there by accident. The Warden replies with what soon will be recognized as a byword: “Many fall down, and few return to the sunlit lands” (128). The formula is Lewis’s adaptation of the Cumean Sibyl’s warning to Aeneas when he is about to descend to the realm of the dead.²⁴ Captured by a host of Earthmen, the seekers are marched off to face the Queen of Underland. It is a long and weary journey, marching or sometimes crawling, in a place of dim light and dead air with no wind and no birds (133)—the root meaning of the name *Avernus*²⁵—and it ends

²² Again, as in chapter 1, through a door unexpectedly left open (but this time with no hint of anything but a natural explanation [119]).

²³ Virgil has Aeneas descend into “a deep cave” by a rocky, rough, “shingly” (*scrupea*) descent—Lewis devotes most of a page (126) to expanding on these images—that ends in darkness and (a little farther on, in Lewis) a black lake (*lacu nigro*) (*Aen.* 6.237-38). Lewis’s translation of the *Aeneid*, left unfinished at his death, did not include this passage or the one quoted in the next note.

²⁴ “Easy is the descent to Avernus / [...] / but to recall one’s steps and pass out to the upper air” is a task that can be accomplished only by “some few,” blessed with divine favor (*Aen.* 6.126-30). In Lewis’s adaptation some Christian elements are mingled with the classical. He begins it by balancing “few” with the word “Many,” an echo of Matthew 7:13, “many there be who go in” through “the gate [...] to destruction.” Lewis gives this formula five times, varying the first clause but keeping the “few” clause the same. (When the Warden uses it to explain the sleeping creatures and the dreaming Father Time, he adds that “they will all wake at the end of the world” [131, 133], alluding to the Last Judgment. Lewis returns to this idea in *The Last Battle* [151].) Some commentators have heard instead, in Lewis’s formulaic line, a considerably more distant echo of Dante. Elsewhere in the descriptions of Underland we do find parallels to the *Inferno*, and of course the divine favor that allows Dante the pilgrim to emerge from his underworld journey is itself an allusion to the lines in the *Aeneid* just cited.

²⁵ Compare *Aen.* 6.239-42.

with their being rowed ("Many have taken ship at the pale beaches" [133]) to the city where the Queen dwells.²⁶

Underland exhibits mutability of a different sort, not the gradual change wrought by the natural processes of our world but the sudden alteration by supernatural forces of the kind we associate with metamorphosis in the myths of various cultures. The Queen, herself a shape-shifter, has the power to change others. The Earthmen have already undergone metamorphosis through her spells, transformed from happy-go-lucky children of the fiery deep into hard-working exiles bearing expressions "as sad as a face could be" (129). Enslaved to her in another way is Prince Rilian, though not until the Fourth Sign will the seekers know they have found him. He recognizes them, from the meeting by the stone bridge. His outward appearance is still what it was at home, but since none of the trio has ever seen him that is no help. His metamorphosis is internal: by the witch's spell he has forgotten who he is and all his former life.²⁷ The names "Rilian," "Narnia," and "Aslan" mean nothing to him (139-40). She has given him a new, false identity.

Rilian "was dressed in black and altogether looked a little bit like Hamlet" (138). That comparison may well bring us up short, for direct literary references are rare in Lewis's children's tales except ones to books traditionally for children. Thus it cries out for closer examination. The first question to ask is whether this is what Jill thought upon seeing the knight and his garments, or a comment by the storyteller intended to help *his* audience visualize the scene. The latter view is plausible, since the audience one imagines for these stories has likely had some experience of Shakespeare's play. But the preceding sentences seem to reflect the three visitors' viewpoint: the knight "was handsome and looked both bold and kind, though there was something about his face that didn't seem quite right," and when he "laughed very loudly" at his own joke "Jill thought to herself, 'I wonder is *that* what's wrong with his face? Is he a bit silly?'" (139).²⁸ (One of the clichés of detective fiction attributes to the sleuth unusual skill in reading faces.) Still, it seems unlikely that students from Experiment House, with its modern, practical curriculum, would so readily think of a comparison to Hamlet. Probably, then, it should be taken as the narrator's reference; thus, Lewis's own—a clue for the readers of his mystery, though not one likely to assist his detectives.

²⁶ As Salwa Khoddam points out (93), the City of Dis in Dante's Hell provides a parallel to this feature of Lewis's underworld.

²⁷ "I remember no time when I was not dwelling, as now, at the court of this all but heavenly Queen" who has "saved me from some evil enchantment" (142). Like Dante in the opening lines of the *Inferno*, Rilian has become lost spiritually as well as physically.

²⁸ Emphasis in the original. "Silly" had best be taken to denote deficiency of intellect or judgment (*OED* sense 4 or 5).

In that case, what purpose does this allusion serve in his text? First, as in this story, the whole plot of Shakespeare's play is the aftermath of a murder. John Cox has shown that the allusion is "not gratuitous" but nicely related to the book's epistemological theme, recalling Hamlet's doubt. He also sees a parallel between the emotional lostness of the Prince of Denmark and that of the Prince of Narnia, who is literally lost as well (161). Doris Myers observes that Rilian's obsession with killing the snake has made him "vulnerable to enchantment [...] just as Hamlet was trapped by the need for revenge" (154). But there is more yet to this allusion, including pointed differences between the two princes as well as similarities. They both behave at times so erratically that observers consider them mad;²⁹ such misunderstanding advances Hamlet's aims, but it frustrates Rilian's. Hamlet in his "customary suits of solemn black" is still mourning his father, less than "two months dead," but his feelings of "woe" are deeper than these outward "trappings" (*Hamlet* I.ii.78, 138, 86). Rilian mourned a month for his mother but now, though still dressed in the trappings of grief, no longer remembers her—indeed, as Salwa Khoddam observes, he has ambivalently allowed his captor to assume elements of a maternal role (95). He too suffers deep woe—but he does not feel it. Hamlet soon will learn from his father's ghost that Denmark's spin-doctors had "given out that, sleeping in [his] orchard, / A serpent stung [him]," pouring poison into his ears. That he was "sleeping" is true—as also in the case of the Narnian queen— and so is poison as the means of "murder," but the rest is a false report by which "the whole ear of Denmark" has been "abused"; and Shakespeare's play with key-words, literal and metaphorical, continues when the Ghost says, "The serpent that did sting thy father's life / Now wears his crown" and possesses his queen (I.v.35-36, 63-64, 74, 25-27, 36, 38-40, 75; emphasis supplied). Lewis rings the changes on the same images. In his tale, one who is literally a serpent, as well as a witch, stings the prince's mother, talks of marrying not the king but his son and of gaining dominion over Narnia, and meanwhile pours poisonous falsehoods and promises into Rilian's ear. "Remember me," says the Ghost in bidding farewell (I.v.91), and Hamlet's response to these revelations is a vow that "while memory holds a seat / In this distracted globe" (96-97) he will indeed remember. We will see shortly the relevance of this speech to Lewis's themes.³⁰

When Eustace discovers that the Lady of the Green Kirtle whom they had met by the bridge is the Queen of Underland, he complains to the knight about her attempt to have him and his companions eaten by the giants. So

²⁹ Ward hints at this parallel but does not develop the point (134).

³⁰ An anonymous reviewer of an earlier draft of this essay reminded me of yet another echo of *Hamlet* in Lewis's tale. Like Hamlet's father, Rilian's grandfather, King Caspian IX, had been "murdered by his brother Miraz who usurp[ed] the throne" (Lewis, "Outline" 43; see also Doctor Cornelius's direct statement in *Prince Caspian* 57).

thoroughly has the Witch manipulated Rilian's mind that he cannot believe this, affirming instead that she possesses "all virtues," mentioning, among others, truth and mercy (139). This is particularly ironic since it is a beautiful lady *without* mercy who (to use the phrasing of Keats's poem) has him in thrall.³¹ The idea of metamorphosis in one's inner being though not in outward form is not original with Lewis, but his use of it in many places is a significant extension of the classical tradition he inherited. It is a work of magic or miracle, depending on whether it is done by evil power or divine. The sorceress cannot, however, effect through enchantment a complete transformation. Once each day, only briefly, Rilian recovers his memory of the sunlit world and knows the witch's enchantment for what it is. To maintain her control, therefore, she must depend on force and deceit: binding him with strong cords to "a curious silver chair" (147) and then, when the period of his sanity has passed and her enchantment returns, obliterating any memory of it, feeding him a carefully crafted account of his behavior during his so-called "vile fit." She says that he is "horribly changed" in both mind and body, first murderously wild and pleading to be allowed out of the chair, then transformed into a deadly serpent, before returning to his "proper shape," still bound. Because he believes this tale, when the visitors come and see him on the chair he extracts a solemn promise that they will not cut his bonds however "dear and [...] dreadful" the name by which he pleads (142, 147).³²

The chair, then, serves to keep Rilian imprisoned during those brief times when the witch's spell is in abeyance. To a certain extent it resembles several other chairs in literary tradition that are associated in one way or another with the underworld, but the other points of similarity vary. It is a good illustration of Lewis's habit of reworking motifs so thoroughly that they can hardly be considered "sources." For the present survey, the most important points of resemblance have to do with the epistemological theme. Sir Guyon, Spenser's knight of temperance, faces temptation from Mammon to take his ease on a "siluer stoole" in the underworld garden of Proserpina, Hades' consort.³³ But what is at stake morally in that scene bears little resemblance to Prince Rilian's plight, and besides, Guyon firmly refuses to sit. The one word common to both texts, "silver," though admittedly a key word in the image, falls far short

³¹ Keats borrowed his title (but little else) from a medieval French poem, the 15th-century English translation of which Lewis discusses and quotes in his *Allegory of Love*. It is just barely conceivable that he also, in one of Rilian's speeches, unconsciously echoed one of the lines he quoted, although with quite a different meaning. "A garnison she was of al goodness" is how the unsuccessful wooer in Alain Chartier's poem describes his *belle dame* (*Allegory* 235); to Rilian, his captor "is a nosegay of all virtues" (*Silver Chair* 139).

³² The last quoted phrase gains in meaning retrospectively once Rilian invokes the name of Aslan (150), thus fulfilling the Fourth Sign. See Lewis, *Problem* 5-7, discussing "dread."

³³ *FQ* 2.7.63.8-9; also 2.7.53, "a siluer seat," identified as a place for "pleasures."

of providing us a gloss on Lewis's account.³⁴ More promising is the chair in Milton's masque where an innocent young lady sits immobilized while Comus, deceptively disguised as a friendly shepherd, offers her a refreshing drink—much as his mother Circe by giving drinks to Odysseus's crewmen had turned them into swine. We aren't told what the chair is made of, or its color, but the setting—not strictly underground, but a labyrinthine wood in which the lady had lost her way and from which the "shepherd" pretended to rescue her—is a quasi-hell image. At stake here are ethical issues, with the epistemological and metaphysical ones secondary, but the crucial difference from Rilian's situation is that all through the confrontation the lady retains her mental faculties, indeed parries Comus's arguments, "false rules pranked in reason's garb," with better ones of her own, insisting, "Thou canst not touch the freedom of my mind / With all thy charms, although this outward rind / Thou hast immanacled" (*Masque*, lines 758, 662-64). What finally frees her from Comus's bondage is the higher countermagic of a goddess called in for the purpose, but the chair itself seems to have no function except that, smeared with adhesive, it holds the lady prisoner.³⁵

A closer parallel is a chair that I think commentators on Lewis have not yet noted. Pirithoüs descends to the underworld on a madcap scheme of kidnapping Proserpina and taking her home as his wife. The hero Theseus goes along to help his friend. Hades hospitably offers them refreshment and a rock to sit on—to which their bodies are promptly cemented and, for extra security, held fast by coiling serpents. The iconography may not be a perfect match—the chair in Lewis's story is ornately crafted of precious metal and the cords that bind the prince are tied and untied daily—but the seat from which Hercules eventually rescues Theseus by sheer strength (though leaving bits of his flesh on the rock) is called, significantly, the Chair of Forgetfulness, which reminds us of one of Lewis's key themes, the importance of remembering what one has learned.³⁶ But

³⁴ Cox argues (162-63) for a closer similarity between Rilian and Guyon than I would allow, since the freedom of will that Guyon exercises is precisely what Rilian lacks while under enchantment.

³⁵ We may add to this catalog one other silver chair that Lewis would have remembered from his reading, but which has even less resemblance to Rilian's chair. In the 14th-century alliterative poem *Morte Arthure* King Arthur dreams of sitting in a silver chair atop the wheel of Fortune, then being dashed to the ground as the wheel turns (Armitage 226).

³⁶ Apollodorus, *Eptome* 1.24 (2:153). The story appears in several ancient poets and mythographers (see Frazer's note, 1:234-35), but only Apollodorus (2d century BCE) names the chair, though Horace's allusion in *Odes* 4.7, line 27, suggests that he too knew that tradition. Some commentators on Horace's lines appear to have been confused by a sort of verbal interference with the more famous River Lethe: see, for example, Alexander's translation (339) and the editorial comments in the Bennett-Rolfe edition (391; also 306, where Horace's *vincula* is taken literally). James Nohrnberg discusses at length, in the context of Sir Guyon's temptation, the presence in ancient mythology of contrasting chairs

if we ask just what role the Silver Chair plays, we see how far Lewis's imagination has left all such possible models behind. Whatever the name Chair of Forgetfulness might imply, the Silver Chair seems to have just the opposite effect: it's when Rilian is seated there that the memory of his former life returns. But why would the Witch allow him to sit there, if there is some quality in the Chair that does this? As I have said, her spell includes forgetfulness but she lacks the power to make it work all the time. The Chair in fact breaks that spell, but the cords that hold him in it prevent him from acting while sound in memory, understanding, and will.³⁷ It is paradoxically a place of both captivity and liberation: only when the body is bound is the mind free. But once that brief interval is past the enchantment resumes. The Chair may not, however, be a mere neutral instrument. Rilian, when "in [his] right mind," calls it "enchanted," a "vile engine of sorcery" (149, 148, 152). Once the Chair is hacked to pieces, the enchantment also ends, with "a bright flash, a sound like small thunder, and [...] a loathsome smell" (152).³⁸ The Chair, then, must have a double function, not only to imprison the victim (as do those of Theseus and the Lady, and perhaps that of Sir Guyon as well if he had accepted the invitation to sit) but also to ensure the renewal of the spell. Thus it is, after all, in some fashion a chair of forgetfulness; but with a great deal more complexity in Lewis's adaptation than in the ancient myth as it has come down to us. In *An Experiment in Criticism* Lewis identifies a "mythic quality" that does not depend on the medium used to convey it, found sometimes in story plots and sometimes in mere conceptions (42-43). I suggest that the "Chair of Forgetfulness" in Apollodorus and Horace belonged, for Lewis, in the second category and stirred his imagination to make a story of it.

When the captive pleads with them "by the great Lion, by Aslan himself" to release him (150), the three whose mission it is to harrow hell immediately recognize the Fourth Sign; this time, they've remembered to

of Forgetfulness and Memory (342-43). My thanks to Matthew Fike, who drew my attention to this part of the Theseus myth (43). Robert Graves also mentions it (363).

³⁷ This triadic formula is taken from Augustine's *De Trinitate* 10.17-18 (298). Cox writes of the role in this story of "will, a determination to persevere" (166), and Nohnberg notes a parallel in the Lotus Eaters episode of the *Odyssey* where the loss of memory produces "inability to sustain a continuous will" and purpose (343).

³⁸ Not only is Rilian released from the Witch's enchantment at that moment, but so also are the Earthmen: "there came a great crash and bang," the floor of Underland cracks open to reveal "the Really Deep Land" more than a mile below, and at once each of those who had been "called up [...] by magic" from Bism "thinks to himself, Why, I must have been enchanted." Throwing down their "sacks and bundles and tools," they remember jokes, jigs, songs, and fireworks (180-81)—which Jill and the others misinterpret as battle signals (173).

remember. Again, however, they face a hermeneutic task. As when the journey began by moonlight, they cannot yet see their way clearly. If they had remembered Rilian's earlier drawing a blank at the name "Aslan," they might have more readily perceived that they were now hearing his authentic, unenchanted voice. But Eustace is cautious: "It was the *words* of the sign" (150; emphasis in the original). But could it have been a trick by the sorceress or just an accident? In the preceding clue, also, it was only "the words"—"UNDER ME"—and as Puddleglum reminded them, "there *are* no accidents." They must conclude, then, that the man in the Chair is "the lost prince"; the Fourth Sign was clear: "you will know." But the next question is, what action does that knowledge call for? Their instructions did not state that a request made in Aslan's name must necessarily be granted, no matter what the circumstances; on that point, judgment is required. Rilian's behavior, which so far has matched the sorceress's account (though he hasn't yet turned into a snake), seems certifiably "lunatic" (151). Part of what deters them is fear—born of prudence, which is a virtue opposed to recklessness. But Eustace and Jill in their prudential calculation of what might result³⁹ overlook one crucial fact, that "our guide is Aslan." When Puddleglum reminds them of that, courage, based on trust, replaces fear. Without guarantees, they take the risk of cutting the cords—crying out, "In the name of Aslan" (152)—and the result confirms their decision.⁴⁰ Rilian's release fully restores his memory and his identity. They kneel before him in retrospective acknowledgment that his requests are indeed to be obeyed.

Unexpectedly returning, the Witch seizes control of the situation. Although her spell has ended, she has skill also in a lesser kind of "magic" (159) using such instruments as drugs, rhythm and melody,⁴¹ tone of voice, and sophistry. She nearly succeeds in undermining the knowledge that the four companions have and obliterating the memories that ought to confirm it. Although Rilian had easily remembered meeting the others in the Overworld and later had spoken of his many excursions "to accustom my eyes to the sunlight" (138, 144), and goes on even in this scene to remind the Witch of her promise to make him a king in the Overworld (156), and though the realm's own password recited over and over acknowledges "the sunlit lands," now the Witch

³⁹ *Prudence* and *providence* both derive from Latin *pro + videre*, with the sense of 'looking ahead.' But the former is a human quality that involves taking into account to the best of our ability what we consider a likely future, while the latter has in addition a specialized theological sense (for which the etymology with its implications of linear time is a bit misleading, since the divine omniscience operates outside of time).

⁴⁰ Compare Digory's decision in *The Magician's Nephew* (156-61) to keep his promise in the face of strong temptation concerning imagined outcomes, intensified by the Witch's attempted deconstruction of the promise (161).

⁴¹ As Jill would put it later, "the Witch's thrumming had been full of bad magic" (195).

with her reductivist pseudologic and “her soft, silver laughs” charms him and the others into pronouncing that “there never was a *sun*” (161) and denying that Overworld exists: it is “all a dream” (159).⁴² Then, though Jill with a great struggle brings up from the depths of her memory the existence of Aslan, the Witch dismisses that too as imaginary: “this world of mine [...] is the only world.”⁴³ She chides them all for their “childish” play (161-62). Her victims are nearly hypnotized, “the enchantment [is] almost complete,” but, once again, Puddleglum’s courage saves the day. He stamps out the stupefying fire and “instantly [...] everyone’s brain” clears and their bodies revive. The Witch herself, by turning her voice angrily from “sweet tones” to “loud [and] terrible,” unintentionally aids in breaking the spell and enables Puddleglum to continue the contest on a playing field of his choosing (163). Without trying to refute her false logic, he explains the principle by which he intends to live. Even if theirs is only “a play-world,” her “black pit of a kingdom” is a “pretty poor” world in comparison and they’d prefer “setting out in the dark” to try and find Overland (164). Not long after writing *The Silver Chair* Lewis read a paper at the Socratic Club that explains in philosophical terms the principle of trust that has guided their action in freeing the prince and maintaining their faith in Aslan despite contrary evidence that seems at the time overwhelming. For those who have come to know God—albeit only imperfectly—“the logic of personal relations” trumps “the logic of speculative thought” (Lewis, “Obstinacy” 196).⁴⁴

So far, the Green Witch has appeared as one with the power to metamorphose others. Now, as if Puddleglum has stamped out her sophistries as well as her fire, she drops the instrument she has been strumming and begins a quick change from her own human shape into that of a “great serpent [...] green as poison,⁴⁵ thick as Jill’s waist,” with “huge flaming eyes” (165). Unlike some

⁴² Much earlier, in the heavy, soporific atmosphere over the underground lake, they already have trouble remembering that “sun and blue skies and wind and birds” were more than a dream (135). Compare Aslan’s warning on the Mountain, “Take care that it [the thicker air below] does not confuse your mind” (31), and Ward’s comments (129).

⁴³ McGrath traces to Feuerbach and Freud her argument of “projection,” adding that Lewis has given here “an obvious, but exceptionally creative, reworking of Plato’s image of men in a cave” (197). Rilian seems defenseless against a strategy of negation very like that to which his father had been subjected as a child. The Witch insists that a so-called lion is only “a bigger and better cat, [...] a pretty make-believe” imagined as wish-fulfillment. “There is no Narnia, no Overworld, no sky, no sun, no Aslan” (*Silver Chair* 162). Miraz had told the boy Caspian, “[T]here’s no such person as Aslan. And there are no such things as lions” (*Prince Caspian* 42).

⁴⁴ Evan K. Gibson (192-93) has noted the parallel between Puddleglum’s speech and the closing paragraph of Lewis’s essay.

⁴⁵ The phrase “green as poison” is Lewis’s *leitmotif* for the shape-shifting Witch (see the quotations on page 145 above). Apparently unique in Lewis is the fusing of the shape-

serpent transformations in older literary tradition, hers is not a penalty imposed but a chosen strategy, and she remains erect in fighting mode rather than crawling on the ground. In changing her bodily form she also relinquishes human attributes, exchanging guile (which has failed) for violence. Her tongue, now “forked” (166), has become an attack weapon and no longer capable of speech.⁴⁶ Her eyes have now taken on the legendary power of the snake to fascinate its prey⁴⁷—the one power remaining to her, besides serpentine strength and venom, after other enchantments have failed. It is useless, however, since the heroes, having escaped from her attacks on their reasoning power, are now too occupied with the urgency of self-defense to be candidates for further hypnosis. Much like the monster Error, half woman and half serpent, in the first book of Spenser’s *Faerie Queene*, the great green snake wraps itself around Rilian’s body

shifter’s garment into her new body, which accounts for the green color. It is hard to say whether Lewis’s choice of color indicates a memory, from his reading, of the “bright green snake” seen in a dream in Coleridge’s unfinished poem “Christabel” (line 549), in which the eponymous heroine is victimized by an intruder, Geraldine, whose possible kinship with Lewis’s Green Witch may be discerned in Coleridge’s use of serpentine imagery, including that in the dream, rather than any literal metamorphosis. See Nethercot 54-55, 92-93, 99-100, 105-19.

⁴⁶ Metamorphosis from human to ophidian shape is a fairly common motif in folklore and myth, but hardly ever is the process of change described in so much detail as Lewis offers (164-65). (Another example of his careful attention to visualizing a transformation process is found in the story he had just finished writing, *The Horse and His Boy*, in the account of Rabadash’s asinification; see Huttar 17-18, 20-22.) Several critics have noted in Lewis’s account of the Witch’s transformation possible echoes of older writers. At least equally worth noticing, however, are the ways Lewis departed from tradition, including, besides those already noted, the emphasis on the eyes, which seems to be unique in Lewis. Two earlier texts with some obvious verbal parallels to Lewis’s narrative are Milton’s account of Satan’s transformation (*Paradise Lost* 10.511-14 and 518) and Dante’s of Buoso’s exchange of bodies with another thief who is already in serpent form, in Circle Eight (*Inferno* 25.105-41). Both poets mention the forked tongue (lines 518 and 133-34 respectively) and explicitly connect it with the consequent lack of speech. In both Milton and Lewis this physical feature has been anticipated by the subject’s long habit of equivocation and deceit, for which it is a common metaphor. On the Witch’s shift from guile to violence compare the choices considered by Milton’s Satan (*Paradise Lost* 1.121).

⁴⁷ See Nethercot 114-17 and Coleridge, “Christabel,” lines 582-600. Also worth comparison are a fragment among Lewis’s juvenilia (see King 262-63) and a scene in Charles Williams’s *The Place of the Lion* in which the hero is being attacked by a woman who is in some fashion under demonic possession in serpent form. Her eyes are “gazing at him as if they were following the helpless scurry of some escaping creature” and “he could do nothing” (83).

so quickly that he can barely free his arms—another narrow escape—and finally, with help from his companions and with many blows, “[hack] off its head.”⁴⁸

Having witnessed the metamorphosis, the four companions now know that their enemy could assume either of two forms, and once she has been killed, Rilian completes the confirmation of what Jill had intuited after the owl’s story: “This is undoubtedly the same worm that I pursued in vain by the fountain.” Casting himself in a role comparable to Hamlet’s, he declares, “My royal mother is avenged” (166). The struggle in the dark castle of Underland has ended.⁴⁹ The Witch is dead, who thought herself immortal,⁵⁰ and the mission for which Jill and Eustace were called into Narnia is accomplished.

But four chapters remain, fully a quarter of the book. Lewis will need them, to get his characters home. They will face more puzzles that need solving, and at the end justice must be done to offenders, the schoolyard bullies. It was a noted historian of the detective genre who, in the same era when Lewis created Narnia, suggested that one reason for its “vast popularity” might be “that, in a disorderly world, it represents one of the few fixed points of order and morality, where justice may be counted on to emerge triumphant” (Haycraft 1:5). Aslan’s Four Signs, however, have all been fulfilled. There are no more divinely given clues; the heroes now are left to their own mental and physical resources and their trust in Aslan.

Their first concern is to return to the Overworld, but they are not sure of the way or of what might block the way. We may recall that the ball of thread Ariadne gave Theseus for retracing his path in the labyrinth was also called a

⁴⁸ *Silver Chair* 166. The name Errour in Spenser’s allegory aptly fits Lewis’s Witch as well. Hardy (39-40) is one of several scholars who have enumerated similarities between the two narratives—the “darksome” cave where the monster, standing erect, winds “her huge traine / All suddenly about his [the Redcross Knight’s] body;” the knight’s attempt to strangle her before finally lopping off her head, and the resultant flow of gore. To appreciate Lewis’s artistry in the use of sources, however, it is equally important to notice the differences, such as the hybrid form of Spenser’s monster vs. the Witch’s shape-shifting, the differing ways the human combatants get their hands free, and Rilian’s inability to dispatch the snake single-handed with only one blow, lacking Redcross’s “more than manly force.” Nor does Lewis have any use for Errour’s allegorical “vomit [...] of books and papers” or the “spawne of [...] / Deformed monsters” with which she nearly overwhelms the knight and which finally “deuoure” her corpse (see *FQ* 1.1.11-26; for the quotations, stanzas 14, 18, 24, 20, 22, 26).

⁴⁹ Lewis gives some prominence to the phrase “dark castle” by using it in the title of his chapter 11. Is it merely coincidence that a similarly negative connotation for “dark” lies at the heart of the novel fragment known as “The Dark Tower”?

⁵⁰ She “well remembers” the ancient king’s stone inscription, said the brainwashed Rilian. “She is of divine race, and knows neither age nor death” (140, 141).

“clue”—in fact, the original meaning of the word.⁵¹ But Underland is different, having many exits: labyrinthine but multicursal. Their question is, how can they avoid capture by the enslaved but well-armed Earthmen? And the ominous noise they are hearing—what does it mean? There are “voices [...] and also a steady roaring,” and from the high window they see “a great red glow” and “something very strange” in the streets that they must try to decipher, Earthmen “darting about” or “lurking in shadow”; from the harbor a “rumbling roar” increasing and “shaking the whole city.” The sea is rising; a flood is feared. They try several interpretations. Puddleglum wonders if a volcano beneath them is about to erupt and destroy them all. Rilian’s first thought is that it’s “some new devilry” (169-70). But the truth, they finally agree, is the opposite. The Witch’s enchantments had arrested mutability in the underground realm. With her death, the pent-up course of natural change breaks out. Mutability returns with a vengeance, “and now the Deep Lands are falling to pieces” (171).

That conclusion is close to the mark, and they turn next to consider the best action to take. At this point a good omen appears (and therefore must be interpreted), another metamorphosis wrought by supernatural power: Rilian discovers that his once-black shield has “turned bright as silver” and now is blazoned with “the figure of the Lion” gules on a field argent.⁵² In ordinary detective fiction such a *deus ex machina* would be a serious flaw, but in Lewis’s adaptation of the genre it is fully in accord with his restoration of a theological dimension to the concept of “mystery.” To Rilian the change “signifies that Aslan will be our good lord, whether he means us to live or die” (172). And now, “bid[ding] farewell to hopes and fears” (173), they set out. Two obstacles threaten their escape, the rising flood and an army of gnomes assembling against them—for the Earthmen too are misinterpreting what they see. More and more the Prince becomes his old self, leading the group in improvised efforts to escape and “almost enjoying himself” as he sings “snatches of an old song” in the Narnian repertoire (176)—evidence of his happily recovered memories. Capturing someone they suppose to be an enemy, they learn that the gnomes, now unenchanted,⁵³ are friends who will direct them on the way out to the upper world.

The way is dimly lit; still, better than the state of their knowledge. Once they get across the rising water they face a “slow, weary march uphill” (188) and find the road growing narrow and “leading them up into a steep tunnel” where,

⁵¹ *OED* s.v. *clue*, sense 3, with citations from Chaucer onward. The figurative sense of the word (used throughout this paper) is not recorded earlier than the 17th century; the modern spelling, still later.

⁵² The divine self-revelation is given not as an aid to faith but as a confirmation of faith that has been embraced without benefit of sight.

⁵³ See above, note 38.

finally, the lamps give out and leave them “in absolute darkness.” In this crisis, when their sum total of information might add up to despair, Rilian calls for “courage” and reminds the others of what he had said before: “Whether we live or die Aslan will be our good lord” (190). It is Eustace who urges that they keep walking, and who notices “much later” a small patch of light high in a wall that blocks further progress—not sunshine, “only a cold blue sort of light,” not even enough to illuminate their surroundings yet “better than nothing” (191).

That poses the next conundrum to be solved. Again, the first step is to gather information. With the help of Puddleglum, the tallest of the four, Jill climbs up and discovers a hole into the upper world. At this point Lewis’s narrative takes an interesting turn. There are literally two different points of view, Jill’s and the others’, and each must try to make sense of what they see—or, in the case of those below, mainly what they hear. Lewis uses a device often found in detective stories, reporting sequentially what different observers think they have found out. First are the ones standing below, who hear “scuffling [and] struggling” and, when Jill vanishes through the hole, conclude that she is in danger: “We have sent a brave lady into the hands of enemies” (193). Then the narrative viewpoint changes and we are told what “really happened.” Jill discovers that the hole in the wall is like a window from which she can look down on a puzzling scene, the knowledge of which comes to her in stages. At first she has only a jumble of sensory experiences—tactile (“deadly cold”), auditory (“a good deal of noise”), and visual (“pale and blue light” and “white objects flying about”). Then, having climbed higher, she begins to put names to these sensations: music and rhythmical thumping, a white patch of level ground several feet below—far enough to hurt if she fell—and “a lot of people [...] moving about.” The next stage is one of connecting these observations with similar ones in her memory and thus filling out the scene. The people are Fauns and Dryads, their movement is a dance. Suddenly “like a thunderclap” she realizes that the scene is snow-covered and lit by moonlight. (Here Lewis nicely closes a circle, returning to the moonlit night when Jill was flown to the ruined tower to begin the quest, with all that suggests regarding the limitations of our knowledge.) These identifications enable her finally to put all the scraps of information together, with a remarkable twofold effect: a change from apprehension to “delight” and immediate action based on her new knowledge: “It’s all right. We’re out and we’re home.”⁵⁴ But the words are never uttered, being blocked by a snowball “square in [her] mouth” (193-96). When she can talk again, Jill calls out for help, and when the Narnians have brought her “slithering

⁵⁴ Note that Jill’s first thoughts are of the whole group, not just herself. This is foreshadowed in her interior monologue a few lines before as she looks on the scene below: “*They* had [...] come out in the heart of Narnia” (194, emphasis supplied).

down the bank head first" she immediately asks them to "dig the others out" (196). But thanks to the snowball, the others are still in the dark figuratively as well as literally. Once again the viewpoint shifts, as Eustace emerges from the hole trying to attack his rescuers with a sword, thinking he is still in the underworld and they are another sort of "evil creatures" (198).

The return above ground is liberating in more ways than one, for now, in a nice inversion of the Green Witch's false claims, Jill and Eustace can no longer "quite believe in Underland"; already their experience in the dark world seems "only a dream" (199). When the others too have been freed, there is one matter that's immediately clear with no need for deliberation. Though he is dusty and disheveled, the Narnians at once recognize Prince Rilian and do him homage. In yet another indication of the value of remembering, we are told how some are old enough to see the resemblance to King Caspian as a youth (201). Conversation follows and a "lesson" is drawn from the Prince's account of their adventures: "These Northern Witches always mean the same thing, but in every age they have a different plan for getting it" (203).⁵⁵

Now it is winter, not the long, burdensome winter of the White Witch but one that has its place in a Spenserian procession of the seasons, with its own pleasures such as the charming traditional Snow Dance. It is a time for people and readers alike to relax and enjoy themselves at a convivial (though not abundant) communal meal in a cozy firelit cave. But mutability in its darker sense will reassert itself. The adventurers get back to the Narnian capital just in time for Prince Rilian to greet his father the King, who is dying. As Donald Glover has noted, in this novel "for the first time in Narnia we see age, sorrow, and death" (164), themes generally deemed, in Lewis's time, unsuitable in stories for child readers. But the metamorphoses will take yet another turn—reminiscent of the pattern we will see in Spenser's *Two Cantos*. While the Narnians mourn (having to put off celebrating their new King), Jill and Eustace suddenly find themselves back on the Mountain of Aslan, a place of "clear" air and clear understanding—unlike the "thicke[r]" atmosphere of the world below (31) where the job of detecting can pose great challenges. Lying here on the streambed is the dead King Caspian. Then, with a drop of the Lion's blood, his form begins to change. Again the process of transformation is carefully described step by step. Time seems to work backward:⁵⁶ "His white beard turned to grey, and from grey to yellow, and got shorter and vanished altogether; and his sunken cheeks grew round and fresh, and the wrinkles were smoothed, and his eyes

⁵⁵ Compare Lewis's idea, in a different context, of the way diabolical strategies change from one era to another in the manipulation of "sexual 'tastes'" and intellectual fashions (*Screwtape* 91, 32-33, 118).

⁵⁶ Lewis's phrase on the power of the Deeper Magic in *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* (133).

opened, and his eyes and lips both laughed, and suddenly he leaped up and stood before them—a very young man, or a boy” (213). Lewis is still writing fantasy, but what he writes is an imaginative construction of an abstract doctrine: in the words of the Apostles’ Creed, “I believe in the resurrection of the body.” Here in *The Silver Chair* Lewis makes a dry run for what he will do more extensively at the end of *The Last Battle*, when English Narnians no longer alive on Earth all live again, physically as in their prime, in Aslan’s Country which is the New Narnia.

For the old Narnia has itself come to an end, and the human metamorphoses are only part of a larger divine process which is shown in *The Last Battle*, the rebirth of Nature in a glory surpassing that of Eden. Lewis there portrays vividly what Spenser expressed more abstractly in the judgment given by the goddess Nature. It is important to remember, however, that neither Lewis’s nor Spenser’s rendition can be more than an approximation. The reality must remain a mystery.

Nature’s verdict is in two parts. First, she agrees with Mutability “that all things stedfastnes doe hate / And changed be.” Still, change is inherent in the created order, and thus “ouer them Change doth not rule and raigne”; rather, “by their change their being [they] dilate: / And turning to themselues at length againe, / Doe worke their owne perfection”; they “raigne ouer change, and doe their states maintaine” (FQ 7.7.58). Therefore Mutability must be “content” with her present status, powerful but not almighty. Second, Nature looks far ahead to the Last Things as understood in Christian teaching and adds: “But time shall come that all shall changed bee, / And from thenceforth, none no more change shall see” (7.7.59.4-5). Finally, we hear the poet’s voice, reflecting first that what Mutability said “makes me loath this state of life so tickle” and “cast away” the love of things that “fad[e]” and are “fickle,” soon to become victims of Time. “Then gin I think on that which Nature sayd, / Of that same time when no more *Change* shall be, / But stedfast rest of all things firmly stayd / Vpon the pillours of Eternity”; and the poem breaks off with a prayer to be allowed himself to experience that Sabbath rest (FQ 7.8.1-2). For all Lewis’s high regard for Spenser, however, this ending does not quite satisfy his own vision. The Heaven that we find imagined in the close of his Narnian chronicles is anything but static and unmoving, and his Sabbath rest is paradoxically very energetic, a continuing journey of discovery, faster and faster, farther up and farther in, an always open-ended mystery.

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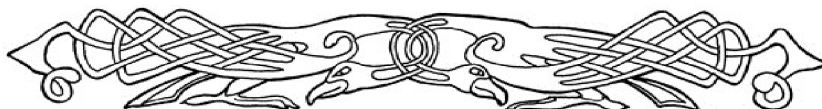
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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

CHARLES A. HUTTAR is Professor of English Emeritus at Hope College. He has written extensively on the Inklings as well as editing *Imagination and the Spirit* (1971) and co-editing two volumes that have received the Mythopoeic Scholarship Award in Inklings Studies, *Word and Story in C.S. Lewis* and *The Rhetoric of Vision: Essays in Charles Williams*. His most recent collection is *Scandalous Truths: Essays by and about Susan Howatch*. His current studies focus on C.S. Lewis and the mythography of metamorphosis.



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As a non-profit organization incorporated in the state of California, we are required by law to vote every three years on the Council of Stewards (the Society's Board of Directors) to serve for three year terms which commence the first day of the following year, in this case 2015. Toward the end of the year, the present Council will be sending out a ballot of nominees for the various offices that make up the Council.

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