Mythopoeic Society MYTHLORE A Journal of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature

Volume 23
Number 1

Article 8

10-15-2000

Letters

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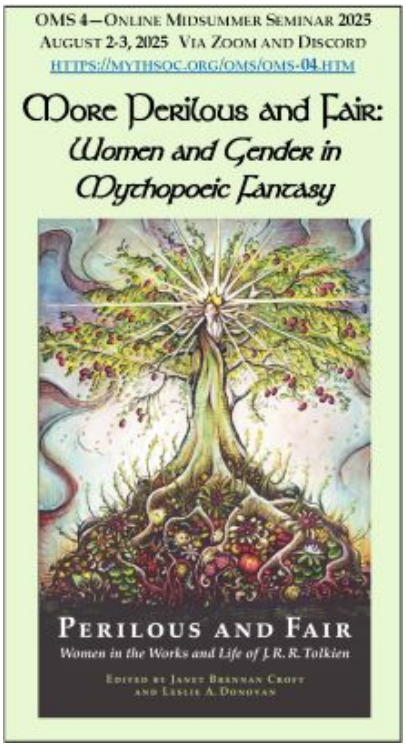
Online MidSummer Seminar 2025
More Perilous and Fair: Women and Gender in Mythopoeic Fantasy

August 2-5, 2024

Via Zoom and Discord

https://www.mythsoc.org/oms/oms-04.htm



Letters

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I will attempt to print in each issue letters received since the preceding issue. Subscribers are encouraged to send letters. I am especially interested in letters that question the theses, conclusions, and methodologies of articles in previous issues. My hope is that this Letters section may serve as an open forum subscribers to comment upon the articles and to receive replies from the authors. [Nota Bene: Letters thus printed are printed verbatim as I receive them.]

Dear Editor,

May I submit some thoughts upon reading Charles Huttar's "C.S. Lewis' Prufrokian Vision in *The Greats Divorce*" (*Mythlore* 22.4 [Spring 2000]: 4-12)? First let me say that *The Great Divorce* is one of my most favorite of Lewis' books, and I have read it many times, so I am happy to read insights about it.

Page 6 "What Lewis had against Eliot's famous image was not what Eliot made of it, but what some of Eliot's readers, reading perhaps equally casually and carelessly, have made of it." That may indeed be so, and it would be a great mistake to castigate the world's thinkers for what their casual and careless readers have believed that they said. In a small Pelican published in 1944, entitled "Meaning and Purpose", Kenneth Walker analyzes "the main scientific theories of the last hundred years and their impact upon religious thought and belief". In his preface he says, "I mistook tentative theories for absolute truths.....It was not the inventors of these theories who were to blame, but my own inability to understand the true function of science and the nature of the conclusions at which it arrives." In dealing with Darwin, Freud, Bergsen, and Nietzsche, among others, he repeats over and over that "his countrymen misread his account". So that whatever the writer wrote, the popular effect was produced by what what his readers read - often not the same thing at all!

Page 7 "The bus queue as an image of waiting, mingling despair and hope" put me in mind not of Samuel Beckett's work, but of the story "Uncovenanted Mercies" by Rudyard Kipling, first published, as nearly as I can discover, in 1932, in the collection "Limits and Renewals". Kipling's version of Hell is a railway station where people wait for "a train, which may or may not bring the person with whom they have contracted to spend Eternity. And, as the English say, they don't half have to wait, either." Satan, Azrael, and Gabriel observe the waiting "till the agony of waiting that shuffled and mumbled ... laid hold; dimming, first, the lustre of their pinions; bowing, next, their shoulders as the motes in the never-shifting sunbeam filtered through it and settled on them, masking, finally, the radiance of Robe, Sword, and very Halo, till only their eyes held light". "My orders," [said Azrael] "are to dismiss to the Mercy.

Where is it?" Kipling's story has other satires and messages than Lewis' book, but the image of the terrible waiting has remained with me.

Page 4 Eliot shares with Lewis a Christian faith. Eliot's career and conversion are outlined in "Literary Converts": spiritual inspiration in an age of unbelief" by Joseph Pearce. (HarperCollinsPublisher c1999 also San Francisco, Ignatius Press). Beginning with Oscar Wilde, who died in 1900, and going through literary figures of Belloc, Chesterton, Eliot, Waugh, the Sitwells, to Muggeridge and Greene, among many others, Pearce interweaves their overlapping lives and interactions for a century. Most of the "converts" are converts to Roman Catholicism. Lewis and Eliot are classified as Anglo-Catholics. The book also includes mentions of Tolkien and Sayers, but not, obviousl, [sic] as "converts". Pearce attempts to put down the prevailing winds of thought as the century progressed, and to show how each writer and critic influenced and was influenced by the other, up to the "conversion" of each, and what change that made in life and writing. I am not competent to judge how far the attempt succeeds. I am intrigued by Pearce's research into contemporary accounts, for example, of Edith Sitwell on the platform in debate with Alfred Noyes in 1932, and the reversal of facts made in the press next day. I am also a little awed by the vehemence with which advocates of moderns (e.g. Sitwell) and traditionalists (e.g. Noyes) addressed each other in the press. [I am reminded of the public reaction to the Councils of Nicea, after which triumphant bishops were chaired through the streets like football heroes, and their supporters rioted joyously.] I am also grateful to Pearce for the many apt quotations by his subjects about their lives and times. He quotes Alec Guinness on the conversion of Edith Sitwell: "her tall figure, swathed in black, looking like some strange, eccentric bird and Fr Caraman pouring water over her foreheaad in the ancient rite. She seemed like an ageing princess come home from exile." He quotes C.S. Lewis: "I never liked Eliot's poetry or his prose but when I met him I loved him." I enjoyed startling tidbits like the revelation that Graham Greene had never received the Nobel Prize for Literature because one of the judges objected that "he is a Catholic".

For neat, potted biographies, do not turn to this book. For a challenge to what you can remember of Literature 101, enjoy it. And the index (which has 35 separate references to Eliot alone, and 19 to Lewis) will help you find specifics, if you insist.

Grace E. Funk