A Retelling within a Myth Retold: The Priest of Essur and Lewisian Mythopoetics

Peter J. Schakel
Hope College, MI

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Abstract
Asks why Lewis felt the myth of Cupid and Psyche needed to be retold. The story told by the Priest of Essur is a “middle step” between the original myth and Lewis’s recasting of it, in which the incomplete pagan notion of sacrifice gives way to the fullness of that theme in Christianity.

Additional Keywords
Cupid and Psyche (myth)—Relation to Till We Have Faces; Lewis, C.S. Till We Have Faces; Sacrifice in Till We Have Faces; Christine Lowentrout
A Retelling within a Myth Retold:
The Priest of Essur and Lewisian Mythopoetics
Peter J. Schakel

Readers have long recognized that the form, tone, and emphases of C.S. Lewis's *Till We Have Faces* can be understood only through attention to Lewis's subtitle, "A Myth Retold." Steve J. Van Der Weele, in a fine paper several years ago, focused on the word "Retold" and discussed in an illuminating way the main changes Lewis made in Apuleius's tale of Cupid and Psyche: Lewis's elaboration of the historical setting, his shift to a first-person point-of-view, and his enlargement of the theme of jealousy and love. In that paper, however, Van Der Weele touched only lightly on what seems to me a more fundamental issue, not how Lewis retold the myth, but why he felt — and felt so long and intensely — that it needed retelling. I will suggest that an answer — and an insight into Lewis's views upon myth, paganism, and Christianity — may be found in the curious fact that he actually retells it twice, in *Till We Have Faces* as a whole, of course, but also in the sacred story told to Orual by the Priest of Essur.

Apuleius' tale is familiar — Psyche's beauty; Venus' jealousy toward her; Cupid's love for and marriage to her; her sisters' visit to and envy of her magnificent palace; her folly, her subsequent trials and sufferings, and her eventual reconciliation with Venus and restoration to Cupid. What Lewis noticed immediately about this story, a story filled with archetypes and mythic potential, was its lack of numinosity, its lack of any sense of awe or wonder or mystery. Most significantly it did not make the palace invisible to the skeptical and sinister sisters, though Lewis knew, from his first reading of the story, that this was "the way the thing must have been." That lack of numinosity is all the more striking in context, in Apuleius's *Metamorphoses*, which, bawdy and extravagant as it is in places, ends with a scene of high numinosity, a pean of praise at the appearance of the goddess Isis to her now devoted worshipper Lucius. Unlike that final scene, the tale of Cupid and Psyche does not strike the emotions and imagination deeply; Apuleius drew on folk motifs and archetypes which could have been — which even cried out to be — turned into myth, but he failed to imbue them with the imaginative and numinious qualities essential in myth.

That failure frustrated and even haunted Lewis. In his youth he tried to write a poem on his own version of the Cupid and Psyche story — fragments of two such attempts in couplets remain in the "Memoirs of the Lewis Family" compiled by Warren Lewis, now in the Wade Collection at Wheaton College. In 1922, according to his diary, he was considering how to make a masque or play of the story. Only much later, however, in the 1950's, was he able to find a form which could release fully the latent power of the myth; it is important to notice that, in arriving at that form, he inserts an extra step in order to set forth the basic mythical implications of the tale. The story told to Orual by the Priest of Essur becomes a middle step between Apuleius's telling and Lewis's retelling, a step needed to show what Apuleius could, perhaps even should, have developed but did not.

Orual, in her old age, needing a change of scenery, resolves "to go on a progress and travel in other lands" (p. 237). She and several younger companions travel first into Phars, then into Essur, where they decide to take an extra day in order to examine the unusual phenomenon of a natural hot spring. The excursion is made on "the calmest day — pure autumn — very hot, yet the sunlight on the stubble looked aged and gentle,
not fierce like the summer heats. You would think the year was resting, its work done. And I whispered to myself that I too would begin to rest" (p. 239). The setting is ironic, in terms of the unsettling revelations about to come, but also symbolic, for Orual, like the year, has reached her golden years, the time for a harvest of the wisdom which has been maturing over the decades. The setting introduces the seasonal archetype, which will be crucial to the story she is about to hear, as is the "journey" archetype (p. 239) — a journey of education, into experience.

As the others prepare the evening meal, Orual wanders off into the shady forest and comes upon a tiny, white temple containing the image of a godess, with a band or scarf of some black stuff tied round the head of the image so as to hide its face — much like my own veil, but that mine was white" (p. 241). The temple priest offers, for a little silver piece, to tell her the sacred story of Istra, the goddess. As he begins, she reflects,

to me it was as if the old man's voice, and the temple, and myself and my journey, were all things in such a story; for he was telling the very history of our Istra, of Psyche herself — how Talapal (that's the Essurian Ungit) was jealous of her beauty and made her to be offered to a brute on a mountain, and how Talapal's son Ialim, the most beautiful of the gods, loved her and took her away to his secret palace. (p. 242)

Lewis turns Psyche into the goddess Apuleius worshipped, into "the Veiled Isis," originally a goddess of fecundity identified with Demeter, and he uses that identification to indicate what Apuleius had missed, namely the theme of sacrifice — Istra in the priest's tale is "offered to a brute on a mountain," not, like Apuleius's Psyche, given in marriage to "a dire mischief, vipers and fierce" in obedience to Apollo's oracle. For Orual, however, two elements of the priest's tale are erroneous — "he was telling it wrong" (p. 243). First, he apparently mistakes the motivation of the sisters as jealousy, rather than Orual's desire for the truth, and this is what incites Orual to the writing of Perelandra. Second, he says that both sisters had visited Psyche and, more importantly, had seen her temple: "How," Orual writes in protest, "could any mortal have known of that palace at all? That much of the truth [the gods] had dropped into someone's mind, in a dream, or an oracle, or however they do such things. That much; and wiped clean out the very meaning, the pith, the central knot, of the whole tale" (p. 243).

Orual concludes angrily that the Priest "knew nothing" (p. 246), but here in fact is the mythical significance Apuleius chose not to develop. By interrupting the Priest, Orual prevented him from completing his sentence with the word sacrifice. Inherent in the Cupid and Psyche story is what Lewis called in "Myth Become Fact" "the old myth of the Dying God"; it is, when its archetypal threads are traced back, one of "those queer stories scattered all through the heathen religions about a god who dies and comes to life again and, by his death, has somehow given new life to men." In missing the image of sacrifice, Apuleius neglected what is at the heart of the matter for Lewis. He brings out its importance later in the book when he has the Fox comment, "for the story of Essur's tale is a reworking of Lewis's "Till We Have Faces" in Ungit's temple: "I never told [Psyche] why the old Priest got something from the dark House that I never got from my trim sentences.... The Priest knew at least that there must be sacrifices" (p. 295). And Lewis knows that in the basic myth of Cupid and Psyche, there must be sacrifice, for it is in sacrifice especially that the old pagan religions anticipate God's fullest revelation of himself and his truths in Christ.

Lewis saw, then, the failures of what Apuleius's tale was; but even more important to him is the inadequacy of what Apuleius's tale should have been, the insufficiency or incompleteness of paganism. ✿ Till We Have Faces, as a "myth reto ld," is actually a retelling of the brutal story of Essur's tale, of Psyche's sacrifice, of Istra, originally a goddess of fecundity, identified with Demeter, 4 and he uses that identification to indicate what Apuleius neglected, not the sacrifice, but the sacrifice of Psyche, Psyche who wears a black scarf through the winter, are fertility myths of a dying god who returns to life, of an image of sacrifice, Apuleius neglected what is at the heart of the matter for Lewis. He brings out its importance later in the book when he has the Fox comment, "for the story of Essur's tale is a reworking of Lewis's "Till We Have Faces" in Ungit's temple: "I never told [Psyche] why the old Priest got something from the dark House that I never got from my trim sentences.... The Priest knew at least that there must be sacrifices" (p. 295). And Lewis knows that in the basic myth of Cupid and Psyche, there must be sacrifice, for it is in sacrifice especially that the old pagan religions anticipate God's fullest revelation of himself and his truths in Christ.

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Oedipus' Son

That Trojan Horse I see
from my parapet
I built myself.

Those readied troops I know,
as I stare within,
I trained myself.

The moon is silent, full and still.
The wooden eyes reflect its light.
The steady archers clutch their bows.
And no bird sings.

--Allan Weinberg

Notes


10. This essay is part of a forthcoming study of Till We Have Faces and Lewis's epistemology.