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Editorial

Additional Keywords

Annalee Peoples

TO ADORE AND TO OBEY

BY GRACIA FAY ELLWOOD

"Obedience...is an erotic necessity" claimed C. S. Lewis' Ransom, referring evidently to the submission of female to male. It is well known that Lewis considered this state of affairs to image forth the true relation between human beings and God: "we are all, corporately and individually, feminine to Him."

Female submission was no doubt an erotic necessity in his own case, to judge from his secrets now published in *They Stand Together*. He was not alone in his orientation, though his was more extreme than most; masculine assertiveness and feminine acquiescence are built into our patterns of speech and action at almost every turn. But that it is an erotic necessity for everyone is questionable. No doubt it depends on one's definition of a good erotic relationship, for people who have no desire for any signs of obedience in their own sexual lives, and are doing just fine, thank you, are not far to seek.

Something else which may tell against Lewis' conception (or, contrariwise, may turn out to support it) is the existence of cases in which his idea stands on its head; there are women for whom the submission of the male is erotically exciting. I have known of some whose fantasies would make Lewis' imagined whip look poor.

That Lewis had (at one time, at least, and possibly throughout his life) a sexual imagination so seriously disordered prompts a second look at his long-maintained affirmation of this necessity. His mention in *The Four Loves* of painful erotic play in a context of mastery and submission seems to suggest a more than incidental connection, even that late in his life. The desire to dominate and the desire to punish may well be a matter of degree of a consciousness that the sexual other is an enemy.

An armchair psychologist might point out that Jack Lewis was effectively abandoned by his mother at her death. It would have been very surprising if he had not felt terrible rage when his continent sank from under him, a rage he was likely unable to face or deal with because he had no right to it; he knew well enough that the abandonment was unintentional. Rage seeks to punish; a guilty rage may invite punishment, as well. It is not so long a step from this to the whip.

Such may well be the case, but I am not sure that this kind of speculation is profitable, since it cannot be established one way or the other. Besides, it is also the case that others who have no such complaint against a parent have also suffered from a sado-masochistic imagination.

The many and varied results of the oppression of women in virtually every time and place give ample reason to explain a dim consciousness, in many of both sexes, that the other is an enemy. (I merely cite the oppression; this is not the place to marshal evidence to convince anyone who is determined that it does not exist.) The oppressed may resent being discouraged or blocked from developing many of their gifts, from jobs of serious responsibility; they may resent dependency; while apparently wielding only that weapon of the (otherwise) powerless, nagging, a woman may be capable of heavier and more effective weapons. The more crushing the structures of oppression at a given

time and place, or the more vocal the agitation against them, the greater the anxiety of those profiting from the structures is likely to be. (Of course not all males profit from them, and on a deep level everyone loses.) In times of calamity it may feed into mass hysteria and monstrous scapegoating, as in the witch hunts. And if a man's self-worth requires fearlessness, there is no way to face up to the anxiety, pinpoint its source and exorcise it. Defensive violence, physical or mental, can only create greater anxiety. Sado-masochism is one way the psyche deals with the intolerable conflict of desiring and fearing the same object at the same time.

Seen from this perspective, the ideal sexual relationship is one in which there is complete confidence and self-assurance, no sense of past wrongs or of a dangerousness in the other, and thus no need to punish or be punished, to control or be controlled.

* * *

But what of Lewis' position that the hierarchical structure in sexual relationships derives not from the Fall but from the order of creation? I think any religious person will grant that when the relationship of a human being to God is in question, submission is a prerequisite. The power of God is released only in the life in which insistence on self-will is given up. Lewis himself is a good example. When he reluctantly let down his defences and learned to adore and to obey, his mind and heart began to be united, and his gifts began to be liberated; and so it has been with many another.

But whether sexual interaction is truly a symbol for this process has been questioned. Despite the firm conclusions I reached above--conclusions for which enormous evidence could be supplied--I am not ready to dismiss sexual union as a symbol for the ultimate union, with its prerequisite of complete submission. Many people have experienced God in this way, and it would be presuming much to say that they have all misconstrued the experience. To take an extreme example:

Batter my heart, three person'd God; for,
you
As yet but knocke, breathe, shine, and
seeke to mend;
That I may rise, and stand, o'erthrow mee,
'and bend
Your force, to breake, blowe, burn and
make me new....
Take mee to you, imprison mee, for I
Except you'enthrall mee, never shall be
free,
Nor ever chaste, except you ravish mee.

But it is important to maintain the complementary image, with God as feminine. Compare the Donne lines with the following from "The Wisdom of ben Sirach":

Wisdom is like her name....
Put your feet into her fetters,
and your neck into her collar.
Put your shoulder under her and carry her,
and do not fret under her bonds.
Come to her with all your soul,

and keep her ways with all your might....
 For at last you will find the rest she
 gives...
 Then her fetters will become for you a
 strong protection,
 and her collar a glorious robe....
 From blossom to ripening grape my heart
 delighted in her;
 My foot entered upon the straight path;
 From my youth I followed her steps.

Unless both images are kept in balance,
 either will become a very destructive model for
 human relationships. Even if one consciously
 tries to avoid the idolatry of unconditionally
 adoring and obeying a human being, partial real-
 ization of the model still tends toward psychologi-
 cal stunting, a permanent child-state on the part
 of the subordinate one, and pride and exploitation
 on the part of the superordinate; too often, even
 violence. The Arthurian Erec is an example of the
 kind of ugliness that erupts when a man who has
 been given this much power is threatened. (The
 story has a happy ending--the teller clearly ad-
 mired Enide's behavior--but such cannot be counted
 on in life.)

The courtly-love ideal of the Lady whose every
 whim is obeyed by her adoring knight probably arose
 out of an instinctive awareness that the Enide
 ideal needed correction. Though the counter-ideal
 may have helped somewhat to raise the status of
 women, who in many respects were chattels, by it-
 self it is no better; Chrétien's Queen is no im-
 provement on his Erec.

Nor can these ideals be dismissed as too far
 removed from concrete daily life to matter. They
 still influence us. C. S. Lewis himself seems to
 have played a filial Knight to Janie Moore's Lady,
 and his too-ready obedience no doubt contributed
 to her degeneration into an impossible tyrant.
 (I do not fault him for taking a share of domestic
 labor, which was only fair, but for letting him-
 self be subject to her whims.)

Of course the results of adoring and obeying
 a human being are not all painful. Adoration is
 rapturous; it is gratifying to think of oneself as
 loving so devotedly. Obedience releases one of
 certain anxieties of maturation, the need to make
 crucial decisions and take responsibility for one's
 life. And even when ill-considered it can help to
 develop a true obedience, to God.

The potential evils of domination and sub-
 mission did not escape Lewis, who knew the danger
 of idolatry and the fact that we need protection
 from one another's fallenness. Let lovers play at
 domination and submission, he says, provided they
 remember that they are playing, enacting, the ult-
 imate relationship. This counsel can well be
 rounded out with the complementary image. Let
 her submit like the Handmaid of the Lord to the

lifegiving inflow of the Spirit. Let him submit
 like one taking the Strait Gate and the Narrow Way
 back to the divine womb to receive rebirth. Let
 them, if they feel so inclined, put paper crowns
 or paper chains upon one another, enjoy the
 theatrical, and not forget its significance.

* * *

An impulse to command or to yield submission
 in an erotic relationship ought to be overcome,
 like any other baneful effect of the Fall, in fav-
 or of a confident mutuality. An impulse to com-
 mand or to yield submission may helpfully be car-
 ried out, in a spirit of play and mutuality.

Which? I am not ready to pronounce *ex cath-
 edra* in favor of either. Readers are invited to
 give opinions.

* * * * *

Glen Goodknight will be guest editor for *Myth-
 lore* 24 while I relax a bit and catch up on some
 things. I expect to return as editor with Number
 25.

Mythprint will reappear in April 1980; see inside
 front cover for further information. Back issues
 of *Mythprint* may now be ordered.



Cont'd from page 17

NOTES

¹Critical opinion varies tremendously on this novel.
 Clyde S. Kilby and William Luther White both agree that it
 is not the best of the Lewis fictions; Green and Hooper,
 however, point out that although Lewis said that the critics
 hated the novel, many Lewis enthusiasts adore it. Clyde
 S. Kilby, *The Christian World of C.S. Lewis* (Grand Rapids,
 Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1969)
 p. 107; William Luther White, *The Image of Man in C.S.
 Lewis* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1969), p. 134; Roger
 Lancelyn Green and Walter Hooper, *C. S. Lewis, a
 Biography* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc.,
 1974), pp. 177-179.

²C. S. Lewis, *The Allegory of Love* (New York: Oxford
 University Press, 1958), p. 164.

³C. S. Lewis, *That Hideous Strength* (New York:
 MacMillan, 1966), p. 16.

⁴C. S. Lewis, *The Four Loves* (New York: Harcourt
 Brace Jovanovich, 1960), pp. 148, 149.

⁵Jack Haynes, "Eros in *That Hideous Strength*,"
Bulletin of the New York C. S. Lewis Society, 5 April 1974),
 2-4.

⁶*That Hideous Strength*, pp. 299, 300.

⁷Same, p. 89.

⁸*The Four Loves*, p. 166.

⁹*That Hideous Strength*, p. 299.