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Till We Have Faces and its Mythological and Literary Precursors

Abstract
Compares Till We Have Faces with its “chief source,” the tale of Cupid and Psyche in Apuleius. Briefly compares it with other works of Lewis as well.

Additional Keywords
Apuleius, Lucius. “Cupid and Psyche”—Relation to Till We Have Faces; Cupid and Psyche (myth)—Relation to Till We Have Faces; Lewis, C.S. Till We Have Faces—Sources; Bonnie GoodKnight
the original article.

Gene and I had the opportunity to meet at MLA, after the letter was written. It was pleasant to find that we are not so far apart on these issues as I would have imagined. For example, we discovered we agree that women should be ordained if they are called to the ministry, and that Lewis's argument to the contrary in "Priestesses in the Church?" is, in Gene's words, probably the "least persuasive" of Lewis's essays.

There does not seem to be substantial evidence against my thesis in Gene's remarks. The quote from "Addison" is excellent, and may indicate that the process was not so quite simple as I may have made it sound; however, it does not dispute the fact that Lewis changed his ideas about women and the Church.

The "superstitious taboo" mentioned was Lewis's direct reference to menstruation as disqualifying a woman from the priesthood. Surely that is not a theological argument against the ordination of women; that portion of The Arthritian Torso does seem to be based on a taboo.

Gene reiterates my objections to That Hideous Strength fairly accurately; I do not see that he has answered them. Mother Dimple irritates me not because she is unintelligent, but because her disparaging generalizations about women are presented as wisdom. The fact that Grace Ironwood is never given her title bothers me only because so many of the men are given professional titles at various points in the novel. It is not simply that she is called Grace; she is "Miss Ironwood" while the men are "Dr. Ransom," "Dr. Dimple," "Professor Frost."

Yes, of course there is a White Witch in Narnia. I certainly would not expend much energy defending the tangential note on a possible racial reference in the description of the hrons. My students found it annoying that after a half a dozen references to its color, Ransom expresses his fear in these terms: "It seemed friendly; but it was very big, very black, and he knew nothing at all about it." "Very big" they could understand as frightening, but "very black"?

Gene told me that he was afraid his final quote from Lewis was a bit harsh. I will close with a better one: "Opposition is true friendship."

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After reading Jessica Kemball-Cook's suggested origins for the name "Moria" in the February Mythprint, I feel moved to point out another possible analogue. As a Christian, Tolkien was influenced by the Bible and may have regarded the coining of names with Biblical echoes as a sort of private joke.

In Gen. 22:2, God commands Abraham to "get thee into the land of Moriah" to offer up Isaac, and subsequent references (2 Sam. 24:18, 1 Chr. 21:18, etc.) accordingly treat Moriah as a place of sacrifice. I don't suggest that we take this correspondence very seriously, but the parallelism is interesting to note.

Another point: has anyone compared the idea of the Balrog with Job 12:22? Here the King James version reads: "He discovereth deep things out of darkness, and bringeth out to light the shadow of death." Far-fetched, perhaps, but fun.

TILL WE HAVE FACES
and its Mythological and Literary Precursors
by Andrew Howard

C.S. LEWIS never wrote anything else like Till We Have Faces. Lewis's literary output includes children's books, space fantasies, allegorical fantasies, Christian-apologetic essays, and works of medieval scholarship, but Faces falls distinctly outside of all of these categories. It is difficult even to assign Till We Have Faces to a familiar fictional genre. It contains elements of the historical novel, the maturation novel, the mystic romance, and the fictionalized philosophical treatise; but it does not fit comfortably into any of these categories. For all its singularity, however, Till We Have Faces has some significant links with its mythological and literary precursors, and our understanding of Faces can be deepened by comparing it with its forerunners.

Lewis takes the story of Psyche and Cupid from the second-century Latin novel The Transformations of Lucius, by Lucius Apuleius. The fundamental story of the mortal who is punished for looking upon her divine lover is much older and appears in more than one culture. Lysias, the Greek tutor in Faces, tells a variant of the story with the sexes reversed,1 and Robert Graves notes that the story "is still widely current as a primitive folk-tale in countries as far apart as Scotland and Hindustan."2 In Apuleius' novel the Cupid and Psyche story is a three-chapter short story inserted into a rollicking and rather disheveled tale of the journeys of an unlucky young nobleman who is turned into an ass for meddling with magic. An old woman tells the story to a frightened young girl, who has just been kidnapped by robbers, in an effort to make her "feel a little better" (Graves, p. 95). Lucius the ass hears the entire story, and remarks that though it was told by a drunken and half-demented old woman, I regretted that I had no means of committing it to writing. (Graves, p. 143)

The drunken old woman's story differs from Lewis' in several respects. Apuleius' story is set unambiguously in the context of Graeco-Roman mythology, the principal divine characters being Venus and her mischievous son Cupid. There are three royal sisters in Apuleius' story, as in Lewis' but all three are beautiful; Psyche, the youngest, far outshines the others in beauty, but they too are lovely. Psyche from the start is a very different character from Lewis' Istra. The old woman calls her "simple-minded" and "silly" (Graves, pp. 113, 115), and there is not trace of the toughness of mind and body which characterize Istra. The two elder sisters are unmistakably cruel, and distinctly jealous of what Psyche receives from her divine husband—for they can see and feel her palace just as easily as she herself can. Thus Apuleius' story corresponds more closely to the tale of the Priest of Istra in Lewis' book (Ch. 21) than to the events of the book themselves.

Lewis attaches great importance to the fact that Istra's

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1 C. S. Lewis, Till We Have Faces (New York: Time, Inc. 1966; orig. pub. 1956), p. 7. Subsequent references will be to this edition.

2 Robert Graves, Intro. to his transl. of The Transformations of Lucius (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1951), p. xix. Subsequent references will be to this edition in the form "Graves, p. "

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palace, unlike that of Apuleius' Psyche, is invisible to others:

The central alteration in my own version consists in making Psyche's palace invisible to normal, mortal eyes—if "making" is not the wrong word for something which forced itself upon me, almost at my first reading of the story. This change of course brings with it a more ambivalent motive and a different character for my heroine and finally modifies the whole quality of the tale. (author's note, pp. 274-75)

Nevertheless, Orual's feelings are not totally different from those of Psyche's sisters in Apuleius' story. Her motive for plotting to kill Psyche's husband may be "more ambivalent"—particularly in her own mind, where she can justify the plot in terms of her love for Psyche—but it remains rooted in the same emotion: jealousy.

The sisters of Apuleius' story display a bald, straightforward kind of jealousy—jealousy of what Psyche has. Their feelings about Psyche's fortune, when they see her beautiful palace and her power over invisible servants and the winds, are very simple:

I simply can't stand seeing my youngest sister living in such undeserved style. ...I'll be ashamed to call myself a woman, if I don't see that she gets toppled down from her pinnacle before long and flung into the gutter. (Graves, p. 109)

Orual's jealousy is to a certain extent more sophisticated; it is jealousy for Psyche, an unwillingness to give up the girl she brought up, the girl she mothered. This jealousy is that which makes her angry at the gods and motivates her to write her accusation of them; I will deal with it more fully below.

But not all of Orual's jealousy is of this higher sort. There are unmistakable traces of jealousy of Istra's good fortune in Orual's feelings, particularly after the girl is taken away from her. She begins to feel jealousy of Psyche's god-husband; when she crosses the river for the first time, with the help of Psyche's strong hand, she thinks, "How strong she grows. She'll be a stronger woman than ever I was. She'll have that as well as her beauty" (p. 92). In Orual's "face-to-face" accusation of the gods the note of envious jealousy is struck among the chords of anger at them for stealing her:

You'll say I was jealous. Jealous of Psyche? Not while she was mine. If you'd have done the other way to work—if it was my eyes you had opened—you'd soon have seen how I would have shown her and told her and taught her and had her up to my level. But to hear a chit of a girl who had (or ought to have had) no thought in her that I'd not put there, setting up for a seer and a prophetess and next thing to a goddess...how could anyone endure it? (p. 255)

Orual resented Psyche's being above her "level," and would only be content with Psyche's being brought "up" to her level if she could have it on her own terms. Orual's resentment is envious jealousy, an emotion she shares with the sisters in Apuleius' story.

We can draw a more fundamental parallel between Apuleius' story and Lewis'. It lies in their directedness, in the way the stories are headed. In Apuleius' story the emphasis is upon Psyche's maturation—her journey from the simplemindedness that allows her to be duped into trying to murder her husband, through the divinely instituted trials and travails, to her final maturity in which she is granted divine status and a legalized marriage with Cupid. This maturation is a gradual one, and requires considerable divine help—at the end of Psyche's Venusian trials, Cupid has to rescue her from magical sleep when she disobeys Venus' orders and opens Proserpine's casket of beauty. But finally the mortal girl is worthy of Cupid, and from the union of Psyche and Eros can come the flowering of love in the human consciousness—their daughter, Pleasure (Graves, p. 143).

For Graves, the story becomes "a most philosophical allegory of the progress of the rational soul toward intellectual love" (Graves, Introd., p. xix).

The maturation of Apuleius' Psyche parallels the fundamental movement of Lewis' book. *Faces* is also the story of a journey of a soul—a soul that is both Psyche and Orual. Psyche's journey is the mythic task-filled one—she must separate the seeds into piles, gather the fleece of the man-killing sheep, and bring back the water from the Styx. Orual's journey is one of suffering—she must suffer the griefs and pains of the mythic tasks, and bear the loss of those she loves, the Fox and Bardia as well as Psyche. Furthermore, Orual matures as she journeys. Probably the first step of her maturation is her willingness to govern wisely and justly, a willingness that gives her a successful reign and a reputation for fairness. When she is the veiled queen she is still the Ungit/Batta figure, "gorged with men's stolen lives" (p. 242), but at least she...
governs wisely, and I do not believe Lewis considers this to be of no account. Her maturation starts moving when she begins to see how she has destroyed the lives of Bardia and Reval, and when she gets an inkling into the nature of her love for Psyche in her visit to the temple of Istra. But only in her visions, when she becomes aware that her possessiveness taints even her love for Psyche, that she is most guilty of devouring human spirit in this, her deepest love. Having recognized her possessiveness for what it is, she is able to see her deformity without the complacency for what it is—a railing against Good for taking away what she thinks she has a right to deceive. This opens the way for the final step—the cleansing of Orual and the triumphant affirmation of the god's words, "You shall also be Psyche" (p. 141).

Here an inversion occurs. Until this point Psyche has had to do only one thing—perform her tasks, not lose heart, continue toiling for Aphrodite/Ungit; she has had to "keep on her way" (p. 266). Meanwhile Orual has not only had to keep on her way—that is, to refuse to see the mirage and have any compunction about it. In the last task it is Orual who needs to do only one thing—suffer—while Psyche must suffer and keep on her way. The suffering is as acute for her as for Orual, but her determination and devotion give her the strength to keep on her way. She suffers and acts, and thereby brings Orual to her final maturation, the beautifying and purifying maturation of ugly Orual into another, beautiful Psyche.

Thus Lewis' and Apeleius' stories both involve maturation. But the maturation does not parallel lines, nor do they have the same line, and we should not make too much of the parallelism. Lewis has not written "a neat philosophical allegory"—in fact, he never writes "neat" books—and we cannot really put Apeleius' piece in the same category as Lewis' complex and unsettled tale. Parallel lines never meet, and although Lewis and Apeleius travel the same kinds of paths, they end up in different places.

We have been comparing Faooe with its chief source in an effort to understand what Lewis is doing. When we look for modern literary works with which similar "useful" comparisons can be made, we are drawn almost exclusively to the other works of Lewis himself. Nathaniel Hawthorne made some appropriate parables in "The Minister's Black Veil," but Orual's observations on the same subject (p. 200) gives us everything Hawthorne gives, and more. A person better read than I in the works of Charles Williams, Dorothy Sayers, G. K. Chesterton, and George MacDonald could probably make some informative comparisons between those authors' works and Faooe. But the most fertile ground for the digging out of useful parallels is the rich soil of Lewis' own works.

Orual's self-centeredness and possessiveness shape a great portion of her character, and in particular they make her unable to see what is happening to the people around her. The glaring example of this blindness is her inability to see Psyche's castle (or, more precisely, her refusal to believe her nighttime visions of it), but others are evident. Everyone around her knows how she has twisted the lives of Lysias and Bardia—Ansit is unusual only in her willingness to tell the queen the truth—but Orual can no more see what she has done than see how twisted her love for Psyche is. A striking parallel to her blindness is the inability (unwillingness?) of the dwarfs in The Last Battle to accept the new world opening around them as Aslan creates Narnia anew. Like Orual, the Dwarfs are so determined to have their own way that they fear to see beauty around them, and they deny joyous reality. Aslan explains:

They will not let us help them. They have chosen cunning instead of belief. Their prison is only in their own minds, yet they are in that prison; and so afraid of being taken in that they cannot be taken out.3

Orual realizes that she has been blind even before she repents of her dwarflike, voluntary blindness:

...Oh, you'll say (you've been whispering it to me these forty years) that I'd signs enough her palace was real, could have known the truth if I'd wanted. But how could I want to know it? (pp. 254-55)

The Dwarfs' experiences remind us that Orual's blindness is very distinctly her own doing—and that she must overcome her fear of the truth before joy will break in on her.

If part of Orual's jealousy is the familiar Apuleius-style envy, the greater possessiveness, or jealousy "for." Orual really does love Istra, even in her bad moments, when she calls her "cruel Psyche" and believes Istra to harbor "scorn...un-love...hated" (p. 149) for her. But her love is so distorted that it sends Psyche to a kind of death and shatters another love. At the heart of Orual's love is a desire to have Psyche, to grasp her, mold her, and keep her, and when the god takes her away, it is the denial of this total possession which torments Orual most. She says to the gods,

Did you ever remember whose the girl was? She was mine. Mine! So you not know what that means? Mine! You're thieves, seducers. That's my wrong. (p. 255)

Orual's possessiveness is clearly mirrored in the jealousy of Pam, Michael's mother in The Great Divorce. Like Orual, Pam is so consumed by her possessive love that she cannot see God in any context other than he who has my son: "You're treating God only as a matter to Michael, as her brother says. Pam finally errs in not loving Michael enough: she says, "Michael is mine" (Divorce, p. 95), she shows that her love "has turned into a poor, prickly, astringent sort of thing" (Divorce, p. 96). Psyche "had no more dangerous enemies" (p. 266) than Orual and the Fox, who loved her; similarly, while he was on this earth, Michael had not more dangerous enemies than his mother.

The parallel between Pam and Orual is not perfect. David is taken away from Pam precisely because she loves him possessively, while Istra is taken from Orual because the steps Orual takes to enforce her possession. Also, Pam's love for David excludes love for anyone else, while Orual's for Istra allows some love for Bardia and Lysias. But the parallel does underscore the dangers of Orual's possessiveness, and it also gives us a hint as to why, finally, Orual was worthy of being transformed into another psyche. Lewis is saying of Orual what is MacDonald says of Pam:

There's still a wee spark of something that's not just her self in her love that might be blown into a flame... There's something in a natural affection which will lead it on to eternal life more easily than natural appetite could be led on. But there's also something in it which makes it easier to stop at the natural level and mistake it for the heavenly.... It is a stronger angel, and therefore, when it falls, a stronger devil. (Divorce, pp. 96-97)

Pam's experience shows both the promise and the danger of Orual's love. In Orual's case, the promise triumphs.

Love transformed—that is the essence of Till We Have Faces. The promise of natural love can only triumph within the terrifying joy of God, a joy that must be embraced on its own and not as a means to possessing the object of the love. The experiences of Orual are mirrored in those of the Dwarfs and Pam—and they are concretized in the following Lewsonian declarations:

Every preference of a small good to a great, or a partial good to a total good, involves the loss of the small or partial good for which the sacrifice was made.5

The greed to be loved is a fearful thing.6

Love is too young to know what conscience is.7

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7 C. S. Lewis, epigram to Till We Have Faces.