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***The Fame of C.S. Lewis: A Controversialist's Reception in Britain and America* by Stephanie L. Derrick**

Abstract

In her book *The Fame of C.S. Lewis*, Stephanie Derrick seeks to examine the question of Lewis's continuing popularity and influence for later generations of readers. Based on her doctoral dissertation and eight years of research in the United Kingdom and United States, Derrick's book is a compelling and controversial read. Derrick discusses the life of Lewis, perceptions of him during his lifetime, and his posthumous reception as a writer. Derrick claims that we have to turn our gaze beyond Lewis to understand why he continues to be read long after he (and many of his lesser known contemporaries) have passed on.

Additional Keywords

Stephanie Derrick

THE FAME OF C.S. LEWIS: A CONTROVERSIALIST'S RECEPTION IN BRITAIN AND AMERICA. Stephanie L. Derrick. New York: Oxford University Press, 2018. 221 pp. ISBN 978-0-19-881944-8. \$30.00 (hardcover).

STEPHANIE L. DERRICK, AN AMERICAN AUTHOR, is, according to her Amazon.com page, "a historian of religion in the modern era, with a special interest in the intellectual and print cultures of British and American Christianity." She also designates herself as someone who "investigates the ways in which technology and globalization are shaping religious experience in the twenty-first century." Derrick's book *The Fame of C.S. Lewis: A Controversialist's Reception in Britain and America* discusses how "Lewis's grounding as a young reader in the classics of English literature, marketed to broad audiences, his frustrated ambitions to become a great poet, and his opposition to the ascending literary modernism, as well as his literary theory, all provided impetus for him to write works for a general readership" (200). She also seeks to examine the question of Lewis's continuing popularity and influence for later generations of readers. Derrick intends to offer us a "high-level, historical account for how and why Lewis became one of the most successful Christian authors of the twentieth century" (9).

Derrick's book is "the result of eight years of research, spent equally in the UK and USA, and extensive travel to archives scattered across these countries," and the amount of study she has done for her book is certainly impressive (3). While Derrick and her publishers do make some overtures to a broader readership, Derrick's book is mainly a work of academic research that seems intended for readers who are active in the field of study surrounding C.S. Lewis. Indeed, her book often reads like a dissertation adaptation, which it actually seems to be since her thesis at the University of Sterling was "The Reception of C.S. Lewis in Britain and America." For me, scholarship worth reading usually falls into two categories: there are treatises such as Wayne K. Booth's *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, Reed Way Dasenbrock's *Truth and Consequences*, or Stephen Greenblatt's *Will in the World* that are so labored and manicured that the conversation surrounding them is more about the 'speck in the eye' rather than the 'beam.' However, Derrick's book better fits a second category of scholarly work because it illustrates the need for more scholarship to explore questions that remain unanswered.

Some of us might be more favorably disposed towards the book were we to skip Derrick's Introduction where she makes it clear that she intends to avoid much of what makes Lewis valuable as a writer and thinker in favor of examining him as a "complex cultural phenomenon" (3). As I will discuss later on, Derrick's book is less about Lewis (though it does document many interesting facets of his life) and more about those of us who have grown up

with his imaginative stories and moral arguments. Derrick states that “*The Fame of C.S. Lewis’s* focus is the paperback-reading Christian cultures of Britain and America. Discussion of Lewis’s books is meant to underscore *context*, not to offer interpretive statements or judgements about the merits of Lewis’s writings” (5). As I will later discuss, such a scope is not without relevance for Lewis readers, though skipping the Introduction might allow readers to discover Derrick’s true purpose and thus grow amenable towards her topic as she makes her case.

In chapter 1, Derrick dubs C.S. Lewis the ‘Ulster Contrarian’ and discusses the reasons he had for writing for a popular audience. She discusses Lewis’s long-running quarrel with T.S. Eliot and modernist literature, and Derrick points out that Lewis “believed he was defending an older, more organic and morally superior relationship between author, imaginative work, and reader.” After his conversion to Christianity, the stakes for Lewis’s position against modernism became more important for him because “of the potential of literature to point to God—and salvation—or the breaking off of sources of wisdom outside ourselves, leading to confusion” (26). Derrick spends much of this chapter discussing the historical exigencies behind Lewis’s writings, but she implies that Lewis’s response should be viewed in relation to how Lewis “fashioned himself as one who looked *back*, to the art and ideology of the past” (28-29).

For most readers, chapters 2 (‘Lewis Among His Peers’) and 3 (‘Lewis’s Popular Reception in Mid-Century Britain and America’) might be the most controversial parts of Derrick’s book. She argues that “Lewis’s decision to write popular works is best understood when [...] seen in the light of his peers’ perceptions and expectations of him” (47). Derrick spends much time analyzing the reactions of Lewis’s British friends and contemporaries, and then turns to examine what she calls the “transatlantic contrast” between the responses to him in Britain and America. Derrick discusses Lewis’s platform before his ever-widening transatlantic readership that was coming to resemble his traditional Oxbridge audience less and less after Lewis’s BBC radio talks and the publication of *Mere Christianity*. Derrick discusses the differences between American and British audiences of Lewis and implies that American readers tended not to connect the writings of Lewis with his public persona (or implied authorship within his work), which would have been more recognizable to Lewis’s British peers and readership.

Derrick provides accounts of some of Lewis’s colleagues and students where a picture of Lewis at Oxford emerges—a persona of a contrarian Ulster don who was given to candidly embarrassing those whom he deemed complacent in their adherence to modernist sensibilities. Some such as Lewis’s friend Lord David Cecil viewed this side of Lewis as a ‘mask’ that he used for “his utterances in print or on platform” (51). Others in Oxford took this

provocateur part of Lewis as part of his traditional-minded Ulster Irishman identity, or his aversion to University conventions, or his disdain for the movement away from the older style of scholarly writing towards a more professionalized academic form of research. Whatever the source or the reason, the projections of Lewis's peers colored many of their observations about him: this at times could lead to Lewis's more inconsequential choices (such as his selection of walking clothes) or his other decisions (such as his purchase of a house in Headington Quarry outside of Oxford) to be perceived as acts of a contrarian who defied Oxford conventions.

I think critics such as Derrick are correct to argue that American readers of Lewis often miss some of the nuances within his work. For example, the self-deprecating conclusion that Lewis offers at the end of "Screwtape Proposes a Toast" is easy to miss if we are unaware of the perceptions of Lewis's peers and contemporaries in the UK, especially those among the literary and academic circles that Lewis frequented. However, I think these critics are wrong to imply that British readers of Lewis (especially those who wrote for the literary reviews in the UK popular presses) had a better understanding of Lewis's work than American readers who were less aware of his persona. In some cases, the opposite could be argued. If British readers were in a better position to pick up on subtleties within Lewis's work, might not American readers be better positioned to examine Lewis's stories and arguments on their merits because they were less familiar (and thus less preoccupied) with the Lewis persona? No form of this question arises in Derrick's book.

In chapters 4 ('Lewis and the Mechanisms of Mass Culture') and 5 ('Whose Lewis? Transatlantic Contestations') Derrick discusses how Lewis, after his death in 1963, was becoming less and less regarded as a person and more as a brand-name in the British and American book marketplace. As the importance of Lewis's posthumous reputation as an author continued to grow, this led to more transatlantic discrepancies and disputes over the author's identity that tended to reflect 'cultural sea changes' in the USA and UK. Derrick argues that the "British historicizing of Lewis was frustrating to Americans who thought that Lewis's talent and message were being cast aside for the sake of exploring comparatively inconsequential matters" (177), and she uses examples such as Walter Hooper, who is the long-time American executor of Lewis's literary estate, and the British biographer A.N. Wilson to illustrate the differences between the "American Lewis" and the "British Lewis" and the controversy over which one is closer to the *historical* Lewis. Earlier in her book, Derrick appears at times to downplay the American Lewis in favor of the British Lewis, but she seems to take a more neutral stance as her book progresses.

Readers who are more interested in Lewis's life and times could find these final chapters less interesting, but Lewis scholars and enthusiasts might

come across discussions concerning questions that have always interested them. Throughout the book, Derrick continues to suggest that the enduring admiration of Lewis is remarkable considering that there were multiple writers doing work in popular apologetics during the war years, and that Lewis's enduring image as an author is often in contrast with the contrarian persona. Derrick attempts to appraise Lewis's reception and examine which elements (such as people, commercial interests, and religious developments, etc.) were instrumental to his fame and popularity. She also discusses the "recent renewal of interest in Lewis's Christian writings in the UK" including within the Church of England (178, 198). Derrick argues that "the chances of Lewis's name achieving the levels of continued visibility that it did were quite particular to him" (144).

Derrick's book is a worthy piece of scholarship in the field of study surrounding C.S. Lewis. It offers new research and analysis concerning Lewis's success in his own time as well as addressing questions concerning his posthumous literary reputation. However, that said, Derrick's book is a better candidate for my second category of scholarly work because it calls for more research and criticism into the topics that she examines. For example, Derrick's discussion concerning the "transatlantic tensions" between the American Lewis and British Lewis provides no definitive conclusions. Instead, Derrick's work seems to call for another study to examine whether the "American Lewis" is more of a construct or projection of American readers, or if those same readers were better able to examine Lewis's stories and arguments on their merits alone because they were not overawed by a projection put forth by the literary press and academic intelligentsia in the UK? Derrick's work also seems to call for a study that uses the lens of media criticism to reexamine Lewis's reception among his contemporaries and in the British literary press reviews.

In the end, the importance of Derrick's book comes into play when we consider how Lewis's imaginative stories and moral arguments have shaped us as readers, writers, teachers, parents, friends, colleagues, and individuals with our own personal lives. The use of the term "fame" in Derrick's title might suggest to us movie premiers and Hollywood glitz. Indeed, as Derrick points out, the popular acclaim Lewis achieved because of mass communication, paperback publishing, and brand marketing did lead to such Tinseltown fame in the years since Lewis's death. However, when Derrick discusses the "fame" of Lewis, she is mainly talking about how our perceptions of Lewis influences how we read his books. In other words, to understand the appeal of Lewis's writings, we also have to understand ourselves and how we respond to the challenges of our own times.

The relevance of such a point is easily missed until we listen to the stories of how diverse readers of Lewis experience his writings. My mother-in-

law encountered C.S. Lewis in the early 1980s when Rev. Michael Sartelle—who was the young, erudite, and enthusiastic pastor at First Presbyterian Church in Yazoo City, Mississippi—took to his pulpit one Sunday morning and told his congregation that everyone needed to read *The Chronicles of Narnia*. Sartelle often used quotes from Lewis in his sermons, and his congregation began reading the Narnia stories and other books their pastor recommended. This went on until 1992 when Pastor Sartelle died in a car accident while traveling with his family. His death so upset Sartelle’s congregation that it was difficult for them to speak of it; however, when they share memories of their pastor, the conversation often turns to his passion for the writings of Lewis. His former churchgoers often recall when Sartelle spoke about the creator of Narnia in his sermons. For instance, some of them talk about how Sartelle would preach with power and authority from the pulpit when speaking on a scene from a Narnia story or quoting from *Mere Christianity*. It can sound like a movie scene from *Shadowlands*, which is interesting because many of these people have become avid readers of Lewis’s writings.

I have often believed that a sort of imaginative or cultural symbiosis exists between us and the authors we cherish, which might explain another of Derrick’s arguments. “In America,” she argues, “fans often describe reading Lewis’s books in rapturous tones” (3). Derrick also claims that we have to turn our gaze beyond Lewis to understand why he continues to be read long after he (and many of his lesser known contemporaries) have passed on: her larger question is “how is renown made and kept?” (5). In Yazoo City, some of those who mourned the loss of Sartelle still continue to read the works of C.S. Lewis because for them Lewis is not merely an author but a link of continuity to their former pastor and their past. This seems to support what Derrick says about readers playing a part in the making and keeping of Lewis’s renown: “Lewis’s reception, in other words, is a way to view *ourselves*” (6).

—Chad Chisholm



GODS AND ROBOTS: MYTHS, MACHINES, AND ANCIENT DREAMS OF TECHNOLOGY. Adrienne Mayor. Princeton UP, 2018. 304 pp. 75 b/w illus. 11 color illus. Bibliography and index. ISBN 978-0-691-18351-0 ebook 978-0-691-18544-6. \$29.95.

*G*ODS AND ROBOTS IS AN IN-DEPTH DISCUSSION of how the ancient Greeks imagined the possibility of robots and artificial intelligence in their literature and art. While clearly useful for reference, I found this book an