

Thomas Schmidt

University of Chicago

Response to Emmanuelle Burton

In “Whose Lion Is It, Anyway,” Emmanuelle Burton adjudicates between two possible readings of *Prince Caspian*, the second book of C.S. Lewis’s *Chronicles of Narnia*. On the one hand, she presents her own reading, a “fresh encounter”¹ with the text; on the other hand, there is the Christian reading, which characterizes the novel as an allegory of the Christian faith. Burton’s reading of the novel as a whole is productive and interesting, but I will focus on the central passage around which her argument is focused: the crossing of the gorge over the river Rush, in which the Pevensie children are asked to act irrationally by following Lucy’s vision of Aslan, and shamed for having failed to do so.

The heart of Burton’s argument is the claim that Christian readings of this scene are “reductionist,”² that is, that they transform a complex and sophisticated scene into one which only has a religious meaning. The problem does not seem to be that the supposed allegorical meaning of the scene overwhelms the literal meaning, but instead that the particularly Christian point of view of the scholarly critics in question prevents them from seeing other moral or symbolic meanings of the text. In the case of the scene at the gorge, these Christian readings have characterized the journey as a “narrative about faith triumphing over skepticism and unbelief.”³ Their readings are “biased,”⁴ and Burton argues that a fresh approach based in the method of close-reading is needed to recover other possible meanings of the text.

Burton’s own reading is more difficult to characterize, but she comes closest to stating it when she argues that the true meaning of the passage is centered around “how one’s emotions can inflect or even cripple the process of deciding how to respond to circumstances.”⁵ While this might be a decision about faith, she argues, this reading is “by no means necessary for grasping its psychological or noetic nuances.” The point, then, is that the Pevensies must imitate Trumpkin, the voice of reason, instead of Nikabrik, an emotional firecracker, as they decide to follow Aslan over the gorge. Here Burton attempts to weave together three separate aspects of the Pevensie decision making: belief,⁶ emotion, and reason. Belief in Aslan, here represented by the decision to follow him across the gorge, is a result of the proper balance of reason and emotion. The focus of the passage, according to this reading, is not on what the Pevensies decide, but instead on how they decide. This conclusion is established by a rich and detailed

¹ Burton, 13

² Burton, 11

³ Burton, 12.

⁴ Burton, 12, note 23

⁵ Burton, 25.

⁶ Burton appears to use the terms “belief” and “faith” interchangeably, although she prefers “belief.” In the context of this scene in the novel, the question is not whether the Pevensies have faith that Aslan would try or would be able to communicate with or help them, but whether or not they are willing to believe that he is there guiding them at that particular moment. By contrast, Trufflehunter says explicitly that he has faith, while Trumpkin and Nikabrik dispute Aslan’s very existence, as well as his benevolence and power. This paper is suggestive in the way that it uses the two terms, and an exploration of the contrast between the two terms in *Prince Caspian* might be an avenue for further research.

close-reading. Burton's analysis of the motivations and challenges of each child is a real contribution to our understanding of *Prince Caspian*.

However, Burton's reading implicitly depends upon the assumption that the text upholds the value of belief, and that the children's eventual decision to believe is valorized. The claim that "the children's ability to master themselves and act in the way dictated by reason, properly applied, is central"⁷ does not take into account the attitude the children must take in order to successfully cross the gorge. In fact, the children, especially Peter, act in direct contradiction to the dictates of reason. This is especially clear if we accept that Trumpkin, who consistently argues against following Aslan, represents well-reasoned skepticism. If the proper balance of reason involves abandoning it – if "Edmund eventually has to be satisfied with not understanding"⁸ – then the gorge crossing is at the very least invoking an implicit contrast between belief and reason, if not between belief and unbelief. The argument that this passage focuses on "the process of deciding how to respond to circumstances"⁹ does not acknowledge that the kind of decision-making depicted is particularly appropriate to problems of faith and, perhaps, not applicable to other situations.

At the end of the paper, Burton argues that her view is compatible with the Christian reading of the passage as a test of faith. If this is true, then it is not entirely clear what part of this paper's reading is inaccessible to a Christian reader. Burton asserts that the consensus of scholarship on *Prince Caspian* views the gorge scene as a binary contrast between belief and unbelief, and thus misses the subtleties of the emotional and moral dynamics present in the scene.¹⁰ If the results of a close-reading of the novel are entirely compatible with an insider, Christian reading, then what is the added value of a secular approach?

The emotional dynamics this paper describes might be seen as variations upon or kinds of belief and unbelief, preserving the rendering of the passage as a test of faith, and I wonder if the rich descriptions of the reactions of the different Pevensie children to Aslan's appearance could be accommodated to particular stereotyped models of the challenges of the life of faith. Even if insider critics have not read the text in this way in the past, they certainly could have, and, as Burton says, it is surprising that they have not. It remains to be said what the outsider reader has to offer that an enlightened insider does not, but this paper's thoughtful and compelling close analysis of the text points a way forward.

⁷ Burton, 26.

⁸ Burton, 27.

⁹ Burton, 25.

¹⁰ This is not an entirely fair claim; Downing, for example, uses the gorge scene as a demonstration of the value of trust, which he implicitly connects to faith. David C. Downing, *Into the Wardrobe: C.S. Lewis and the Narnia Chronicles*. San Francisco, Ca: Jossey-Bass, 2005. 105.