

## Response to “Whose Lion Is It, Anyway?: Rescuing the Chronicles of Narnia from the Christian Academy”

In many ways I am in sympathy with Emanuelle Burton’s ideas in her article, “Whose Lion Is It, Anyway?: Rescuing the Chronicles of Narnia from the Christian Academy.” My work on Lewis over the years has been as a professor in the secular rather than the Christian academy, and when I have commented on his work I have done so fairly much in the same manner I comment on works that were written by those who lived in other times and who possessed different beliefs than Lewis. I have focused on Lewis’s sources and influences and issues pertinent to aesthetics (which I define here as the ways authors produce well-crafted works that succeed as literary art). That said, I have not shied away from Lewis’s Christian beliefs when they are appropriate in some way or other in the arguments I have constructed in following these methods and aims. In my thirty years of engagement with Lewis’s writings, I haven’t presented analyses as object lessons in Christian faith or doctrine. I do the same at the large state university at which I teach. I don’t use Lewis to explain to my students my own religious beliefs, which I keep to myself—as is appropriate in this context. I teach him, when I get the chance, as a writer who produced some really fine fiction, both for adults and children. I think this is the kind of thing Ms. Burton is calling for and is exemplifying in her fine analysis of a crucial scene in *Prince Caspian*. If so, she just preached to me as a very sympathetic choir.

I would, however, like to articulate a few ideas that have occurred to me while I was reading her article. The first is not so much a criticism (though I suppose it could be construed that way) as an “I” statement, the kind that the wise breed of person known as a psychological counselor likes so much. I would rather not think that the Chronicles of Narnia has to be “rescued” from anywhere. I think that scholars in the Christian academy have every right to

explicate Lewis according to their own methods and aims, even if they differ from those I listed for myself above. I have learned very much from them, and in the main I am grateful for their work, including the scholars Burton mentions. Perhaps it would help explain my ideas if I make a distinction here about the uses of literary texts that have religious content. Lewis, together with so many past religious writers—the anonymous authors of works like *The Dream of the Rood* and *Pearl*, Julian of Norwich, Edmund Spenser, George Herbert, John Milton, Gerard Manly Hopkins, the late T. S. Eliot (regardless of Lewis’s early dislike of him!), and so many others—offer works that can be read in different ways. Devotional reading is one, but we must remember that it is different from the other types—academic reading (what we professors do when we’re producing publications), aesthetic reading (appreciating the beauties of how poems use rhyme or rhythm or how novelists construct effective plots, for instance), historical reading (what we learn about the past from a text), and socio-cultural reading (how texts construct gender or race, for instance). None of these is “wrong” reading, as long as it remains within its own context. If Christian explicators of Lewis produce devotional readings while pawning them off as academic readings, there is a problem, of course, but in my experience, I have not encountered this all that much, though it is there to be found for the looking.

The way I would frame things differently is that there is an opportunity to broaden the attention that the secular academy pays to Lewis. If this were done, the non-religiously inclined reader of Lewis perhaps wouldn’t feel disappointed when presented with a reductive Christian allegory imposed on one of his texts, for the professionals would be there to support that person’s enjoyment of the text by explaining its context and explicating through close reading and other methods how it functions artistically. But the secular academy can be uneasy at times with Lewis, dismissing him as a mere religious popularizer (something that doesn’t happen with

the list of authors I assembled above). At first, I thought this was because of Lewis's unashamed fore-fronting of his Christian beliefs and the emphasis he has at times placed on conversion. But now I am not so sure that this is the main cause for the secular academy's distanced and at times uneasy observation of Lewis. I think it is rather that he so emphatically rejected the literary beliefs of his own generation—the Modernists—and thus resists the entrenched academic periodization. He survived horrific trench warfare in World War I, during which he was at age 19 seriously wounded, but he was not, as so many others, eager to reject pre-war values and to assume a posture of ironic detachment, experimenting with deconstructing previous modes of literary expression (rhyming poetry, for instance, or plots that were easy to follow). Thus he has seemed an outlier, out of step with his times. He knew this about himself, of course, and he made matters worse by tweaking the progressive literary faculty of Cambridge when he took up his professorship there by calling himself a dinosaur who was still able to read old texts like a native. I would prefer a different, though perhaps daunting agenda—nurturing Lewis in the secular academy rather than rescuing him from the Christian academy. The aim is the same, and it is, I think, a noble one—supporting the reading of Lewis by anyone attracted to his stories, regardless of their beliefs.

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