

“Whose Lion Is It, Anyway?” –a response

This essay arises from its author’s observation that readers of Lewis’s Chronicles of Narnia seem to like and to dislike his work depending on their attitude toward the religious and specifically Christian elements detectable in it. Even sophisticated readers of Lewis who attend to more than religious matters in his work tend to align themselves with those who are advocates of Lewis because of his Christian identity. The essay is directed primarily toward rectifying this situation by focusing not on what is of religious interest but on matters of a more general and literary kind. The scenes from Prince Caspian analyzed toward the end of the essay demonstrate that, even in his children’s books, Lewis is more subtle and complex than his readers generally take him to be.

The complaint is warranted. It is worth pointing out, however, that the situation described by the essay is aggravated by the fact that Lewis has fallen captive to his Evangelical supporters, one could almost say devotees, and, true to characteristics generally evident in such people, they read Lewis in an eschatological way, separating sharply belief from unbelief, the saved from those left behind. It becomes a question, then, of whether those who dislike Lewis because his work seems to them over-laden with religious designs are put off more by the religious coloration of his enthusiasts than by the deployment of religious matters in the fictional texts themselves.

Yet some readers’ experiences of betrayal (cited by Burton at the outset of the essay) perhaps are of overstated importance. That a person reads an author at one time of his or her development and then recognizes on maturity that there are objectionable ingredients in that author that question earlier fondness is a common experience and hardly equal to “violation.” Readers can frequently have earlier attachments to texts and authors that later are shaken by the recognition of detectable and objectionable political, social, or cultural assumptions and such biases as sexism, racism, and homophobia. I find traits of these kinds in Lewis more disturbing than the fact that he includes religion in his work, and such traits have to be taken into account, as must also, for example, the anti-Semitism of T. S. Eliot. Simply put, Lewis is clearly interested in religion and in Christianity, as interested in them as Henry Miller is in sex, and one should not feel offended by encountering the one in Lewis and the other in Miller.

An important matter related to Lewis and religion is that, as the essay implies, his interest in Christianity has given him, largely, two types of readers, those who value his work primarily because of the Christianity in it and those who ignore or even despise it for that same reason. This may be unfortunate, but it happens to authors. Take Frederick Buechner, for example. His first novel was warmly welcomed by several prominent critics as a notable entry into the literary market place, but today he has, I would think, few readers who do not self-identify as religious or even Christian. Other writers for whom religion is important to their

work do not suffer this fate, such as Graham Greene, who, incidentally, consciously worked at avoiding it, or Flannery O'Connor. Lewis's early novel, Out of the Silent Planet, was favorably reviewed with very little attention to any deployment of religious interests, even though, while faint compared to those in The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe, they are there. But his appreciative readers today are largely Christian, and they attend to his fiction because of the Christianity that they find in it, although Christianity is by no means the only repertoire upon which Lewis draws for figures, paradigms and allusions. That these Christian readers are largely Evangelical and, thereby, tend sharply to distinguish themselves from the rest of the world exacerbates the situation, since it means that when they comment on Lewis they will not only emphasize his interest in and deployment of things Christian, but also read them not as continuous with but as sharply contrasting with their non-Christian companions.

Another point of the essay is to complain that Lewis criticism is author- rather than text-focused. I am not as disturbed by this as the essayist seems to be. Some authors do draw attention from their work to themselves—Mailer or Hemingway, for example. Lewis draws attention to himself not only because of his assertive size and complex productivity but also because his work is laced with his own opinions. He even includes himself in his fictions, although those inclusions are also literary or textual constructions. Lewis is no Salinger, Pynchon, or McCarthy when it comes to exposing himself in public. More than most authors, he puts himself out there, even in his fiction, although it also should be said that this public thrust was part of a personal complex that included a studied privacy. But his public exposures and standing make him very difficult to ignore. Although I cannot be as irritated as the essayist seems to be by readers' attention to the person, I agree that it deflects from attention that the texts should be given.

The scenes from Prince Caspian that are examined toward the end of the essay emphasize two important things about Lewis. First, unlike many of his readers, Lewis did not like putting people into categories. One of his objections to the social sciences, for example, is that they tend to do that. So, delivering his characters from the simple contraries of believer and unbeliever is consistent with his work overall. Second, Lewis generally, perhaps inveterately, places himself between clear alternatives or categories rather than on one side or on the other. It is not Lewis who places himself in a category that separates him from others but some of his readers or devotees who conscript him into their campaign to separate themselves sharply from their non-believing neighbors. For this and other reasons, I take Lewis and the most visible portion of his readership as remarkably unlike one another.

Wesley A. Kort

Duke University