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"Respecting the Rights of the Vehicle": A Response to "Whose Lion Is It, Anyway? Rescuing the Chronicles of Narnia from the Christian Academy" by Emmanuel Burton

Emmanuel Burton argues that C.S. Lewis' Narnian Chronicles suffer from the perception that Lewis is "slipping faith to the younger generation like Turkish delight" (7). This simile captures exactly the reason that readers such as Laura Miller (*The Magician's Book: A Skeptic's Guide to Narnia*) feel so betrayed when they learn of the Chronicles' theological interpretation; if they consume this "Turkish delight," they may succumb to its enchantment as a fiction yet resent the attempt to spellbind them to evangelical Christian orthodoxy. A perception of ulterior motives--that the author has slipped a mickey into an otherwise tasty draught--deters the theologically resistant reader. Burton argues for "rescuing" Narnia from those critics who seek only to reveal the pill the series allegedly hides. To interpret Narnia as an elaborate sweetener making palatable religious truths of the sort that might be found in a Sunday school lesson is to miss much of what makes the works delightful in the first place, as Burton beautifully shows. Might it be possible, even desirable, to suck the sugar off and discard the pill? Could the lion belong to anyone--regardless of religious affiliation--who appreciates the vivid and pleasurable imaginative experience that is Narnia?

Burton notes that "scholars of literature and of religion" are now prepared to turn "more seriously to children as subjects," but does not consult the work of scholars who have already engaged with the phenomenon of texts that appeal both to children and adults in general and C.S. Lewis' writings for children in particular. It's true that many critics who deal with the Chronicles of Narnia have some stake in a Christian status quo. Other critics, however, such as those in my

discipline of children's literature, offer insight into the literary and cultural aspects of Lewis' work that resonate beyond evangelical Christianity. Children's literature critics assume, as Lewis himself did, that historical context and the metaphors, similes, and other literary figures that emerge from those contexts, ought to be taken seriously, regardless of intended audience. Like Lewis, critics of children's literature object to patronizing children and their taste. In their work, Narnia embodies diverse and contradictory meanings as well as unified and constrained ones.

Children's literature scholar David Rudd, for example, has shown that the Narnian chronicles can be productively read against the proselytizing grain if Lewis's words are taken seriously. To Rudd, "the children who understand Lewis's *Chronicles* do so in terms that are strictly Lewis's own; that is, precisely by *not* seeing the message. Adults, on the other hand, because they do see the message, fail, in Lewis's sense, to appreciate his stories properly."<sup>1</sup> Rudd asserts that Lewis' plan to "steal past [the] watchful dragons"<sup>2</sup> of enforced piety by making the Christian story as beautifully resonant as pagan mythology is successful only "so long as it remains mysterious and apocryphal in the root sense (i.e., hidden); but as soon as the myth, or hidden story, is spotted, it rapidly becomes more conventionally apocryphal (i.e., spurious)."<sup>3</sup>

I think Rudd is right as Emmanuel Burton is right: we appreciate Lewis' stories most properly when we attend to the story, not when we push past the story to some message beyond

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<sup>1</sup> "Myth-Making--Or Just Taking the Myth? The Dangers of Myth Becoming Fact in Lewis' Narnia Series." *Papers: Explorations into Children's Literature*. 12 (2002) 30-39; 30, emphasis mine.

<sup>2</sup> "Watchful dragons" is Lewis' image justifying his choice of a fairy tale form, which could allow a reader to "steal past a certain inhibition which had paralysed much of my own religion in childhood. . . . [S]upposing that by casting all these things into an imaginary world, stripping them of their stained-glass and Sunday school associations, one could make them for the first time appear in their real potency? Could one not thus steal past those watchful dragons?" (C.S. Lewis, "Sometimes Fairy Stories May Say Best What's to Be Said," *Of Other Worlds: Essays and Stories*. Ed. Walter Hooper. London: Geoffrey Bles, 1966. 35-38; 36-37).

<sup>3</sup> Rudd, 37.

it. Lewis himself discouraged reductive allegorical readings. He recognized language's metaphoric nature, the paradox that the word is never exactly the same as the thing it describes, but that language is the only way we can speak at all. True, for Lewis, "good" metaphors or true symbols will be the ones that most aptly capture something essential and archetypally Real about the thing or person being described.<sup>4</sup> Yet despite his frequent invocations of Plato and assertions about archetypal Ideas, Lewis also recommended that readers "respect[] the rights of the vehicle."<sup>5</sup> For Lewis, ignoring the vehicle results in "stupidity,"

the pernicious habit of reading allegory as if it were a cryptogram to be translated; as if, having grasped what an image (as we say) "means," we threw the image away and thought of the ingredient in real life which it represents. *But that method leads you continually out of the book and back into the conception you started from and would have had without reading it. The right process is the exact reverse.* We ought not to be thinking "This green valley, where the shepherd boy is singing, represents humility"; we ought to be discovering, as we read, that humility is like that green valley. That way, moving always into the book, not out of it, from the concept to the image, enriches the concept. And that is what allegory is for.<sup>6</sup>

Thus, when Lewis depicts landscapes, individuals, and situations, we are encouraged, authorized even, to immerse ourselves without "straining after meaning," as Keats put it. Still, within the text of the Narnia books, we find tensions: Lewis' endorsement of immersive reading and fresh discovery conflicts at times with a narrative that attempts to foreclose alternative meanings.

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<sup>4</sup> See *Allegory of Love: A Study in Medieval Tradition*. (1936) (New York: Oxford University Press, 1958) 44-45.

<sup>5</sup> "Vision of John Bunyan." *Selected Literary Essays*. Ed. Walter Hooper. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980) 146-153; 148.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.* 149, emphasis mine.

Lewis' repeated insistence on Aslan's qualities as the King of Beasts, his "wildness," is another place where the vehicle seems to mean more than its ostensible tenor. Available to ecocritical and conservationist readings as well as religious ones, for instance, Aslan's animality raises questions about human exceptionalism and claims to superiority. And Burton's reading of *Prince Caspian* shows the truth of many readers' experience that when we ride the vehicles the text provides, we discover new vistas that enhance our experience and transport us to new places.

Lewis is not the only writer needing "rescue" from his admirers; one conclusion we might draw from this discussion is the need for greater attention to narrative textures and nuances of characterization and symbol in all our reading and analysis. Opening up the frame of reference to secular as well as religious disciplines, children's as well as adult literature, multiplies Narnia's-- and Aslan's--possible meanings.