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A Collection of Essays Presented at the Ninth
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on
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When C.S. Lewis penned the final installment of his space trilogy *That Hideous Strength*, he began not with his prodigious protagonist Dr. Ransom, but with a newlywed scholar named Jane Studdock. She is recalling, and bristling, at the language contained in the marriage vows from the *Book of Common Prayer*: "Mutual society, help, and comfort," said Jane bitterly. In reality marriage had proved to be the door out of a world of work and comradeship and laughter and innumerable things to do, into something like solitary confinement" (13). Jane decides to postpone motherhood in exchange for a blossoming career as a scholar of Dante. Her spouse Mark Studdock is preoccupied with career goals, spending long evenings tickling the egos of the college elite instead of delighting in the company of his bride. Over time, Jane has grown resentful of her husband, listening to the ticking clock after the morning chores are finished. She feels that the whole circumstance is grossly unjust. Mark can frolic with his work friends while she busies herself with housework. *But at least she has academics*. Her studies on Dante, although benign, have provided her with a brief glimpse of her former liberty, of a time before "wifely obligations" which allowed her the privilege to choose her own path. Although only six months have passed since their nuptials, Mark and Jane have seen very little of one another, which only widened the vast chasm that already exists in their

marriage. So we ask, who bears the fault? Should Mark be blamed for his overzealous ambition and domestic truancy or should Jane be blamed for nurturing an unrelenting bitterness in his absence?

Perhaps first we should explore how Lewis and his surrounding culture interpreted gender. Lewis inhabited a time of great social, familial, and economic change for women. During his lifetime, women gained the right to vote, were allowed to graduate with a degree from Oxford University (as his friend Dorothy Sayers did), and began occupying challenging and diverse careers which had been formerly held exclusively by men. Admittedly, Lewis claims his advocacy of Hierarchical Conception, discussed and exemplified in Milton's *Paradise Lost*. There, Satan's disobedience to God and his refusal to submit to a superior authority propagate his fall, the establishment of hell, while catalyzing his role as God's adversary. By extension, Adam and Eve are guilty of this same sin when they knowingly partake of fruit which has been explicitly forbidden. In both situations, the attempt to become "equal" is the fatal flaw which precipitates the downfall. Lewis firmly admits in his essay "Equality" what is derived from II Corinthians chapter 12: "There [in the Christian life] we are not homogeneous units, but different and complementary organs of a mystical body" (494). Obedience, he claims, is the key to a happy, peaceful, and tranquil life. Lewis

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harkens a music metaphor in a passage from *Preface to Paradise Lost*:

Discipline, while the world is yet unfallen, exists for the sake of what seems its very opposite—for freedom, almost for extravagance. The pattern deep hidden in the dance, hidden so deep that shallow spectators cannot see it . . . The heavenly frolic arises from an orchestra which is in tune; the rules of courtesy make perfect ease and freedom possible between those who obey them. (81)

But keep in mind here that Lewis was discussing man's relationship to God, not necessarily a relationship to one another. Although, the same is often true of marriages, the foundational idea is that God is a perfect superior, while man is not. This, he reiterates, is strongly portrayed in *Paradise Lost*. Man's leadership role is much more difficult, as his fallen nature makes him vulnerable to corruption.

However, despite our fallen natures, a hierarchy of some kind must exist to maintain order and peace. Shall we dismiss all male leadership because of a few "bad apples"? Furthermore, do we attempt to actually remedy our fallen natures by substituting a different scenario? Lewis explains in the essay "Priestesses in the Church":

We men may often make bad priests. That is because we are insufficiently masculine. It is no cure to call in those who are not masculine at all. A given man may make a very bad husband; you cannot mend matters by trying to reverse the roles. He may make a bad male partner in a dance. The cure for that is that men should more diligently attend dancing classes; not that the ballroom should henceforward ignore distinctions of sex and treat all dancers as neuter (461).

How does this structure work in the home? Lewis states that we must have a power structure for the home to work properly:

"Must we not teach that if the home is to be a means of grace it must be a place of *rules*? There cannot be a common life without a *regula*. The alternative to rule is not freedom but the unconstitutional (and often unconscious) tyranny of the most selfish member" (495).

In the earlier installment of the space trilogy, *Out of the Silent Planet*, the lack of structure is noted by the various creatures of Malacandra:

'It is because they have no Oyarsa,' said one of the pupils. 'It is because every one of them wants to be a little Oyarsa himself,' said Augray. 'They cannot help it,' said the old sorn. 'They must be ruled, yet how can creatures rule themselves? Beasts must be ruled by hnau and hnau by eldila and eldila by Maleldill. These creatures have no eldila. They are like one trying to lift himself by his own hair—or one trying to see over a whole country when he is on a level with it—like a female trying to beget young on herself. (102)

Notice that Lewis names the Malacandran God Maleldill. He states in a letter dated 11 August 1945: "MAL- is really equivalent to the definite article in some of the definite article's uses. ELDIL means a lord or ruler, Maleldill 'The Lord': i.e. it is, strictly speaking the Old Solar not for DEUS but for DOMINUS" (213). Lewis posits that in Christ, all members of the body of feminine, making Christ the MALE head of the Church, as he mentions in his essay "Priestesses in the Church?": "I am crushingly aware how inadequate most [men] are, in our actual and historical individualities, to fill the place prepared for us...Only one wearing the masculine uniform can...represent the Lord to the Church: for we are all, corporately and individually, feminine to him" (461)

Lewis talks openly about the importance of hierarchy, but notice how many of his personal experiences contradict this. When Lewis was a young man, he lived

with Janie and Maureen Moore. It is well documented that, although Lewis was the only male in the household, he was subject to assiduous chores assigned by Mrs. Moore, tasks which only intensified later when her illness progressed. When Joy moved into the Kilns as Mrs. Lewis, she was quick to make several household renovations and updates to the former "bachelor pad". Lewis was opposed to using weapons in threatening trespassers, yet Joy proudly purchased a shotgun to protect the property. Douglas Gresham tells us in *Lenten Lands* that on one occasion when stubborn poachers refused to leave, Joy retrieved her gun immediately. Lewis stepped in front of her to offer protection (as any chivalrous man would do), to which Joy emphatically yelled, "Damn it Jack, get out of my line of fire!" (85).

Yet, even as a proponent of hierarchy who draws gender distinctions, Lewis argued that differences DO NOT determine value. This is illustrated in the conclusion of *Perelandra*:

Gender is a reality, and a more fundamental reality than sex. Sex is, in fact, merely the adaptation to organic life of a fundamental polarity which divides all created beings. Female sex is simply one of the things that have feminine gender; there are many others, and Masculine and Feminine meet us on planes of reality where male and female would simply be meaningless. Masculine is not attenuated male, nor feminine attenuated female. On the contrary, the male and female or organic creatures are rather faint and blurred reflections of masculine and feminine. Their reproductive functions, their differences in strength and size, partly exhibit, but partly also confuse and misrepresent, the real polarity.

Here Lewis argues that Gender is in fact God-ordained, an irrevocable and inalienable

component of our nature. Sex, however, is derived from human (and therefore flawed) cultural perceptions and expectations. Gender runs much deeper than our reproductive functions, our domestic responsibilities, or our physical and intellectual capabilities. It is derived of God's holy design, His divine symmetry of creation which transcends all of the frivolous and shallow misperceptions which often dictate gender roles in contemporary culture. Adam Barkman argues in his article "All is Righteousness and There is No Equality" that Lewis's comment on women "lowering the metaphysical energy" of male conversation is indicative of his strong belief that women are of "lesser value". "The implication seems to be clear," Barkman writes. "Men, not wholly because of education, but by their very essence, are more suited for metaphysical, theological, and theoretical tasks than women, whereas women are more suited for practical and concrete ones. This, of course, need not entail value in terms of cognitive faculties, but given Lewis' earlier comments about the value of each sex, my suspicion is that Lewis implied this" (432-33). Here I must respectfully disagree. As we explore the Ransom Trilogy, the latter installments of *The Chronicles of Narnia*, and especially *Till We Have Faces*, we see women who are comfortable with weapons, who rule successful kingdoms, and share authority. Take, for example, the fact that Orual engages in a dual to win Trunia's freedom (a nice switch of traditional roles). In *Perelandra*, Mars and Venus stand side-by-side in a contrasting and yet harmonious posture, describing Malacandra as rhythm and Perelandra as melody: "He thinks that the first held in his hand something like a spear, but the hands of the other were open, with the palms toward him" (200).

Interestingly, we see that the male and female are unique, yet equally important. This inequity is what readers first encounter in *That Hideous Strength*. Jane is wounded from Mark's dismissive behavior and Mark is blissfully ignorant of the pain he inflicts upon his wife. Both are wrong and, as Lewis writes in "A Sermon and a Lunch" in need of

restoration: “The family, like the nation, can be offered to God, can be converted and redeemed, and will then become the channel of particular blessings and graces. But like everything else that is human, it needs redemption. Unredeemed, it will produce only particular temptations, corruptions, and miseries. Charity begins at home: so does uncharity” (494). Essentially, Mark is still performing the role of bachelor, becoming more self-consumed with career advancement and administrative flattery than seeking the companionship of his wife. However, Jane is not unblemished. Lewis continues from “The Sermon and the Lunch”: Affection, as the distinct from charity, is not a cause of lasting happiness. Left to its natural bent affection becomes in the end greedy, naggingly solicitous, jealous, exacting, timorous. It suffers agony when its object is absent – but is not repaid by any long enjoyment when the object is present. (494)

The reader will sense some reluctance in Jane when Mark does arrive home. She feels that he will find her conversation boring and insignificant in comparison to the lengthy, sociological discussions he holds with colleagues. In fact, she is afraid Mark will view her as a typical “whiny” female:

Men hated women who had things wrong with them, specially queer, unusual things. Her resolution was easily kept for Mark, full of his own story, asked her no questions...She knew he often had rather grandiose ideas, and from something in his face she divined that during his absence he had been drinking much more than he usually did. And so, all evening, the male bird displayed his plumage and the female played her part and asked questions and laughed and feigned more interest than she felt. Both were young, and if neither loved very much, each was still anxious to be admired. (89)

Jane is essentially distraught because she is unhappy with the social expectations impressed upon a wife. She has cleaned and cooked and laughed at Mark’s jokes, why must he repay her with loneliness? Over the passage of time, her enmity festers into a disdain for other male characters in the novel, including Mr. Denniston. She interprets them as “complacent, patriarchal figures making arrangements for women as if women were children or bartering them for cattle” and was “very angry” (117). Her displeasure with one man, her husband Mark, has catalyzed a hatred for males in general. Dr. Ransom sees through her emotions and addresses this very issue with Jane:

You are offended by the masculine itself: the loud, irruptive, possessive thing – the gold lion, the bearded bull – which breaks through hedges and scatters the little kingdom of you primness as the dwarfs scattered the carefully made bed. The male you could have escaped, for it exists only on the biological level. But the masculine none of us can escape. What is above and beyond all things is so masculine that we are all feminine in relation to it” (316)

Throughout his correspondence and essays, Lewis is generally sympathetic toward the plight of women. He wrote on 8 April 1948 to Margaret Fuller, “Who said I disliked women? I never liked or disliked any *generalisation*” (849). Most claims that Lewis’s expulsion of Susan from Aslan’s Country is further proof that Lewis hated women. However, Lewis who is often praised for his acumen and clarity, is very adamant that women are not an inferior species. His friend and poetess Ruth Pitter wrote in a letter to Walter Hooper on 13 January 1969:

It is a pity that he made his first (and perhaps biggest) impact with Screwtape, in which some women are only too well portrayed in their

horrors, rather like Milton's Satan – it is this perhaps that has made people think he hated us? But even here, the insight is prodigious...I would say he was a great and very perspicacious lover of women, from poor little things right up to the "Lady" in *Perelandra*. I think he touched innumerable women to the heart here – I know he did me...Surely the shoals of letters he got from women (as he told me) must show how great was his appeal to them: nobody's going to tell me these were hate-letters. (239)

Additionally, several of Lewis's female students at Oxford were very complimentary of him. Rosamund Cowan writes in *In Search of C.S. Lewis*,

It was a joy to study with Lewis. He treated us like queens. I think Pat Thompson and I were the first women students he had. He had perfect manners, always standing up when we came in. And he brought to everything a remarkable original approach. At first we were a bit frightened as he had a reputation of being a "man's man." We rather thought he would be a bit down on women. Actually he was delightful. He told me I reminded him of a Shakespearean heroine – a compliment I've always cherished. He certainly treated me like one. (62)

Her fellow student Patricia (Thompson) Berry writes:

Owing to the call-up of men in World War II, Lewis consented to teach women students...Someone reports that Lewis disliked tutorials. He did not show it. Instead of remind us, as other tutors had done, of what we had left out of our essays, he considered what was in them. He

did not encourage us to bow to his value judgments, but to form our own. His comments for or against our work were just, his conversation highly enlightening to young, would-be intellectuals. His manner to the "ladies of St. Hugh's" was most gracious. (70)

Lewis's issue was not with the feminist movement in general or women's effort to achieve equality for career advancement, but in the fact that, in historical context, the empowerment movement often hindered relationships with men by encouraging a climate of female animosity. Lewis's friend, Dante scholar and mystery novelist Dorothy Sayers, references this particular climate in a talk entitled "Are Women Human?" from the collection *Unpopular Opinions*. When asked if she would be associated with the "feminist movement", Sayers replies:

I replied – a little irritably, I am afraid – that I was not sure I wanted to 'identify myself,' as the phrase goes, with feminism, and that the time for 'feminism,' in the old-fashioned sense of the word, had gone past. In fact, I think I went so far as to say that, under present conditions, an aggressive feminism might do more harm than good" (106). She later goes on to say that the question of "sex-equality" is, "like all questions affecting human relationships, delicate and complicated" (106).

As mentioned earlier, men who abused their power were not "wholly masculine" by God's design. It is absurd to believe that Lewis supported male domestic tyranny. Lewis writes that women must disarm themselves of previous hostilities before they can enter into a healthy relationship:

Men have so horribly abused their power over women in the past that

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to wives, of all people, equality is in danger of appearing as an ideal...Have as much equality as you please – the more the better – in our marriage laws: but at some level consent to inequality, nay, delight in inequality, is an erotic necessity. Mrs. Mitchison speaks of women so fostered on a defiant idea of equality that the mere sensation of the male embrace rouses an undercurrent of resentment. Marriages are thus shipwrecked. This is the tragicomedy of the modern woman; taught by Freud to consider the act of love the most important thing in life, and then inhibited by feminism from that internal surrender which alone can make it a complete emotional success. Merely for the sake of her own erotic pleasure...some degree of obedience and humility seems to be (normally) necessary on the woman's part. (19)

Lewis makes clear that women are in danger of “shipwrecking” relationships. He is operating on the assumption that feminists have fostered a profound disdain, an abiding “resentment” which often develops into an obstruction to a sexual relationship. Please note the use of semantics: “Feminist” is a term which has altered greatly in the nearly sixty years which have lapsed since the composition of this essay. Lewis is speaking strictly from experience and literature of the day. In my observation, the term has changed; in the evangelical sense, it has been “softened” and typically means “not aggressive or discriminatory toward women”. These linguistic shifts cannot be understated, as they lend us great clarity of the perspective from which Lewis is speaking. Lewis, perhaps, was operating on a more severe interpretation of the term. Some posit that Lewis's harsh criticism originates from the male hegemony of the day, men frustrated with the increasing liberation of women. However, Lewis, in many senses, often felt sympathetic for the difficulties women face in

culture and relationships, as noted in the essay “We Have No Right to Happiness” from *God in the Dock*:

A society in which conjugal infidelity is tolerated must always be in the long run a society adverse to women. Women, whatever a few male songs and satires may say to the contrary, are more naturally monogamous than men; it is a biological necessity...And the quality by which they most easily hold a man, their beauty, decreases every year after they have come to maturity, but this does not happen to those qualities of personality – women don't really care twopence about our looks – by which we hold women. Thus in the ruthless war of promiscuity women are at a double disadvantage. They play for higher stakes and are also more likely to lose. I have no sympathy with moralists who frown at the increasing crudity of female provocativeness. These signs of desperate competition fill me with pity. (519).

Even within the Hierarchical conception, Lewis never insists that females completely abandon all aspirations for family responsibility, only that they accept fundamental differences of gender and achieve balance. We see this in the final pages of *That Hideous Strength*, but originally we see this in Charles Williams's *The Place of the Lion*. A strong friendship between Lewis and Charles Williams began more as a mutual affection for one another's work. Williams's letter to Lewis praising *The Allegory of Love* and Lewis's letter to Williams revering *The Place of the Lion* nearly crossed in the post. Damaris's compelling exchange with Anthony in this work and Jane's final conversation with Ransom are strikingly similar: “Tell me one thing first, Damaris said. “Do you think – I've been wondering this afternoon – do you think it's wrong of me to work at Abelard?”

“Darling, how can intelligence be wrong?” he answered. “I should think you knew more about him than anyone else in the world, and it’s a perfectly sound idea to make a beautiful thing of what you know. So long as you don’t neglect me in order to do it” (e-book).

Notice that Mark and Anthony are not domestic tyrants. They simply ask their wives for balance. Mark, especially, has learned this lesson the hard way. Alan Jacobs writes, “But of course, Lewis condescends to her husband, Mark too, as we have already seen. Neither of them has any idea what it means to be truly married; both of them must learn, and at the books’ end they do begin to learn” (258). At the conclusion of *That Hideous Strength*, he realizes how foolhardy it was to jeopardize his marriage for reckless ambition. After his conversion, Mark contemplates, “He had gone wrong only in assuming that marriage, by itself, gave him either power or title to appropriate [her] freshness. As he now saw, one might as well have thought one could buy a sunset by buying the field from which one had seen it” (360).

Either male or female, we are all fallen creatures. Lewis mentions in “Meditations in a Toolshed” that the experience of “looking at” is vastly different than “looking along.” Looking along means that one is fully encompassed in a phenomenon and has greater comprehension of its origins, lending us a greater understanding than can be achieved simply by “looking at”. So it is with C.S. Lewis. His understanding of marriage, although deft insight, was not fully accomplished until he himself wed Joy Davidman and experienced it for himself. He writes in *A Grief Observed*:

For a good wife contains so many persons in herself. What was H. not to me? She was my daughter and my mother, my pupil and my teacher, my subject and my sovereign; and always, holding all these in solution, my trusty comrade, friend, shipmate, fellow-soldier. My mistress; but at the same time all that any man friend (and I have

good ones) has ever been to me. Perhaps more...That’s what I meant when I once praised her for her ‘masculine virtues.’ But she soon put a stop to that by asking how I’d like to be praised for my feminine ones...Solomon calls his bride Sister. Could a woman be a complete wife unless, for a moment, in one particular mood, a man felt almost inclined to call her Brother? (455)

So perhaps you wonder, where is the defense? Is Jane a victim or culprit in *That Hideous Strength*? What is truly defensible about her remains after her conversion to Christianity. Once Jane recognizes that gender is an aspect much deeper and more complex than lonely hours and housework, that marriage is a unity of supernatural origin, she disposes of her enmity. She begins the journey to become who she is intended to be in Christ, and this makes her a better woman, a better wife, and a better individual. Obedience is necessary but it is done not out of obligation, but out of love and devotion, in both a martial sense and a spiritual sense. This is where general Affection transitions to Eros. That deeper connection, that intimacy is only permitted when both male and female have discarded their armor, have dismantled their stumbling blocks and create a home and life together. It is a shared space of reciprocal respect, admiration, and trust with Christ at its center. Mutual society, indeed.

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