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## The Company They Didn't Keep: Collaborative Women in the Letters of C.S. Lewis

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### Abstract

Building on the work of Diana Pavlac Gyer to establish a framework and set of terms for understanding the collaborative nature of the Inklings, McBride takes us outside their exclusively masculine circle to look at women who influenced Lewis’s writing. His study introduces us to women who served Lewis as, in Gyer’s terms, Resonators, Opponents, Conductors, and so on, from anonymous fans to well-known names like Pitter and Sayers.

### Additional Keywords

Baynes, Pauline—Relation to C.S. Lewis; Dunbar, Nan—Relation to C.S. Lewis; Farrer, Katharine—Relation to C.S. Lewis; Lawson, Penelope (Sister Penelope)—Relation to C.S. Lewis; Lewis, C.S.—Friends and associates—Women; Lewis, C.S.—Relations with women; Lewis, C.S. Letters; Pitter, Ruth S.—Relation to C.S. Lewis; Sayers, Dorothy L.—Relation to C.S. Lewis; Shelburne, Mary Willis—Relation to C.S. Lewis



THE COMPANY THEY DIDN'T KEEP:  
COLLABORATIVE WOMEN  
IN THE LETTERS OF C.S. LEWIS

SAM MCBRIDE

NO ONE WORK OF C.S. LEWIS, OR J.R.R. TOLKIEN, OR CHARLES WILLIAMS encompasses all that the phrase 'the Inklings' conjures in the minds of fans familiar with all three writers. In fact, as individual authors, none of the three men fully represents the Inklings, whose famed interactions have acquired mythic proportions. The Inklings as a corporate entity has evolved in the minds of readers into something larger and better than the sum of its parts.

One way of comprehending that entity is as a writing community, as Diana Pavlac Glyer has done in *The Company They Keep: C.S. Lewis and J.R.R. Tolkien as Writers in Community*. The metaphor of 'community' helps to explain how the group functioned to inspire members to greater literary production, and places them parallel to other communities of writers that, while differing from the Inklings in content and theme, functioned for one another in similar roles. Glyer identifies these roles, using terms extrapolated from Karen Burke LeFevre, as Resonators, Opponents, Editors, and Collaborators. As Glyer points out, asserting that the Inklings were collaborators contradicts an assertion by my colleague, Candice Fredrick, and me that the work of the Inklings does not fit the term collaboration.

Glyer builds a strong argument for seeing the Inklings as collaborators, especially if one adds to her argument the concept of different levels or degrees of collaboration, and with the proviso that Inklings collaboration rarely reached the most involved level. Perhaps a classification system could calculate the ratio of time collaborators spent together on a project to the time spent working and writing individually. The least-involved level might be termed simple cooperation, a word that sums up much of the Inklings collaboration as outlined by Glyer. This form involves minimal interaction within the writing process, other than initial planning and later response; of course, such projects might reflect many hours of dialogue on the part of the collaborators, as is probably the case with the Inklings, but most of the writing, that is, the actual putting words on paper, would be completed individually. Glyer has identified this level of collaboration as "collaborative projects" (135). One could then imagine other degrees of collaboration, each involving more of the collaborators' shared time in

a shared space (or these days, virtual time and space), culminating with writers working together from beginning to end on a joint project. The Inklings were not amenable to this more involved form of collaboration. Even Glycer has acknowledged that C.S. and Warren Lewis's adolescent "Boxen" was the "most reciprocal" Inklings collaborative effort (136); Glycer describes few other Inklings collaborations reaching such a level of mutual involvement. Fredrick and I were thinking of this more intense level of collaboration when we wrote the sentence quoted in Glycer, "One would never be tempted to suggest that the Inklings' reading and critiquing could be appropriately labeled 'collaboration'" (xvii).

Yet beyond simply acknowledging that indeed Glycer is right, that some of the Inklings' works can appropriately be labeled 'collaborative,' I am also struck by her assertion because of its intersection with the central theme of my work with Lewis: that is, feminist analysis. While Glycer's book focuses on 'The Company They (Lewis and Tolkien) Kept,' my work has focused on 'The Company They Didn't Keep'; that is, individuals who were part of the Inklings' lives, but not part of the small group of like-minded men who met weekly to read and debate one another's work. Women, even if they were like-minded, were excluded from the group because they were women. Yet collaboration is a venture that some feminists have claimed as a mode of working that is especially comfortable and appealing for women, perhaps even more so than for men.<sup>1</sup>

Applying Glycer's categories to the women in the lives of the Inklings suggests that some of them also functioned as Resonators, Opponents, Editors, and Collaborators. Glycer's vision of the Inklings as a writing community can be expanded to embrace 'Inklings outsiders,' individuals who were not part of the Thursday-evening get-togethers in Lewis's Oxford rooms. To extrapolate on the metaphor of the 'writing community,' the 'community' appears larger if we examine the suburbs and the countryside, rather than just the town.

This paper will begin the process of examining women in the lives of the Inklings as members of an extended writing community. Or more accurately, it will continue the process, since Glycer's book already references some of the Inklings' collaborations with women to bolster the arguments she makes predominantly about the male Inklings. As a preliminary venture, my project will focus just on Lewis, partly because he was the most prolific writer of the group, and partly because the large number of Lewis letters makes such an exploration convenient. My research method was simple: scan the indexes of the three volumes of *Collected Letters* for names that sound feminine; ignore names of women with whom collaboration would have been impossible or unlikely (Jane

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Andrews; Kaplan and Rose; Leonardi and Pope; Sagaria and Dickens; and Wei and Kramarae.

Austen, Queen Elizabeth II); peruse the relevant passages in the letters. I ignored a few passages of faux-community, as when Lewis asked his Aunt Lily Suffern to critique his (already published) narrative poem, *Dymmer*; "I always rely on you for plain honest criticism," he says, no doubt disingenuously, in a 1926 letter (I:673).<sup>2</sup>

This methodology has both advantages and disadvantages. One advantage is that it confirms an argument put forth by Mary Stewart Van Leeuwen that Lewis, when it comes to gender, was "a better man than his theories" (109); whether or not Lewis's attitudes are appropriately labeled 'misogynistic,' his behaviors toward women tended to be fair and charitable. One disadvantage, of course, is that women who do not figure in Lewis's correspondence are ignored; there are no extant letters, for example, to the woman with whom Lewis spent the greatest amount of time, Janie Moore. Yet much of his correspondence was with women, so perusing the letters is an appropriately authoritative mechanism for examining Lewis's extra-Inklings collaboration.

My study revealed several categories of female collaborators with Lewis:

- wives and female friends of colleagues
- women scholars
- female fans
- women already well known within Inklings circles, especially Dorothy L. Sayers, Ruth Pitter, and Sister Penelope

Lastly, the study revealed a further category of Lewis collaboration, one bridging the gap between the human and the divine.

### **Wives and Female Friends of Colleagues**

Glyer's footnotes are a useful entry point into this investigation. One, for example, describes Maud Barfield, wife of Lewis's friend Owen Barfield, as a proposed collaborator. The Barfields experimented with wine-making in 1930, which inspired them, Lewis, and Cecil Harwood to make preliminary plans for a Bacchic festival. Harwood, Lewis noted in a letter to Arthur Greeves, had a facial structure that made him a good stand-in for Bacchus; Lewis and Owen Barfield would be Corybantes, and "Mrs. B.," as Lewis called Maud, would be a Maenad. "B. and I will write the poetry," Lewis told Greeves, "& she will compose a dance" (I:913). Sadly, the letters make no further reference to this event.

Glyer also discusses Cecil Harwood as a collaborator with Lewis and Barfield in walking tours and the odd little document titled *A Cretaceous Perambulator*, though Harwood is not generally considered one of the Inklings.

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<sup>2</sup> Parenthetical citations consisting only of Roman numerals and Arabic numbers, with a colon in between, refer to volume and page numbers of C.S. Lewis's *Collected Letters*.

Lewis's letters include a series to Harwood's wife, Daphne, that shows her functioning as a Resonator and an Opponent. In 1933 Mrs. Harwood critiqued ideas Lewis expressed in his pre-Christian dialogue with Barfield, titled the *Summa*; Lewis acknowledged Daphne Harwood's critique but claimed it was no longer relevant, since he no longer held the views earlier expressed. At the same time, Lewis expressed his disinclination to pursue the Anthroposophy that she and her husband fervently embraced as ardent followers of Rudolf Steiner. Seven years later, Mrs. Harwood expressed a different criticism: that Lewis's Christian apologetic writings were becoming increasingly authoritarian. Here Lewis, despite his gallantry when speaking to the fair sex, chose to speak forthrightly, more in the line of an Opponent: "[w]ell! If that doesn't take the bun!! When you have heard half as many sentences beginning 'Christianity teaches' from me as I have heard ones beginning 'Steiner says' from you & Cecil [...] why then we'll start talking about authoritarianism!" (II:512).

Proposed collaborations with wives or friends of colleagues did not usually produce results. A 1920 letter to Arthur Greeves mentions a poetry anthology scheduled to appear that autumn. Contributors were to include Lewis's college friends Leo Baker and Sir Rodney Marshall Pasley. Lewis's letter reveals that two women were involved in the anthology project, Carola Mary Anima Oman and Margaret Gidding, apparently friends of Baker or Pasley (I:494); both women then disappear from Lewis's letters, suggesting this collaboration was one of convenience rather than friendship. In 1947 Marjorie Milne, a friend of Barfield, proposed a ballet based on Lewis's *Dymer* (II:872); Lewis seems to have put little stock in the proposal, since he perceived himself, uncomfortably, as another of Milne's temporary enthusiasms, but a 1949 letter to Ruth Pitter makes plans for a luncheon gathering consisting of Pitter, Milne, Lewis, and Barfield (II:1008).

Similarly, one finds missed opportunities to collaborate with the women surrounding Charles Williams. Glycer discusses *Arthurian Torso* as a Lewis/Williams collaboration (150-151), which is an interesting notion since Williams was dead at the time of the book's development; the book, in fact, consists of a 'prose fragment' of Williams and a lengthier analysis of Williams's poetry by Lewis. A 1946 Lewis letter reveals, however, that Lewis was given permission to publish the Williams text by Alice Mary Hadfield. "Mrs. Hadfield," as Lewis calls her, was a coworker and friend of Williams who later published two biographies of him; she was in a position, in other words, to add valuable insights into Williams's work. According to Walter Hooper's note on the letter, Hadfield "had asked to collaborate with Lewis on" the book (II:745n127); apparently nothing came of her request. About the same time Lewis corresponded with Anne Ridler, another Williams devotee, and suggested the two should meet; "I'm much interested in what you say about" some of

Williams's work, Lewis said (II:659). Again, it appears nothing come of this proposed meeting either.

### Colleagues

More successful collaborations transpired between Lewis and university-level colleagues. Lewis contributed to a Festschrift, *Seventeenth Century Studies Presented to Sir Herbert Grierson*, edited by Joan Bennett, a lecturer at Cambridge. The project entailed a brief series of letters in 1937. According to Walter Hooper, Lewis often visited the home of Bennet and her husband, a librarian at Cambridge, and Lewis's *Studies in Words* is dedicated to them (II:209).

His *Four Loves* owes its origin to Dr. Caroline Rakestraw, who requested some talks and coordinated their recording for broadcast in the United States; for better or for worse, we can also credit Rakestraw as the impetus behind the 1979 animated film of *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* (III:1707). Just a few months before Lewis began his work for Rakestraw he provided feedback to Jane Douglass on a script she had devised for a proposed film of the first *Narnia* book; Lewis's overall tone in his 19 April 1958 letter, however, can be described as discouraging (III:937-938).

The day prior to his unsupportive letter to Douglass, Lewis wrote a colleague, Muriel Bradbrook, animatedly discussing the concept of "bifurcation of meaning" of words; according to Hooper's comments, most of the ideas originating in this letter found their way into the pages of *Studies in Words* (III:936-937). Other letters to Bradbrook discuss college business or informal faculty meetings, one of which intersects with another especially-intriguing female participant in Lewis's extended writing community, Nan Dunbar.

The Lewis-Dunbar relationship had its origin in a vigorous disagreement. During Lewis's lecture on Dante's understanding of the Latin poet Statius, Dunbar disagreed that Statius represented a new turn in the development of ethics. Rather than seeking out Lewis in person following the lecture, she immediately wrote him a letter stating her view and her support for it. After an exchange of four letters each, turning on fine points in the connotations of Latin vocabulary, Lewis confessed he could not prove his own interpretation, though similarly he did not feel persuaded by Dunbar's. Still, toward the end of Lewis's fourth letter, he says "vicisti," which Hooper translates in a note as "you have won" (III:665n329). In a subsequent lecture Lewis admitted that an unnamed audience member, apparently a reference to Dunbar, had convinced him of his inability to prove his assertion. And on the 1957 publication of Lewis's essay, titled "Dante's Statius," Lewis acknowledged to Dunbar that his views had shifted in part as a result of her disagreement.

After seeing Dunbar's ability to marshal proofs from diverse texts, Lewis sought her help in finding the source of a quotation from Hobbes. Shortly

thereafter came the invitation from Muriel Bradbrook to meet Dunbar over dinner at Girton College. Hooper quotes Andrew Cuneo's doctoral dissertation which itself quotes Lewis as saying on meeting, "Ah! Miss Dunbar! I'm glad to find you actually exist—I'd thought perhaps you were only the personification of my conscience" (III:695). This meeting led to a further minor disagreement over the literary quality of a poem by Aristotle, moving Lewis to defend his position via letter, this time not simply discussing Latin, but written in it. Not long after, Dunbar reintroduced the debate over Statius by providing Lewis with new references she had found, this time in favor of *his* position. "It is magnanimous of you to supply me with all the ammunition I lacked," Lewis responded. "I think we can now agree that the text is 'patient' both of your interpretation and of mine" (III:718). He adds that, since Dante depicts Statius in Paradise, he and Dunbar can ask to clarify the point personally when they arrive in heaven. Hooper reports Dunbar found that suggestion unsatisfactory; Lewis, she felt, was likely to die before her, and would then proceed to argue Statius into his own point of view (III:718).

Disputation has long been a trademark of the Inklings, and Dunbar's willingness to engage in learned debate must have endeared her to him. When she questioned his discussion of the word 'nature' as part of the lecture series "Some Difficult Words," he not only responded but also wrote her a Latin poem. Dunbar herself translated it:

Nan is more learned than all the girls,  
More formidable than fierce Camilla  
More unable to shut up than Xanthippe [the shrewish wife of  
Socrates],  
Bold, garrulous, obstinate, aggressive  
Fierce, grim comrade of the sister Furies,  
Momus's daughter [god of ridicule], Zoilus' mother,  
Writing alarmingly, with watercress-sharp glare,  
She does not allow you to be careless. (III:740)

Six years later Lewis called Dunbar "the liveliest and learnedest of my daughters" (III:1467), an epithet that makes bittersweet the knowledge that on 21 November 1963, the morning of the day he died, one of his last letters provided Dunbar with directions to the Kilns for a planned mid-December luncheon. One can imagine how the knowledge of Lewis's death would affect the recipient of that letter; thus a theologian friend comforted Dunbar with the suggestion that, when she finally arrived in heaven, she would find Lewis with "his arm firmly around a small man in a toga, who is being dragged along to meet you. 'All right,' Lewis will be saying to [Statius]—"Tell her!! Tell her!!" (III:1661).



### Interactions With Fans

One of the ways in which Lewis's writing community expanded via correspondence is through the requests he received to comment on literary productions sent by fans, though such criticism tends to operate in one direction only: from Lewis to his correspondents, but not the reverse. Some fan letters were from decent enough authors, such as Phoebe Hesketh, whose poetry collection *No Time for Cowards* received unreserved praise (III:232-4); Lewis was less enthusiastic about her later *Out of the Dark*, which he found too Wordsworthian (III:458). In contrast is the case of Vera Mathews. This name may feel vaguely familiar to anyone who has perused volumes two and three of the Collected Letters. Mathews first contacted Lewis by sending him a care package, what Lewis termed a 'parcel,' in 1947. While Mathews was not the only American fan to send Lewis post-war sustenance, she was certainly one of the most faithful. In fact, one joy of perusing Lewis's letters to Mathews is to see the multiple ways Lewis devised to say 'thank you' for the extravagant gifts. Yet five years and fifty letters into the correspondence Matthews asked Lewis to read a 36-page story of her own. Lewis offered detailed reactions, keyed to the pages of her manuscript, with the following summation: "I will pay you the compliment [...] of giving you a perfectly honest criticism. I don't think the story, as it stands, will do." He ended the letter with "Are we still friends? I hope so" (III:166-7). And indeed the letters continue for another ten years, even after post-war rationing has been abolished, years in which Lewis encouraged further literary production and consented to act as informal editor for a morality play Mathews developed.

Even the best known of Lewis's letters to a fan, those to the 'American lady' Mary Willis Shelburne, took an occasional literary turn. This should not be surprising since Shelburne was herself an author, whose work included poetry and some reviews of Lewis's books. Yet literary topics are overshadowed in these letters by discussion of physical and spiritual ailments, even in the *Collected Letters*, which includes some literary discussion that was excised in *Letters to an American Lady*. At the very least, Lewis does not appear enthusiastic regarding Shelburne's literary efforts. Only rarely did he introduce poetic issues, as in this complaint that the English language has so few poetically suitable words that rhyme with 'world': "Furled, hurled, curled," he says, "none of them v[ery] serviceable." His proposed solution: "Let's invent a verb *to churl* ([to] behave churlishly)" (III:604). Later he thanked Shelburne for a sending him her review of *Surprised by Joy*, which he also briefly critiqued (III:672). Perhaps most interesting in the exchange with Shelburne is the fact that Lewis sent her one of his poems, titled "The Nativity" in *Collected Poems*, which he then promptly forgot. When Shelburne returned it to him, he offered a rare critique of his own work: "'Pon my word, [it's] not so bad as I feared" (III:419-20).

One of the most intriguing examples of Lewis mentoring the creative efforts of a fan concerns Joan Lancaster, who first wrote Lewis as a child in 1954 and whose letters continued sporadically through 1963. Lewis's first encouragement praised her description of a dream: "This [...] is not just compliment, I really mean that what you write is *good*" (III:505). The following year Lewis provided Lancaster with some succinct advice on writing:

1. Always try to use the language so as to make quite clear what you mean [...].
2. Always prefer the plain direct word to the long, vague one. [...]
3. Never use abstract nouns when concrete ones will do. [...]
4. [...] Don't use adjectives which merely tell us how you want us to *feel* [...].
5. Don't use words too big for the subject. [...] (III:766)

Over the next several years Lewis praised and critiqued several Lancaster stories, poems, and an essay. His final letter to her suggested that one poem was "too rhapsodical" but also suggested an affinity between her and Lewis: "So you are, like me, in love with syllables? Good" (III:1420).

### Women Known in Inkling Circles

Several names familiar to Lewis aficionados are at least peripheral to his extended writing community; these are women whom Lewis allowed greater scope and function within his extended writing community, both giving and receiving criticism. One such woman is G.E.B. Anscombe, a philosopher who may, or may not, have bested Lewis in a debate. The story behind the debate and the various assessments of its impact on Lewis have been addressed thoroughly by Victor Reppert and others (Reppert; Lambert; Dorman). Undisputed, however, is that Lewis revised a chapter of *Miracles* based on Anscombe's remarks (III:1066).

Pauline Baynes is another familiar name, loved by Lewis fans for her Narnian drawings. Lewis displayed somewhat less love for her drawings, at least in letters to others. "I have always had serious reservations about her," he told Dorothy L. Sayers, due to her "total ignorance of animal anatomy"; he suggested part of his rationale for continuing to use her work was because she had an elderly mother to support (III:638-9). In his letters to Baynes, however, he was always encouraging, though sometimes giving backhanded compliments: "I say! You have learned something about animals in the last few months [...]. Congratulations! [...] [T]hey show the greatest advance," he wrote in October 1954 (III:511-12), a little less than a year *prior* to the previously mentioned letter to Sayers in which he criticized Baynes's depictions of animals. Yet his letters show him discussing with her advance drafts of drawings and maps, in person on at

least one occasion, and suggesting modifications (such as placing a boat's rower facing backward rather than forward [III:265]); while evidence does not suggest that Baynes's drawings in any way influenced Lewis's writing, he did seek her advice (at least for politeness sake) on the business circumstances surrounding their collaboration when his publisher, Geoffrey Bles, retired (III:413).

Yet another familiar name is Katharine Farrer. Lewis first met her husband, Austin, through the Oxford Socratic Club. Identified in her letters by her single initial, K., she is known in Lewis circles as the woman who befriended Joy Lewis and who inherited Joy's fur coat upon her death. The first of Lewis's letters to K., dated 1952, was, more or less, a fan letter. Lewis described finding himself captivated by one of her detective novels. As usual Lewis provided detailed explanations of the book's positive characteristics, though he also offered criticism: "About your dialogue," he says, "I'm not so happy" (III:197). Over the next several years Lewis critiqued another 'tekkie' in manuscript, as well as a draft of a poem. Just as important, he outlined to K. his work on *Till We Have Faces* while in its earliest development. A 1955 letter suggests Lewis took K.'s criticisms very seriously: "[Your] criticism of the dialogue style of the two sisters is an eye-opener," he says; the defect K. revealed "w[ould] have been fatal" to the novel. Furthermore, K.'s reaction convinced him that his depiction of Psyche had not achieved what he intended (III:630-1). While Lewis disagreed with some of K.'s suggestions, his overall attitude exhibits a writing community at its best: the criticisms themselves suggest problems other readers are likely to encounter and that need to be addressed prior to publication.

Not surprisingly, the strongest evidence of women within Lewis's extended writing community involves names well known to Lewis aficionados: Joy Davidman, Dorothy L. Sayers, Sister Penelope, and Ruth Pitter. Davidman is the woman most closely identified as a collaborator with Lewis. Glycer notes Davidman's editorial assistance on books by both C.S. and Warren Lewis, and C.S. Lewis's editorial work on her own *Smoke on the Mountain* (128, 210). Glycer's footnotes recount Lewis's and Davidman's impromptu collaborative poems. The interactions between Davidman and Lewis concerning *Till We Have Faces* have been thoroughly discussed elsewhere (see, for example, my own book with Fredrick, and Glycer's excellent 1998 *Mythlore* article); therefore, I will ignore Davidman except to provide one new insight gained from perusing Lewis's letters: that is, his faithful and subtle efforts to promote her book to his correspondents. In fact, it is amusing to observe his method: on a dozen or so occasions he mentions "Joy Davidman whose *Smoke on the Mountain* you may have read" (for example, III:835). It is unlikely that Lewis truly believed so many correspondents might have already read the book, but his mentioning it probably resulted in at least a dozen more sales.

### Dorothy L. Sayers

Of the women mentioned in Glycer as peripherally related to the Inklings, Dorothy L. Sayers is most prominent, due to her paper in *Essays Presented to Charles Williams*. Glycer reveals that Sayers's essay on Dante was edited to some extent by Lewis and apparently commented on by all the Inklings contributors (148-149). Sayers also participated with Lewis in the Oxford Socratic Club (Glycer 23), and he invited her to contribute to the proposed Thorn series of theological books, which he had contemplated with Charles Williams; the series itself never materialized, making moot Sayers's decision not to contribute. Projects such as this, as well as Sayers's obvious intelligence, her theological interests, her writing skills, and her delight in literary creations from the past all combine to lead some readers to conclude she must have been an 'official' member of the Inklings. This is not the case, though Fredrick and I have argued that if any woman could have been a candidate for Inklings participation, Sayers was that woman.

But Sayers is most certainly a member of the larger writing community of which the Inklings were the hub; Glycer herself reveals as much in her own collaborative essay (with Laura K. Simmons) on Sayers and Lewis, published in *Seven*. Perusing Lewis's letters shows that, before *Essays Presented to Charles Williams*, and before Sayers had declined to contribute to the Thorn Books series, Lewis had declined in 1942 to contribute a book on marriage to Sayers' Bridgehead series (II:515) (though of course a few years later he did make marriage a central concern of *That Hideous Strength*); Lewis again declined making a contribution to Bridgeheads in 1949 (II:995). An equally intriguing non-collaboration concerns Lewis's efforts to prompt Sayers to join the battle against female clergy (II:859-863).

Despite these false starts, the letters show that successful interactions with Sayers extended further than the publication of the Williams essays; the Summer 1948 issues of *Theology* include letters from both Sayers and Lewis responding to criticism of their anthology, letters that reveal a deeper level of collaboration between Sayers and Charles Williams. Six years later Sayers came to Lewis's defense when the figurative identity of Aslan was questioned in *The Spectator* (III:634-635), and Sayers also provided a review of *Surprised by Joy*. In return, Lewis lavishly praised Sayers's translation of Dante, though he felt comfortable critiquing certain passages. In the mid 1950s the two began commenting on one another's poems, and Sayers suggested some revisions to Lewis; Lewis in turn praised though also suggested changes to Sayers's *Introductory Papers on Dante*, published in 1954. He was equally positive regarding Sayers's *Six Other Deadly Sins* and *The Man Born to be King*.

One of the most remarkable of Sayers's contributions to Inklings work concerns Lewis's *Miracles*, which Glycer mentions as having been read aloud in

Inklings' meetings during its gestation. According to Hooper's notes in *Collected Letters*, Sayers may have been the impetus in Lewis's devoting an entire book to the topic. Her 13 May 1943 letter to him notes that no current books discuss the topic, and asks a simple question: "Why?" (qtd. in II:573n102). Lewis's 17 May response notes "I'm starting a book on Miracles" (II:573). While Lewis had composed and published a sermon on this topic just nine months previously, Sayers's question "was exactly the encouragement Lewis needed to write his own book on the subject," according to Hooper (II:573n103).

Another intriguing Lewis/Sayers collaboration was a public debate with a mutual critic. This event stemmed from the infamous attack on the "dogmatic orthodoxy" of Lewis, Sayers, T.S. Eliot, and Graham Greene by Kathleen Nott, titled *The Emperor's Clothes*. According to Hooper's notes on Lewis's letters, Sayers instigated the event, which was then coordinated by John Wren-Lewis. Nott was understandably hesitant to appear at a forum in which she would single-handedly take on her several opponents, but was finally persuaded to come if Eliot would attend. At the last minute, Eliot became ill, and thus Nott cancelled, so the debate was held between Nott's friend, G.S. Frazer, and the tag-team of Sayers and Lewis.

### **Ruth Pitter**

In a 1946 letter Lewis suggested Sayers should seek out the poetry of Ruth Pitter, who makes just four appearances in *The Company They Keep*. One of those relates in a footnote the delightful story of Pitter skewering Lewis over his depiction of a well-stocked beaver lodge in a Narnia that has been 'always winter' for a hundred years. While this story suggests Pitter, like Sayers, as an intellectual equal to Lewis (since after all very few people could claim to have gotten the best of Lewis in a debate), her first appearance in Glycer's book suggests a humble deprecation of her own worth as a poet compared to Lewis; Glycer quotes Pitter as saying that Lewis's request that she critique some of his poems was "like a lion asking a mouse to criticize his roar" (qtd. in Glycer 77).

Yet Pitter must have overcome any personal reticence to criticism since Lewis continued to ask her advice and opinions on his work, from 1946 through at least 1951; discussion of Lewis's poems in manuscript drops out of the epistolary dialogue in the early 1950s, in part due to Lewis's preoccupation with completing his volume of 'OHEL,' the *Oxford History of English Literature*. In a 1955 letter, Lewis remarked "It is a long time since I turned a verse [...]. I should like to be 'with poem' again" (III:585). Furthermore, in 1953 Pitter moved from Essex to the town of Long Crendon, not too far from Oxford, in part to be closer to Lewis (III:274); at that time the letters became briefer, primarily notes scheduling in-person meetings. Then with Lewis's marriage to Joy Davidman, the letters stopped completely, only to resume in 1962; the break in the

correspondence was due largely to Pitter's belief that "a woman's friendship with a married man must be by grace and favor of his wife," a 'grace and favor' she did not receive from Joy (King, "Silent Music" 6).

Yet for five years prior to Pitter's move to Long Crendon, Lewis and Pitter critiqued one another's work freely. We can surmise this from Lewis's letters which continued to ask Pitter's advice; surely Lewis would not have kept asking if he only received 'I am not worthy to critique a lion' as a response. In fact, when Lewis feared she was reticent in expressing her opinion, he pressed her for it, even to the point where he became worried that a second letter written since an earlier one, with no reply in between, might be perceived as pushy; witness this opening from a 1948 letter: "On a railway platform this morning [...] I made a resolution. I said 'I will no longer be deterred by the fear of seeming to press for an opinion about my poems from writing to find out whether R.P. is dead, ill, in prison, emigrated, or simply never got my letter'" (II:874).

But beyond Lewis's letters, we have Don King's masterful new biography of Pitter, *Hunting the Unicorn*. Here we learn something of the nature of Pitter's critique of Lewis. One of her letters to Lord David Cecil informs him that she has recently written Lewis that some of his poems have "a tinge of the Flaubertian [...] [hatred and disdain for life]. [...] Well, one has to get down to brass tacks about poetry—one can't criticize *round* it" (qtd. in King, *Hunting* 148-9). Lewis took Pitter's critiques seriously. "I was silent about yr. [your] criticism because I was still chewing it and have been early taught Not to Speak with my Mouth Full. And I'm still chewing and can't really quite eat it." The same letter expressed fear that Pitter might be hiding from him the judgment that his work "isn't really poetry at all" (II:881). Part of Lewis's rationale for seeking validation as a poet from Pitter may be understood from George Sayer's famous recollection of Lewis's remark that, were he "not a confirmed bachelor, Ruth Pitter would be the woman he would like to marry" (qtd. in King, *Hunting* 197). But even more important is this comment from a December 1948 letter: "none of [my men friends] is as good a poet as you" (II:893).

Reviewing Lewis's letters to Pitter shows the significance of their interactions. Within eleven days of first replying to correspondence from Pitter, Lewis sent three of his own poems with a clear request for her honest reaction. "Now remember," he tells her, "You won't wound a sick man by unfavourable comment." Lewis asks for evaluation rather than analysis. "I know (or think) that some of these contain important thought and v[ery] great metrical ingenuity. That isn't what I'm worrying about. But are they real poems or do the content and the form remain separable—fitted together only by force?" (II:724). Just two weeks later, in a letter of more than a thousand words and containing fifteen poetic quotations (from French, Latin and the entire range of English poetry),

Lewis acknowledged Pitter's "v[ery] kind and valuable critique of my things" (II:735).

Lewis's request for criticism came after two rather full letters to Pitter in which he praised her work in detail, yet also offered suggestions and criticisms, in the same vein as Lewis's comments on J.R.R. Tolkien's poetry (which Glyer referred to as evidence of collaboration between the two men). "I'm not quite sure whether *primal* in 'primal fear' is pulling its weight," Lewis said about one Pitter poem, and "I can't help thinking it needs rhyme" about another (II:723). Twice in the same letter he confessed that he didn't understand two works, and he soundly rejected one poem: "No, no, no," he said; "The Moderns have got at you. Don't *you*, of all people be taken in by the silly idea that by simply mentioning dull or sordid facts in sub-poetical rhythms you can make a poem" (II:724). Even of a work Lewis labeled Pitter's best he offered a possible revision for a less than felicitous line (II:982).

Over the next several years, Lewis continued to send poems to Pitter for examination, and he freely evaluated her own. But the Lewis/Pitter relationship extended beyond an editorial one and in the direction of collaboration. Early in 1947 Lewis was invited to join in planning a new periodical, tentatively called 'Portico,' addressing arts and culture from a Christian perspective. One of the inducements offered Lewis to participate was that "Ruth Pitter is wholeheartedly in favour of the plan" (qtd. in II:757). Alas, nothing came of the proposal, but the planning itself shows Lewis willing to collaborate outside the Inklings circle, in a project reminiscent of Lewis's and Williams's proposed *Thorn Books*.

Another project from 1947 made further progress, though still did not result in publication; this project might be termed a one-sided collaboration, if such a concept is not an oxymoron. In April 1947 Pitter revealed that she was composing a series of poems in Spenserian stanzas based on a passage Pitter has described as a "Paeon of Praise" from Lewis's *Perelandra* (qtd. in II:789). Lewis's first reaction was surprise: "I'm rather shocked at your wasting *your* verse on *my* prose" (II:771). But two weeks later he queried when he might get to see them; "They'll 'do me good,'" he asserted. Why? As a literary critic Lewis pursued the task of "ferreting out the 'Sources' of the great poets. Now (serve me right) I shall be a source myself" (II:776). Within two months Pitter had, apparently, sent her poems to Lewis, who reported "I like them" (II:789); then, as he had done so often before in his letters to Pitter, he provided a brief critique of her work, including the suggestion that one stanza might inadvertently invoke pantheism.

### **Sister Penelope**

In 1956 Ruth Pitter planned a lecture on Lewis's Ransom trilogy (III:771), which are the very books that established a relationship between Lewis and Sister Penelope (born Ruth Penelope Lawson). Lewis may have possessed

the tendency to compartmentalize. If so, while Pitter was confidante in matters poetic, Sister Penelope played a similar role in matters spiritual and apologetic.

Sister Penelope first corresponded with Lewis in 1939 after reading *Out of the Silent Planet*. She wrote, in essence, a fan letter, praising the work as “provok[ing] thought in just the directions where I have always wanted to think” (qtd. in II:1057). Lewis responded with characteristic graciousness in a letter of about 700 words, the beginning of a correspondence which continued until 1957 and Lewis’s marriage. In Glycer’s book Sister Penelope is referenced four times as a correspondent with and confidante of Lewis; Glycer also notes that Lewis requested “textual criticism” from Sister Penelope concerning *Perelandra* (120).

Reading Lewis’s letters to Sister Penelope in sequential order shows a rapid deepening of their relationship. Before 1939 was finished, the two had exchanged several books, and Lewis claimed her writings had expressed helpful ideas he had never before considered (II:265). Hooper suggests a passage from Sister Penelope’s *Leaves from the Trees* “almost certainly” influenced a passage from Lewis’s *The Problem of Pain* (II:265n80). By the time Lewis consented, in April 1941, to visit Sister Penelope’s convent the following year, their relationship had evolved into a writing community. Lewis mentioned, though off hand, that the two should “compare notes” on their similar war-time service, lecturing to military personnel and defense volunteers (II:480). Just a month later Lewis proposed that the two should meet to discuss upcoming BBC lectures both had committed to. Lewis’s talks became the opening section of *Mere Christianity*, and are thus some of his most important work. He told Sister Penelope his own talks would attempt to argue for a moral law and a lawgiver, noting that as far as his arguments would go, they would likely induce despair in listeners rather than comfort. “You will come after to heal any wounds I may succeed in making,” he told her; “so each of us ought to know what the other is saying” (II:485). While the letters provide no evidence that the two did meet in person to discuss their talks, Lewis’s 9 October letter to Sister Penelope implies that he read her scripts, presumably prior to their on-air delivery (II:493).

*Perelandra*, which Lewis dedicated to Sister Penelope’s convent, was a significant subject of discussion between them in 1942. Lewis expressed his difficulties in developing his Eve character (II:496), and his need to revise the first two chapters after having completed the last chapter (II:520). As Glycer has noted, Lewis asked Sister Penelope for “textual criticism” of the book; Lewis’s letter enlarges the sense of community involved in creating the book, as Lewis suggested others at the convent might wish to read and comment on it, particularly the Reverend Mother, from whom Lewis sought approval since he planned to dedicate the book to the convent’s sisters.

As the publication date of *Perelandra* extended indefinitely into 1943, Lewis assisted Sister Penelope in publishing her translation of a Latin work by St.



Anasthasius. Lewis praised the work in manuscript in April 1942, then insisted she stand firm against her publisher's insistence that the translation should be more simplistic, in order to find an audience as a college student 'crib.' Instead, Lewis urged, she should seek a different publisher; "Try my Mr. Bles," he recommended, meaning Geoffrey Bles, first publisher of most of Lewis's religious writings (II:554). This was good advice since Sister Penelope related that Bles accepted the manuscript "at once" (qtd. in II:516n25). One can only speculate as to whether her association with Lewis, or perhaps even a good word from him, may have tipped Bles in favor of accepting the book. At any rate, Sister Penelope ultimately dedicated the book to Lewis, much to his satisfaction; as if that were not enough, the book contains an introduction by Lewis (II:603). When a later manuscript Sister Penelope offered Bles was rejected, Lewis commiserated with her over the pains and pitfalls of seeking publishers (II:911).

In later letters, Lewis offered Sister Penelope encouragement and criticism on revising a series of radio plays (II:565-566, 590-591), a theological explanation of the Christian creed (III:316), as well as an aborted work of fiction (II:848). Lewis in turn reported on progress in writing *Miracles* (II:591) and his need to abandon his proposed book on prayer (III:428). Toward the end of 1950 Sister Penelope had proposed writing something in the vein of Lewis's *Screwtape*, an idea that Lewis encouraged (III:79).

### **Spiritual Collaboration: Conductors**

Before bringing to a close this examination of C.S. Lewis's extended writing community, I wish to propose a further variety of collaboration, one touched only briefly by Glycer yet of crucial significance. In the "Building Community" chapter of her book, Glycer notes that Lewis's conversion to Christianity was a collaborative event involving others, such as J.R.R. Tolkien, who then became integral members of the Inklings. Of course, Lewis himself later performed this role, collaborating with individuals whose spiritual growth is moving them in the direction of conversion to Christianity. His books performed such a role, but so did his letters in a much more interactive form.

One such convert was Rhona Bodle, who in a 1947 letter expressed interest in Christianity but an inability to accept the divinity of Christ. Lewis's replies exhibit the same clear-headed common sense merging with beautifully written profundities as does his best work, such as the opening chapters of *Mere Christianity*. Over the next eighteen months and six letters, Lewis responded to her growing belief, culminating with a hearty "Welcome home!" on her revelation that her doubts had been resolved (II:947). A few years later Lewis discouraged her from over-emphasizing the role of his own writing in her conversion: "As for my part in it, remember that anybody (or any *thing*) may be used by the Holy Spirit as a conductor," a word which perhaps epitomizes the

nature of collaboration that mixes the human and the divine (III:25). Later letters show Lewis encouraging her vocation (which was working with deaf children) and providing a brief critique of a book of prayers she composed for them (III:265). Later still he encouraged and advised her efforts to introduce the gospel to some of her students.

Mary Neylan is another woman whom Lewis served as “conductor” on her road to belief and Christian growth. Rather than a ‘fan’ who contacted Lewis as a complete stranger, Neylan was one of Lewis’s students. In fact, one of the first letters in the series, dated 1933, explains why Neylan earned a Fourth in English (a grade not to be proud of). Over the next seven years, Lewis suggested further reading, explained literary allusions within his own work, and advised her on marriage and making confession. Along the way he consented to be godfather to one of her children and dedicated to her his anthology of George MacDonald excerpts, claiming that she “got more out of [MacDonald] than anyone else to whom I introduced his books” (II:653).

Lewis performed a similar task, though much more intellectualized, with Eliza Marian Butler, a lecturer at the University of Manchester, and later a Cambridge Professor. In a series of 1940 letters, Lewis offered extensive explanations regarding questions Butler had asked regarding *The Allegory of Love*; shortly thereafter he critiqued an essay draft she had sent him. Then followed a remarkable letter of 25 September 1940, in which Lewis somewhat apologetically took a further step to suggest what Butler had posited as skepticism in her essay actually revealed an opening to the possibility of metaphysical reality. Lewis offered himself, in his pre-Christian years, as a model of intellectual dishonesty that she should avoid. Apparently Lewis’s letter had some effect, as Butler expressed that her own argument now felt ‘thinner’ to her; “You naturally feel ‘thinner,’” Lewis replied, “because you are now living on the food really supplied by the mental country you inhabit. I have cut off the *smuggled* provisions which have been trickling across the frontier from richer adjacent countries” (II:449). Here Lewis takes significant pains to initiate a debate with a female colleague, the stakes of which are not just intellectual, but spiritual and eternal.

## Conclusion

Lewis’s correspondence with Sister Penelope, Dorothy L. Sayers, Ruth Pitter, colleagues, fans and friends reveals the same characteristics of a writing community as do his relationships with the male Inklings. Sister Penelope influenced Lewis’s *The Problem of Pain* (a book which Glycer cites as an Inkling collaboration). Dorothy L. Sayers prompted Lewis’s *Miracles* and G.E.B. Anscombe motivated him to modify it. Ruth Pitter helped shape some of Lewis’s poems. Nan Dunbar provided criticism that shaped a Dante essay. While we can

choose to view the Inklings as a writing community of men, widening our perspective shows that a number of women played important roles, if lesser ones, in the suburbs.

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