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Abstract

Asks why Lewis felt the myth of Cupid and Psyche needed to be retold. The story told by the Priest of Essur is a "middle step" between the original myth and Lewis's recasting of it, in which the incomplete pagan notion of sacrifice gives way to the fullness of that theme in Christianity.

Additional Keywords

Cupid and Psyche (myth)—Relation to Till We Have Faces; Lewis, C.S. Till We Have Faces; Sacrifice in Till We Have Faces; Christine Lowentrout

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A Retelling within a Myth Retold:
The Priest of Essur and Lewisian Mythopoetics
Peter J. Schakel

Readers have long recognized that the form, tone, and emphases of C.S. Lewis's Till We Have Faces can be understood only through attention to Lewis's subtitle, "A Myth Retold." Steve J. Van Der Weele, in a fine paper several years ago,[1] focused on the word "Retold" and discussed in an illuminating way the main changes Lewis made in Apuleius's tale of Cupid and Psyche: Lewis's elaboration of the historical setting, his shift to a first-person point-of-view, and his enlargement of the theme of jealousy and love. In that paper, however, Van Der Weele touched only lightly on what seems to me a more fundamental issue, not how Lewis retold the myth, but why he felt — and felt so long and intensely — that it needed retelling. I will suggest that an answer — and an insight into Lewis's views upon myth, paganism, and Christianity — may be found in the curious fact that he actually retells it twice, in Till We Have Faces as a whole, of course, but also in the sacred story told to Orual by the Priest of Essur.

Apuleius' tale is familiar — Psyche's beauty; Venus' jealousy toward her; Cupid's love for and marriage to her; her sisters' visit to and envy of her magnificent palace; her folly, her subsequent trials and sufferings, and her eventual reconciliation with Venus and restoration to Cupid. What Lewis noticed immediately about this story, a story filled with archetypes and mythic potential, was its lack of numinousness, its lack of any sense of awe or wonder or mystery. Most significantly it did not make the palace invisible to the skeptical and sinister sisters, though Lewis knew, from his first reading of the story, that this was "the way the thing must have been."[2] That lack of numinousness is all the more striking in context, in Apuleius's Metamorphoses, which, bawdy and extravagant as it is in places, ends with a scene of high numinousness, a pean of praise at the appearance of the goddess Isis to her now devoted worshipper Lucius. Unlike that final scene, the tale of Cupid and Psyche does not strike the emotions and imagination deeply; Apuleius drew on folk motifs and archetypes which could have been — which even cried out to be — turned into myth, but he failed to embue them with the imaginative and numinous qualities essential in myth.

That failure frustrated and even haunted Lewis. In his youth he tried to write a poem on his own version of the Cupid and Psyche story — fragments of two such attempts in couplets remain in the "Memoirs of the Lewis Family" compiled by Warren Lewis, now in the Wade Collection at Wheaton College. In 1922, according to his diary, he was considering how to make a masque or play of the story. Only much later, however, in the 1950's, was he able to find a form which could release fully the latent power of the myth; it is important to notice that, in arriving at that form, he inserts an extra step in order to set forth the basic mythical implications of the tale. The story told to Orual by the Priest of Essur becomes a middle step between Apuleius's telling and Lewis's retelling, a step needed to show what Apuleius could, perhaps even should, have developed but did not.

Orual, in her old age, needing a change of scenery, resolves "to go on a progress and travel in other lands" (p. 237). She and several younger companions travel first into Phars, then into Essur, where they decide to take an extra day in order to examine the unusual phenomenon of a natural hot spring. The excursion is made on "the calmest day — pure autumn — very hot, yet the sunlight on the stubble looked aged and gentle,

not fierce like the summer heats. You would think the year was resting, its work done. And I whispered to myself that I too would begin to rest" (p. 239). The setting is ironic, in terms of the unsettling revelations about to come, but also symbolic, for Orual, like the year, has reached her golden years, the time for a harvest of the wisdom which has been maturing over the decades. The setting introduces the seasonal archetype, which will be crucial to the story she is about to hear, as is the "journey" archetype (p. 239) — a journey of education, into experience.

As the others prepare the evening meal, Orual wanders off into the shady forest and comes upon a tiny, white temple containing the image of a goddess, with "a band or scarf of some black stuff tied round the head of the image so as to hide its face — much like my own veil, but that mine was white" (p. 241). The temple priest offers, for a little silver piece, to tell her the sacred story of Istra, the goddess. As he begins, she reflects,

> to me it was as if the old man's voice, and the temple, and I myself and my journey, were all things in such a story; for he was telling the very history of our Istra, of Psyche herself — how Talapal (that's the Essurian Ungit) was jealous of her beauty and made her to be offered to a brute on a mountain, and how Talapal's son Ialim, the most beautiful of the gods, loved her and took her away to his secret palace. (p. 242)

Lewis turns Psyche into the goddess Apuleius worshipped, into "the Veiled Isis,"[3] originally a goddess of fecundity identified with Demeter,[4] and he uses that identification to indicate what Apeleius had missed, namely the theme of sacrifice — Istra in the priest's tale is "offered to a brute on a mountain," not, like Apuleius's Psyche, given in marriage to "a dire mischief, viperous and fierce" in obedience to Apollo's oracle. For Orual, however, two elements of the priest's tale are erroneous — "he was telling it wrong" (p. 243). First, he apparently mistakes the motivation of the sisters as jealousy, rather than Orual's desire for the truth: and this is what incites Orual to the writing of Part I in her own defense. Second, he says that both sisters had visited Psyche and, more importantly, had seen her palace: "How," Orual writes in protest, "could any mortal have known of that palace at all? That much of the truth [the gods] had dropped into someone's mind, in a dream, or an oracle, or however they do such things. That much; and wiped clean out the very meaning, the pith, the central knot, of the whole tale" (p. 243).

Orual, however, preoccupied with the claim that the palace could be seen, misses "the very meaning, the central knot" of the priest's account. She is not even listening until he gets to the part where "Talapal releases her, and she is reunited to Ialim and becomes a goddess. Then we take off her black veil, and I change my black robe for a white one, and we offer — " (p. 246). Here the seasonal archetypes Lewis planted earlier in the chapter reappear and transform Apuleius's pleasant tale into a pagan fertility myth: "But, Stranger," the Priest goes on when Orual asks if Istra has actually been reunited with her husband, "the sacred story is about the sacred things — the things we do in the temple. In spring, and all summer, she is a goddess. Then when harvest comes we bring a lamp into the temple in the night and the god flies away. Then we veil her. And all winter she is wandering and suffering; weeping, always weeping" (p. 246).

Orual concludes angrily that the Priest "knew nothing" (p. 246), but here in fact is the mythical significance Apuleius chose not to develop. By interrupting the Priest, Orual prevented him from completing his sentence with the word sacrifice. Inherent in the Cupid and Psyche story is what Lewis called in "Myth Became Fact" "the old myth of the Dying God";[5] it is, when its archetypal threads are traced back, one of "those queer stories scattered all through the heathen religions about a god who dies and comes to life again and, by his death, has somehow given new life to men."[6] In missing the image of sacrifice, Apuleius neglected what is at the heart of the matter for Lewis. He brings out its importance later in the book when he has the Fox comment on the revolting blood sacrifices offered in Ungit's temple: "I never told [Psyche] why the old Priest got something from the dark House that I never got from my trim sentences.... The Priest knew at least that there must be sacrifices" (p. 295). And Lewis knows that in the basic myth of Cupid and Psyche, there must be sacrifice, for it is in sacrifice especially that the old pagan religions anticipate God's fullest revelation of himself and his truths in Christ.

Lewis saw, then, the failures of what Apuleius's tale was; but even more important to him is the inadequacy of what Apuleius's tale should have been, the insufficiency or incompleteness of paganism. Till We Have Faces, as a "myth retold," is actually a retelling of the Priest of Essur's tale, a retelling of Lewis's smaller retelling of Apuleius. Having, in the sacred story of the Priest, emphasized the theme of sacrifice, Lewis in Till We Have Faces points beyond pagan sacrifice to what it prefigures, the full embodiment of this theme in Christianity. Lewis puts it this way, "If my religion is true, then these stories may well be a preparatio evangelica, a divine hinting in poetic and ritual form at the same central truth which was later focussed and (so to speak) historicised in the Incarnation."[7] The archetypes in the fertility myths of a dying god who returns to life, of an Istra who wears a black scarf through the winter, are crucial to the Cupid and Psyche story because they convey a vital "gleam of divine truth."[8] Lewis explains that truth this way in "The Grand Miracle":

> As soon as you have thought of this, this pattern of the huge dive down to the bottom, into the depths of the universe and coming up again into the light, everyone will see at once how that is imitated and echoed by the principles of the natural world; the descent of the seed into the soil, and its rising again in the plants .... We all know about Adonis .... Christ is a figure of that sort. ... The corn itself is in its far-off way an imitation of the supernatural reality; the thing dying, and coming to life again, descending, and re-ascending beyond all nature. The principle is there in nature because it was first there in God Himself. Thus one is getting in behind the nature religions, and behind nature to Someone Who is not explained by, but explains, not, indeed, the nature religions directly, but that whole characteristic behaviour of nature on which nature religions were based. (God in the Dock, pp. 82-84).

It is a truth the old Priest of Ungit knew well: In retelling the Priest of Essur's tale, Lewis in Till We Have Faces takes us behind Istra, the nature goddess, to the Someone toward whom all such dying gods point: "We pass from a Balder or an Osiris, dying nobody knows when or where, to a historical Person crucified (it is all

in order) under Pontius Pilate" (God in the Dock, pp. 66-67).

Till We Have Faces is lifted far above the tales told by Apuleius and the Priest in Essur by the union of the theme of sacrifice with the book's dominant theme of love. Sacrifice in Till We Have Faces is not just the distanced, ritualistic death and rebirth of a pagan god or goddess, but the unselfish giving of self by individuals for others — Psyche going out to touch the sick and later offering herself on the mountain to end the drought; Bardia, the Fox, and Psyche disregarding their own god to promote Orual's; and Orual — unknowingly — spending her life for her country. Orual can find peace, forgiveness, and acceptance only as she sacrifices herself, her selfish demands and desires, and learns to give herself totally to others instead of requiring total devotion from them, a process completed in Part II. Through sacrifice and love, Orual is able to remove the veil of pretense and defense she has interposed between herself and the divine and is ready to meet, face to face, the most beautiful of the gods, Psyche's husband, the Christ.

In that middle step of the Priest's tale, then, is a significant clue to why, in Lewis's view, "Cupid and Psyche" needed to be retold. Apulieus's tale, "masterpiece of narrative and descriptive art" that it is, it not myth as Lewis used the term — it contains no sense of the numinous and requires intellectualization, through allegory, to complete its significance. We begin to "taste" the mythical only when Lewis retells the story as fertility myth, in the Priest of Essur's account, thus introducing us "to a permanent object of contemplation — more like a thing than a narration — which works upon us by its peculiar flavour or quality, rather as a smell or a chord does."[9] The full power and implications of the myth are released, however, only as Lewis retells the Myth in Till We Have Faces as a whole and carries us past natural or pagan truth to its completion in the Truth of Christianity, showing us, in myth and retelling, "that fear of the Lord in which wisdom begins" and "that love in which it is consumated."[10]

Notes

1. "From Mt. Olympus to Glome: C.S. Lewis's Dislocation of Apuleius's 'Cupid and Psyche' in Till We Have Faces," The Longing for a Form: Essays on the Fiction of C.S. Lewis, ed. Peter J. Schakel (Kent, Ohio: Kent State University Press, 1977), pp. 193-212.

2. From a note appended to the American edition: Till We Have Faces (1956; rpt. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1966), p. 313. All quotations of the story are from this edition.

3. C.S. Lewis, "Psycho-Analysis and Literary Criticism," Selected Literary Essays, ed. Walter Hooper (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969), p. 299.

4. Sir James G. Frazer, The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion (New York: Macmillan, 1922), p. 383.

5. God in the Dock: Essays on Theology and Ethics, ed. Walter Hooper (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1970), p. 66.

6. C.S. Lewis, Mere Christianity (1952; rpt. New York: Macmillan, 1960). p. 54.

7. "Religion without Dogma?", God in the Dock, p. 132.

8. C.S. Lewis, Miracles (1947; rpt. New York: Macmillan, 1978), p. 134n.

9. C.S. Lewis, An Experiment in Criticism (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1961), p. 43.

10. This essay is part of a forthcoming study of Till We Have Faces and Lewis's epistemology.

Oedipus' Son

That Trojan Horse I see
from my parapet
I built myself.

Those readied troops I know,
as I stare within,
I trained myself.

The moon is silent, full and still.
The wooden eyes reflect its light.
The steady archers clutch their bows.
And no bird sings.

--Allan Weinberg

MYTHOPOEIC CORE READING LIST

Mythlore frequently publishes articles that presuppose the reader is already familiar with the works they discuss. This is natural, given the special nature of Mythlore. In order to assist some readers, the following is what might be considered a "core" mythopoetic reading list, containing the most well known and discussed works. Due to the many editions printed, only the title and original date of publication are given. Good reading!

J.R.R. TOLKIEN

The Hobbit (1937); "Leaf by Niggle" (1945); "On Fairy-Stories" (1945); The Lord of the Rings: Vol.1, The Fellowship of the Ring (1954); Vol. II, The Two Towers (1954); Vol. III, The Return of the King (1955); The Silmarillion (1977); Unfinished Tales (1980).

C.S. LEWIS

Out of the Silent Planet (1938); Perelandra (1943); That Hideous Strength (1945); The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe (1950); Prince Caspian (1951); The Voyage of the Dawn Treader (1952); The Silver Chair (1953); The Horse and His Boy (1954); The Magician's Nephew (1955); The Last Battle (1956);Till We Have Faces (1956).

CHARLES WILLIAMS

War in Heaven (1930); Many Dimensions (1931); The Place of the Lion (1931); The Greater Trumps (1932); Shadows of Ecstacy (1933); Descent into Hell (1937); All Hallow's Eve (1945); Taliessin through Logres (1938); and The Region of the Summer Stars (1944) (printed together in 1954).