



mythLORE

A Journal of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis,  
Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature

Volume 39  
Number 1

Article 2

Fall 10-15-2020

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### Recommended Citation

Schubert, Tiffany E. (2020) "'I wolde be there / Byyonde the water": Consolation in *Pearl* and *The Silver Chair*," *Mythlore: A Journal of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature*: Vol. 39 : No. 1 , Article 2.

Available at: <https://dc.swosu.edu/mythlore/vol39/iss1/2>

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WOULDE BE THERE / BYGONDE THE WATER":  
CONSOLATION IN *PEARL* AND  
*THE SILVER CHAIR*

TIFFANY E. SCHUBERT

IN HIS FAMOUS *THE DECLINE AND FALL OF THE ROMAN EMPIRE*, Edward Gibbon admires Boethius's *The Consolation of Philosophy* as an intellectually impressive work composed in the midst of an intellectually dark age. However, he ultimately judges its philosophy as useless for consolation: "Such topics of consolation, so obvious, so vague, or so abstruse, are ineffectual to subdue the feelings of human nature" (216). Obvious, vague, and abstruse thought does nothing for our emotions. Reason—at least abstruse reason—cannot conquer passion. Gibbon does concede, "Yet the sense of misfortune may be diverted by the labour of thought; and the sage who could artfully combine in the same work the various riches of philosophy, poetry, and eloquence, must already have possessed the intrepid calmness which he affected to seek" (216). Philosophy, according to Gibbon, is not consoling, but the intellectual labor it demands can distract from misery. Perhaps most modern readers of *The Consolation* would side with Gibbon—after all, what effect do philosophical truisms have after the death of a child?—but C.S. Lewis, the self-proclaimed "dinosaur," contends that Boethius was effectual:

Gibbon has expressed in cadences of habitual beauty his contempt for the impotence of such 'philosophy' to subdue the feelings of the human heart. But no one ever said that it would have subdued Gibbon's. It sounds as if it had done something for Boethius. It is historically certain that for more than a thousand years many minds, not contemptible, found it nourishing. (*The Discarded Image* 90)

According to Lewis, Gibbon is stylistically potent, but historically wrong. As hard as it is for modern readers to believe, Boethius's work appears to have consoled for generations.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Lewis himself listed the *Consolation* as one of the ten most influential books in his own life.

Lewis's own relationship to consolation is by no means straightforward. Indeed, in his deeply personal *A Grief Observed*, written after the death of his wife Joy Davidman, he sounds rather Gibbon-like: "Talk to me about the truth of religion and I'll listen gladly. Talk to me about the duty of religion and I'll listen submissively. But don't come talking to me about the consolations of religion or I shall suspect that you don't understand" (28). In the midst of his grief, he does not find religion to be at all consoling. As he points out, the loved one might be in a better place, but the one left behind has suffered irremediable loss; the mother who has lost a child "[n]ever, in any place or time, will [...] have her son on her knees, or bathe him, or tell him a story, or plan for his future, or see her grandchild" (30). He even speculates that God is "[t]he Cosmic Sadist," who enjoys our pain (35). There is a rawness to his emotions, especially in the early pages of *A Grief Observed*, that the rational arguments of theology seemingly cannot assuage. But Lewis later becomes disgusted with his own emotions: "Feelings, and feelings, and feelings. Let me try thinking instead" (41). He turns away from unchecked emotion and begins his path to consolation by turning to thought. He admits that "[a]ll that stuff about the Cosmic Sadist was not so much the expression of thought as of hatred" (45-6). His path to consolation is not complete, or at least the book is not complete, until he experiences a visitation from Joy which "was incredibly unemotional. Just the impression of her *mind* momentarily facing my own" (85). Lewis remains tentative about the source of this vision, but he confesses, "Wherever it came from, it has made a sort of spring cleaning in my mind" (86). The emphasis here is on mind rather than emotion; indeed, he muses, "The dead could be like that; sheer intellects" (86). Lewis has some kind of intellectual rather than emotional visitation that scrubs and polishes his mind. This vision is certainly not Boethius's long conversation with Lady Philosophy, but it has a transformative effect. And Lewis's description of this unemotional visitation suggests that consolation is not merely an emotional affair. At the end of *A Grief Observed*, Lewis alludes to another consoling lady, Dante's beloved Beatrice: "How wicked it would be, if we could, to call the dead back! She [Joy] said not to me but to the chaplain, 'I am at peace with God.' She smiled, but not at me. *Poi si tornò all' eterna fontana*" (89). Just as Beatrice turned from Dante to the eternal fountain, Joy turned from Lewis to that same fountain. In the end, religion has brought consolation, not the consolation that everything will be as it was before, but the consolation that the beloved has turned from a lesser love to a higher one.

Consolation plays a role not only in Lewis's scholarship and personal life, but also in his fiction, particularly in *The Silver Chair*. Most obviously, the Narnian chronicles, with their knights, kings, ladies, dragons, witches, giants, and quests, belong to the genre of medieval romance. In *The Silver Chair*, Jill and

Eustace embark on a quest to find a missing prince who is being held prisoner by a witch, whose lair is under a city inhabited by giants. The romantic structure of the story is undeniable. However, this romance is also a consolation. While Boethius's *Consolation* is certainly the archetype of the consolation genre, I would like to spend more time with the fourteenth-century, anonymous *Pearl*, another consoling dream vision, whose landscape and characters are analogous to *The Silver Chair*.

The connection between Lewis and the *Pearl*-poet has received less critical attention than his relationship to other medieval poets.<sup>2</sup> T.S. Miller notes that most critics have focused more on Lewis's relationship with Dante than with the *Pearl*-poet. Miller himself explores the *Pearl*-poet's influence on Lewis, though he focuses on *Till We Have Faces* rather than *The Silver Chair*.

Few critics, even those attentive to literary allusions, have noticed the analogy between *Pearl* and *The Silver Chair*. In a chapter entitled "'The Healing of Harms': Allusions in *The Silver Chair*," Marvin Hinten notes allusions from Scripture, Homer, Chaucer, Arthurian literature, *Gulliver's Travels*, Coleridge, and Lewis's own life. Amanda M. Niedbala points to echoes of the *Odyssey* throughout the story. Charles A. Huttar sees the influence of Apollodorus and Horace on the silver chair itself, and Spenser, "not as a possible source for anything in Lewis's book but as providing convenient expression of the truism that we live in a world of change" (140). Only Stephen Yandell has noticed echoes of *Pearl*:

Eustace and Jill's arrival in Aslan's country echoes the dreamers' entrance into a paradisiacal garden of numerous medieval dream visions. The "smooth turf, smoother and brighter than Jill had ever seen before, and blue sky and . . . things so bright that they might have been jewels or huge butterflies" calls to mind Chaucer's *Book of the Duchess*, the garden of *The Romance of the Rose*, and the jeweler searching for his daughter in *Pearl*. (135)<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Lewis's relationship to the *Pearl*-poet was scholarly as well as imaginative. In *Experiment in Criticism*, he provides examples of realism of presentation—"the art of bringing something close to us, making it palpable and vivid, by sharply observed or sharply imagined detail"—from both *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and *Patience*: "the pinnacles in Gawain that looked as if they were 'pared out of paper'; Jonah going into the whale's mouth 'like a mote at a minster door'" (58).

<sup>3</sup> I do not wish to dispute that the landscapes of *Book of the Duchess* and *The Romance of the Rose* influenced Aslan's country. Dante's Earthly Paradise with the stern Matilda and the memory-removing Lethe is probably also an influence. Nevertheless, *Pearl* is more straightforwardly part of the consolation tradition than the other works; comparing it to *The Silver Chair* helps us see how Lewis participates in that tradition.

I would like to expand on Yandell's brief observation and see how both *Pearl* and *The Silver Chair* belong to the consolation tradition. Indeed, it is the shared tradition rather than influence that is the more central claim of this article. *The Silver Chair* is analogous to *Pearl*, and exploring the analogy reveals the role of consolation in Lewis's chronicle and provides an opportunity to reflect on the consolatory power of fiction itself. Both *The Silver Chair* and *Pearl* take place in beautiful landscapes that are retreats from everyday experience, in the dream-world of Paradise and the fantasy world of Narnia. In both works, the consolers—the maiden and Aslan—speak with unsettling sternness and have an extraordinary access to the divine that adds authority to their consolation. In both works, the reader also finds consolation, the kind of consolation that only stories can bring.

#### PEARL AND THE SILVER CHAIR

At the beginning of *The Silver Chair*, "It was a dull autumn day, and Jill Pole was crying behind the gym" (I.549). This tearful opening places the chronicle in the tradition of consolation; Boethius's *Consolation* begins with the declaration that "[s]ad verses flood my cheeks with tears unfeigned" (1.m1.4). At the beginning of *Pearl*, it is August, the season in which corn is harvested, and the *Pearl*-dreamer laments that "[f]or care ful colde that to me caght. / A deuely dele in my hert denned ["I stretched my hand in stark despair; / My heart lamented, deaf and blind"] (1.5.50-51).<sup>4</sup> Jill has been bullied by the children at the Experiment House, and the *Pearl*-dreamer has lost his beloved pearl. Later, in Aslan's country, Jill grieves for Eustace: "she remembered again the scream that Scrubb had given when he fell, and burst into tears" (II.556). No other Narnian chronicle has such a tearful beginning. Both Jill and the *Pearl*-dreamer, both in the season of harvest, need consolation.

They find that consolation in landscapes that share important attributes and transcend ordinary experience. Both Paradise and Aslan's country feature a forest, cliffs, and the color blue. In *Pearl*, the cliffs of Paradise are crystal and gleam with light, and the dreamer sees the maiden at the foot of a cliff. In *The Silver Chair*, the cliffs in Aslan's country are also remarkable; they are so high that the clouds below "might, at first glance, be mistaken for sheep" (I.554). In addition to the blue sky, some of the birds in Aslan's country are blue; the tree trunks in Paradise are "as blwe as ble of Ynde" ["with boles as blue / As indigo silks"] (2.2.76). The mention of "things so bright that they might have been jewels" echoes the language of jewels that runs throughout *Pearl*: the *Pearl*-dreamer walks on pearls, the pebbles in the river are sapphires, emeralds, and

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<sup>4</sup> I am using the Middle English text of "Pearl" that appears in *The Complete Works of the Pearl Poet*, translated by Casey Finch. The translations are Marie Borroff's.

other gems, and the maiden herself is covered with pearls. Both landscapes are bejewelled.

The river is perhaps the most important feature in both Paradise and Aslan's country.<sup>5</sup> It draws both characters deeper into the new world. Jill, "dreadfully thirsty" (II.556), follows the river's sound: "The wood was so still that it was not difficult to decide where the sound was coming from. It grew clearer every moment and, sooner than she expected, she came to an open glade and saw the stream, bright as glass, running across the turf a stone's throw away from her" (I.556-7). The *Pearl*-dreamer is also drawn to the river: "I wan to a water by shore that scherez / Lorde, dere watz hit adubement!" ["I came to the shore of a waterway: / Dear God, what brave embellishment"] (2.4.107-8). At first, the dreamer is full of joy and wonder at what he sees: "The fyrrre I folwed those floty vales / The more strengthe of joye myn herte straynes" ["The more I explored that plashy place / The greater strength did gladness gain"] (3.1.126-7). He longs to cross over to the other side of the river: "Forþy I þoȝt þat paradyse / Watz þer ouer gayn þo bonkez brade" [It could not be but Paradise / Lay beyond those noble banks, thought I"] (3.2.137-8). The river itself is cause for joy and wonderment, but it also draws the dreamer beyond himself, to paradise.

For all the dreamer's wonder and joy, and all his longing to cross the river, he fears its dangers: "But woþez mo iwysse þer ware / þe fyrrre I stalked by þe stronde" ["But dangers direr than before / Appeared, the more I wandered there"] (3.3.151-2). His fear only increases when the maiden appears. The dreamer tells us that the longer he looks at the maiden who stands on the other side of the river,

More then me lyste my drede aros;  
 I stod ful style and dorste not calle.  
 Wyth yyen open and mouth ful clos  
 I stod as hende as hawk in halle.  
     [More dread diminished my delight;  
     I stood stock-still and dared not call.  
     With eyes wide open and mouth shut tight  
     I hoved there tame as hawk in hall]  
 (4.1.181-4)

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<sup>5</sup> Rivers are, of course, important throughout the entire *Commedia*. Perhaps Lewis is thinking more of Dante's river than of the *Pearl*-poet's rivers. Nevertheless, I think that there are striking correspondences between the landscape of *The Silver Chair* and *Pearl* that are worth exploring.

The dreamer stands as still as a well-trained hawk, gazing at the maiden, and the more he gazes on her, the more his dread increases; his dread not of her, but at what will happen if he is unable to "stalle" the maiden (188). He fears both the dangers of the river and the danger of once again losing that which he has already lost.

Jill, too, experiences fear at the riverbank, though of a different kind than the *Pearl*-dreamer. The lion with the "heavy, golden voice" refuses to go away while she drinks and makes no promise "not to—do anything" (II.557). He also calmly informs her of the "girls and boys, women and men, kings and emperors, cities and realms" that he has swallowed (II.557), information that is not particularly reassuring to a distraught and terribly thirsty child. The narrator tells us that she "stood as still as if she had been turned into stone, with her mouth wide open. And she had a very good reason; just on this side of the stream lay the Lion" (II.557). Both Jill and the speaker respond to their river-side consolors with unmoving astonishment. Jill's mouth is wide open, and the dreamer's is closed, but both are unable to speak; both narrators resort to similes at this emotionally-heightened moment. Both Jill and the dreamer have seen their consolors before this moment: Jill saw the lion after she pushed Eustace off the cliff, and the dreamer has seen the maiden before, on Earth. Nevertheless, both respond with fear, whether fear of loss or fear of destruction, in the midst of a beautiful landscape. Consolation does not come from consolors who are entirely safe or easily approachable.

For Jill, the river is a test of courage. It is the only stream from which to drink, and she is desperately thirsty. But she must face the lion to satisfy her thirst. Jill drinks—though "[i]t was the worst thing she had ever had to do" (II.558). For the *Pearl*-dreamer, the river is a barrier between himself and the maiden, a barrier that he, in obedience to God's will, should not attempt to violate. The maiden chides him for his foolish language when he declares that he would be joyful if he could cross the river separating them (5.5), and the dream ends when he attempts to cross the river (20.1-2). The river separates the earthly from the heavenly—a barrier that ought not be violated. The dreamer's attempt to cross it, unlike Jill's drinking, is not divinely sanctioned. Nevertheless, for both characters the river is a test of their surrender to the divine.

And for both Jill and the *Pearl*-dreamer, the consolors they meet at the river speak with remarkable authority and with surprising sternness. The *Pearl*-maiden is one of the blessed, indeed a queen of heaven, a title to which the dreamer objects. Jill does not fully understand who Aslan is, but "[i]t never occurred to Jill to disbelieve the Lion—no one who had seen his stern face could do that" (II.558). He reveals himself to be the one who has called her into this world, sternly correcting her theological confusion: "You would not have called



to me unless I had been calling to you,'" Aslan tells Jill (II.558). This stern lion is the Somebody behind their whole adventure. Like Aslan, the *Pearl*-maiden sternly corrects the dreamer; "Sir, 3e haf your tale mysetente" ["Sir, your tale is told for nought"] is the first thing she says to the dreamer, a strangely distant opening given the former intimacy between them (5.2.257).

Stern consolers are, of course, part of medieval literature: Lady Philosophy sternly rebukes the Muses:

Her eyes lit on the Muses of poetry, who were standing by my couch, furnishing words to articulate my grief. For a moment she showed irritation; she frowned, and fire flashed from her eyes. "Who," she asked, "has allowed these harlots of the stage to approach this sick man? Not only do they afford no remedies to relieve his pains, but their succulent poisons intensify them." (1.p1.7-9)

Beatrice chides Dante for his tears over Virgil. Indeed, modern readers are often bewildered by the severity of Beatrice's first words to Dante; she seems so unaccountably harsh. Where is her empathy? After all, isn't the dreamer's anguish understandable and justified? Isn't Dante's grief over the loss of Virgil appropriate? Should a distraught child be told she must drink while the threat of being swallowed hangs over her? To answer that question, we must understand what consolation means and how that consolation transforms the consoled.

Consolation, at least in the medieval tradition, is not merely a temporary emotional respite but a transformation of vision that allows one who has experienced loss to see that loss in its proper philosophical and theological context. Generally, the person grieving has some metaphysical confusion, understandable though it may be, about what has happened.<sup>6</sup> Certainly, there is emotional relief in consolation literature (and, as I will discuss later, simply as *literature* it appeals to the emotions and imagination as well as the reason).<sup>7</sup> The

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<sup>6</sup> This medieval tradition has ancient roots. According to Antonio Donato, "In antiquity 'consolation' was the activity, often pursued by writing a text, of trying to alleviate or heal the grief experienced by a person who faces conditions such as old age, exile, death of loved ones, poverty, sickness, and so forth. The goal of such an activity was not to offer sympathy to the grieving person but rather to show him/her that the activity of grieving is not the appropriate response to the situation" (398).

<sup>7</sup> Donato argues that even Lady Philosophy seeks emotional consolation for the dreamer: "In 2.3 Lady Philosophy recalls the many privileges and honours that *Boethius* acquired throughout his life; in 2.4 she focuses on the positive things that he can still enjoy. That is, the well-being of his father-in-law Symmachus, the love of his wife, and the political distinctions that his sons still enjoy. Once more, Lady Philosophy does not seem to be

landscape of Paradise brings some emotional consolation for the dreamer: "The dubbement dere of doun and dalez, / Of wod and water and wlonk playnez, / Bylde in me blys, abated my balez, / Forridden my stresse, dystryed my paynez" ["Embellished with such wondrous grace / Were wood and water and shining plain, / My pleasures multiplied apace, / Conquered my cares, dispelled my pain"] (3.1.121-124). The splendor of wood and water and plains abates his sorrow, but this paradisaal landscape does not permanently console the dreamer's grief. His vision must be transformed through the stern reproof of the maiden. That sternness serves a pedagogical purpose. The dreamer must accept truth and learn to love the maiden for what she now is, not for what she once was. The dreamer thinks he has lost a pearl, but the maiden tells him, "For þat þou lestez watz bot a rose / þat flowred and fayled as kynde hyt gef" ["You lost a rose that grew in the ground: / A flower that fails and is not renewed"] (5.3.269-70). Her mortal body lacked the permanency of a pearl; it was a beautiful, but fleeting rose that by "kynde," by its very nature, was born to perish. But, through death, his rose has truly become "a perle of prys" ["the worth of a pearl"] (5.3.272). The rose reborn becomes the pearl of great price. This correction of vision continues throughout the dream. The dreamer struggles to accept that his pearl is a queen of heaven; he must learn from the parable of the laborers "[o]f more and lasse in Godez ryche / [...] lys no joparde" ["Of more and less, [...] / In the kingdom of God, no risk obtains"] (11.1.601-2) and that all are kings and queens in heaven. His earthly vision is slowly and sternly corrected by a heavenly one.

Consolation, in the Christian, medieval tradition, also requires submission to God's will, which the dreamer does not do until after he wakes up and is back in the ordinary world where Christ presents himself not as the bridegroom of perfected souls, but "in the forme of bred and wyn" ["in the form of bread and wine"] (20.5.1209). In the final moments of his vision, he fails to obey the maiden's instruction and rushes madly into the river. His desire for paradise is understandable, but he still seems too fixated on the maiden; it is "luf-longyng" ["I longed with love"] (19.5.1152) for her that motivates his attempt to cross the river. His love for her is disordered. He should cross the river out of love for the Lamb, not love for the maiden, and he should only cross after death, not now. The dreamer himself categorizes his attempted river-wading as an act of disobedience: "Hit watz not at my Pryncez paye" ["My prince therewith was not content"] (20.1.1164). He muses, "To þat Pryncez paye hade I ay bente, / [...] To mo of His mysterys I hade ben dryuen" ["Had I but sought to content my Lord / [...] I had seen and heard more mysteries yet"]

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driven by the intention of showing Boethius any philosophical truth but, rather, intends to help him tame his emotions" (418, emphasis in original).

(20.4.1189, 1194). Disobedience denied him insight into God's mystery, but since that moment of disobedience, "to God I hit byta3te" ["And to God committed her full and free"] (1207). His consolation, the transformation of his vision, is complete when he prays, "He gef uus to be His homly hyne / And precious perles unto His pay" ["O may we serve him well, and shine / As precious pearls to his content"] (20.5.1211-12). The dreamer classifies himself as a household servant and a precious pearl. He and his dear pearl are, in the end, the precious pearls of Christ. The dreamer's submission is thus seen in part through the transformation of the imagery that dominates the poem; he no longer possessively claims the pearl—"Art thou my perle" ["Are you my pearl"] (5.1.242)—but is himself a pearl possessed by the Prince.

Like the dreamer, Jill also learns to see rightly. In the opening chapter at Experiment House, she knows nothing of Aslan or his country; her vision is limited by a narrow, modern dullness, and, as Niedbala argues, a pagan understanding of religion: "Jill and Eustace [...] can only comprehend religion in a pagan manner; they think they were the ones who decided to enter Narnia, attempting to do so by chanting Aslan's name (much like the invocations to the gods present in ancient Greek literature)" (76). But as Aslan tells Jill, "You would not have called to me unless I had been calling to you" (II.558).<sup>8</sup> Jill thought she was initiating, but she was really responding. She only knows Aslan as "the somebody"; she must come to know him not as a vague power but as the golden lion that he is. Indeed, in the final chapter, Aslan appears to Jill and Eustace "so bright and real and strong that everything else began at once to look pale and shadowy compared with him" (XVI.660). Jill now sees Aslan as the reality that is so real that it transcends all other realities.

But, since Jill's story is a romance, not a dream-vision, she must learn obedience through a heroic quest. In this, her story resembles another of the Pearl-poet's works, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. During their quests both Jill and Gawain travel North and endure difficult terrain during their journey, including cliffs and ravines. Both encounter wretched wintery weather; Gawain faces freezing rain—"When þe colde cler water fro þe cloudez schadde / And fres er hit falle my3t to þe fale erpe" ["the cold clear rains rushed from the clouds / And froze before they could fall to the frosty earth"] (2.727-8)—and Jill experiences "a cruel north wind" and a heavy blizzard on her way to Harfang (VII.591). Both quests involve confrontations with magically potent antagonists who wear green. Both questers confront giants—the "[h]alf-etayn" ["Half a giant"] (1.140) that is the Green Knight and the giants of Harfang. Both Jill and Sir Gawain fail at key moments to perfectly show perfect obedience—he to the

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<sup>8</sup> I am indebted to Niedbala for drawing my attention to the importance of this quotation in the reorientation of Jill's vision from pagan to Christian.

rules of the Green Knight’s game, she to Aslan’s signs. Despite their failures, both are offered grace and forgiveness though Gawain’s emotional state at the end of his poem is rather ambiguous; whereas Jill finds peace and joy, it is unclear if Gawain is he able to forgive himself, as the court does, or if he remains full of self-loathing for accepting the girdle.

Through her heroic quest, Jill, the knight of romance, discovers the consolation of obeying Aslan’s will. Like the *Pearl*-dreamer, she finds immediate emotional consolation from Aslan, who assures her, “the Boy is safe. I have blown him to Narnia” (II.558) after she confesses that she was showing off. “But,” as Aslan tells her, “your task will be the harder because of what you have done” (II.558). The grief that she experiences in Aslan’s country comes about because she has not acted rightly; she has been a show-off. Thus, her own actions make the task all the harder, but the task itself is part of her consolation, part of the process by which she learns to align her will with Aslan’s. While the dreamer, bound by his earthly understanding, struggles to understand the topsy-turvy ways of the kingdom of heaven, Jill (and Eustace), struggle to follow the heavenly signs as they appear in a confusing and distracting world. Indeed, they really only exercise true obedience at the end, when they free Rilian from the titular silver chair; he is the first person in all their travels to ask for something in Aslan’s name. Even so, they hesitate: “Yet could Aslan have really meant them to unbind anyone—even a lunatic—who asked it in his name? [...] But then, supposing this was the real Sign? . . . They had muffed three already; they daren’t muff the fourth” (XI.626). They missed the third sign because they were consumed with their desire for a warm bed and satisfying meal. This time they choose obedience in the face of potential *death*. Puddleglum argues, “Aslan didn’t tell Pole what would happen. He only told her what to do. That fellow will be the death of us once he’s up, I shouldn’t wonder. But that doesn’t let us off following the Sign.” Courageously, Jill agrees: “All right!” said Jill suddenly. “Let’s get it over. Goodbye, everyone . . . !” (XI.626). Obedience demands that they show resolute courage in the face of bewildering uncertainty. Their previous failures to obey have prepared them for this moment of ultimate obedience, just as the dreamer’s failure to obey his prince prepares him to submit to that prince.

Jill’s grief in Aslan’s country arises from her own vice, and she must pay the consequences; for the false courage she displays at the edge of the cliff, she must learn real courage deep underground in the witch’s lair. The sadness with which the story first begins, however, is not her fault; she is an innocent victim. Thus, the consolation for her initial tears is the title of the final chapter, “The Healing of Harms”; in *The Silver Chair*, consolation is a kind of healing of harms, whether those harms be self-inflicted or not. Here, Lewis goes beyond the medieval tradition; Boethius is not restored to Theodoric’s court, nor is the

*Pearl*-dreamer reunited with his pearl. The children do not simply resign themselves to the brokenness and insufficiency of this world, putting their hope in the one to come. They actually bring some restoration to this world.

The “harms” in the title refers most immediately to Caspian, who is resurrected in Aslan’s country. Jill and Eustace see Caspian’s body “on the golden gravel of the bed of the stream,” in another echo of *Pearl*’s bejewelled landscape in (XVI.660). Just as the dreamer is able to see the maiden he lost in Paradise, Jill and Eustace are allowed to see Caspian resurrected in Aslan’s Country. This consolation is not a turning-back-of-the-clock and a making-things-just-as-they-were (Lewis does the first kind in *The Magician’s Nephew* with the miraculous recovery of Digory’s mother). Caspian does not return to Narnia; he will never live with his son or see his grandchildren grow up. But the harm of death has been healed as Jill and Eustace learn that death is not irredeemable oblivion.

“[H]arms” also applies to the harms inflicted on Jill and Eustace by the Head and the bullies of Experiment House. These are the harms that caused Jill to cry behind the gym. In this case, things do not go back to the way they were, but to the way they ought to be. Aslan, Caspian, Jill, and Eustace appear to the nasty children and terrify them; the Head calls the police, but “[w]hen the police arrived and found no lion, no broken wall, and no convicts, and the Head behaving like a lunatic, there was an inquiry into the whole thing. And in the inquiry all sorts of things about Experiment House came out, and about ten people got expelled” (XVI.663). Jill and Eustace obtain personal and institutional healing; their tormenters are expelled, and with the removal of the Head, the school becomes a much nicer place. Justice has been served.

#### IMAGINATIVE REALMS AND THE CONSOLATION OF LITERATURE

While both works end with a return to this world, the healing work of consolation is only possible because of an escape into another realm. Consolation cannot happen entirely in the everyday. Even Lewis himself experiences consolation through Joy’s extraordinary visitation. Dante encounters Beatrice in the lush garden at the top of Mt. Purgatory. Louise Cowan catalogues the landscapes of comedy, where characters escape the normal, customary world and find restoration and rejuvenation:

For Aristophanes’ solitary little hopeful figures, the heavens, or the underworld, or the bedroom are places of strength to be used against the corruption and decay of the city. For Shakespeare, Belmont, the Forest of Arden, the woods outside Athens, and Milford Haven are places of sanctuary and healing. (14)

For the *Pearl*-poet, the dream world is the place where the dreamer can receive a healing vision. For Lewis, Narnia is a place where modern children, wounded by their education and their own vices, can grow in wisdom and courage. Cowan writes, “these other ‘places’ [...] offer an experience of renewal, allowing the time and space necessary to keep the protagonist and other members of the community from despair or some irrevocable justice” (14). The dreamer and Jill ultimately returned to their own worlds, but they are forever changed by their time in another world. The weeping Jill of the first book now confidently plies her crops against the cruel girls who tormented her. The grieving dreamer, who has seen the pearl as exclusively his, is now able to pray that he himself will become one of God’s pearls.

Imaginative realms are a kind of consolation for the reader as well as the characters, a consolation that is both a satisfaction of our desires and a reordering of our vision, a consolation that gives us what we want and refines or transforms what we want. Aslan’s country, Narnia, and the *Pearl*-dreamer’s paradise bring consolation to the reader for the loss of Eden, for a time and a place, whether real or only desired, of beauty, and perfection, and intimacy with nature and with the divine. Just as the landscape diminishes the dreamer’s grief, the whole world of the story comforts the reader. Just as Jill and Eustace leave behind the “dull autumn” (a phrase which Lewis mentions three times in the first chapter) and find themselves in “a blaze of sunshine” (l.553), readers also step out of darkness and into light. In “On Fairy-stories,” Tolkien speaks of the consolation that fairy stories bring to ancient desires—the desire to fly like a bird, to swim like a fish, to talk to animals, to escape death, and most of all the desire for a happy ending. Here, Tolkien seems to mean an emotional consolation, a vicarious satisfaction of our deepest desires. We can extend his thoughts beyond fairy-stories to include fantasy like Narnia and the visionary world of *Pearl*. The happy ending of *The Silver Chair*, the restoration of the true king and the healing of educational harms, brings the consolation of both joy and justice as the virtuous are rewarded and the vicious punished. The resurrection of Caspian in Aslan’s country consoles what Tolkien describes as “the oldest and deepest desire, the Great Escape: the Escape from Death” (74). In *Pearl*, the appearance of the maiden consoles the desire we have to hear from loved ones we have lost. The vision of the New Jerusalem and the procession of the Lamb present the reader with a foretaste of what is, at least from a Christian perspective, the ultimate happy ending. And the dreamer’s final submission to God brings a kind of spiritual satisfaction that is emotionally consoling. Thus, reading such stories can be emotionally therapeutic for the reader.

However, that emotional therapy works best when we allow our vision to be reoriented by the story, even if only for a time, just as the character’s vision is reoriented. We have to be open to ancient and medieval consolation. We have

to accept that human beings are roses who only become pearls after death and that Aslan is a golden reality. Indeed, this kind of reorientation of the reader's philosophical and theological vision is what both the *Pearl*-poet and Lewis are striving for. Both authors are aiming for more than emotional consolation, whether of immediate grief or ancient desires. Both authors are aiming for what Tolkien, in "On Fairy-stories," calls "recovery": "Recovery (which includes return and renewal of health) is a re-gaining—regaining of a clear view" (67).<sup>9</sup> Both Lewis and the *Pearl*-poet seek to renew their readers' vision, to restore a healthy vision, a vision in which the temporal is seen in light of the eternal, in which the rose is seen for the pearl that it truly is. That recovered vision is essential to consolation.

While such consolation appeals to the mind, it also, through its very medium, touches the heart. Antonio Donato defends Boethius against those who would discredit his work as consolation literature because of his blending of prose and poetry: "Lady Philosophy's use of poetry seems to be in line with the practice, common to many ancient consolations, of combining purely theoretical discussions—designed to appeal to the mind of the addressee of the consolation—with a series of rhetorical and psychological devices crafted to work with the addressees' emotions" (421). Poetry does not detract from, but enhances the process of consolation. Donato observes that "Lady Philosophy makes ample use of myths, images, and exempla to convey in a different way the philosophical theories she outlines in a purely theoretical fashion" (420). Lady Philosophy, despite her banishment of the Muses, combines image and argument. Dream vision and romance, including *Pearl* and *The Silver Chair*, allow the authors to embody philosophical and theological truths in ways that awaken the emotions. This argument is a response to Gibbon's objection; consolation is certainly about the reorientation of the theological and philosophical vision, but that reorientation, for *The Consolation of Philosophy*, and for other great works in the consolation tradition, is not simply abstract and intellectual; it is a poetic endeavor that engages the whole person. Gibbon seems to imagine that philosophy consoles simply by conquering what he calls "the feelings of human nature" (216). But consolation, mediated through poetry, is not emotional

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<sup>9</sup> Tolkien is careful here to qualify what he means by the recovery of a clear view: "I do not say 'seeing things as they are' and involve myself with the philosophers, though I might venture to say 'seeing things as we are (or were) meant to see them'—as things apart from ourselves" (67). Perhaps this seeing "things apart from ourselves" partially accounts for the off-putting sternness of consolers. Sternness may be necessary to detach the viewer from epistemological possessiveness, from our pervasive tendency to see others as our own pearls rather than Christ's pearls.

repression. The beautiful image awakens desire. Aslan, as an image of Christ, has attracted readers for generations.<sup>10</sup>

Indeed, vivid characters like Aslan contribute to the unique power of stories. Stories work not through propositions or syllogism, but through characters. The consolation tradition draws much of its powers from the stern but engaging characters that the protagonist encounters. Lady Philosophy, Beatrice, the *Pearl*-maiden, and Aslan are memorable, engaging, and intimate. They combine a personal relationship with the philosophical and theological lessons that they teach. Even though Lewis becomes disgusted with his own emotional excess and turns to thought in *A Grief Observed*, he does not find consolation merely through logical reflection; he has a vision of Joy that brings him peace. Her presence consoles.

Of course, not all stories are consoling in a healthy way. As Lady Philosophy says of the Muses, “Not only do they afford no remedies to relieve his pains, but their succulent poisons intensify them” (1.p1.8). For Boethius, poetry has become a way of wallowing in grief; it has no healing power and even makes his suffering worse. Stories that console loss by fulfilling it are dangerous. But, as Lewis contends in “On Three Ways of Writing for Children,” the real danger lies not in fantasy but in realistic stories in which very real fantasies are fulfilled, “stories about millionaires, irresistible beauties, posh hotels, palm beaches and bedroom scenes—things that really might happen, that ought to happen, that would have happened if the reader had had a fair chance” (38). Such stories leave the reader, in Lewis’s words, “undivinely discontented” (38). But fantasy, like the dream-world of Paradise and Aslan’s country, is not wish-fulfillment. According to Lewis, it fortifies the reader for life by

arous[ing] a longing for he knows not what. It stirs and troubles him (to his life-long enrichment) with the dim sense of something beyond his reach and, far from dulling or emptying the actual world, gives it a new dimension of depth. He does not despise real woods because he has read of enchanted woods: the reading makes all real woods a little enchanted.  
(38)

Fantasy awakens a divine longing for a happiness that goes beyond temporal happiness and enriches the reader’s joy in the beauty of this world. As Lady Philosophy tells Boethius at the end of their conversation, “So avoid vices,

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<sup>10</sup> This is not to say that poetic images are simply useful vehicles for expressing philosophical and theological consolation. As Lewis advises in “On Three Ways of Writing for Children,” “Let the pictures tell you their own moral” (41) and again, “The only moral that is of any value is that which arises inevitably from the whole cast of the author’s mind” (42). The consolation of any story arises from the story itself.



cultivate virtues, raise your minds to righteous hopes, pour out your humble prayers to heaven" (5.p6.47-48). His supernatural experience strengthens him for the ordinary life of virtue and prayer.

We all, in this life at least, must return from the enchanted woods to the real woods. The reader closes the book, the dreamer wakes up, and the children return to this world. In *Pearl* and *The Silver Chair*, the characters experience the consolation of right theological perspective and moral growth, through poetic images that stir the heart and the imagination, and help one live well in this world. By returning the children to our world, Lewis is more *Pearl*-poet than Dante, for Dante, within the action of his poem, never wakes up to his exiled life in Ravenna; his will and desire remain in blissful union with the Trinity.<sup>11</sup> But, as Miller writes about *Pearl* and *Till We Have Faces*,

Life goes on, the fragment of the vision ends, and another hand closes off the narrative with a final flourish of the literal-historical; as in *Pearl*, life continues, the Dreamer awakens—as he must—and the reader closes the book, as we must. There is no “pure allegory;” only the historical level of human life, the transcendent sphere of the divine, and the intersection between them that is the subject of both *Pearl* and *Till We Have Faces*. (66)

The literal, historical world is still there, with all its frailty and confusion, but the dreamer and the children and perhaps the reader as well are all better able to live in it because they have escaped from it for a time and have been consoled.

There is the suggestion of a permanent return to Paradise and to Aslan's country—but only through death. When the *Pearl*-dreamer declares that he will live in this country with the maiden, she tells him no one comes to this country without dying: “Thurgh drwry deth bos uch man dreve / Er over thys dam hym Dryghtyn deme” (“Each man must suffer a death foretold / Ere God to this crossing give consent”) (6.2.323-324). At the end of *The Silver Chair*, Jill and Eustace hope that they have come to Aslan's country to stay. “‘No, my dears,’ he said [far more gently than the *Pearl*-maiden does]. ‘When you meet me here again, you will have come to stay. But not now. You must go back to your own world for a while’” (XVI.662). For Lewis and for the *Pearl*-poet, there are no shortcuts to final and complete consolation in which right vision and right action, not just temporary emotional reprieve, are the goal. All men must swallow the bitter pill of death to find permanent healing in eternal consolation.

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<sup>11</sup> Both the reader and Dante know that he will wake up and return to exiled life. But he does not narrate that return. Compare the end of *Paradiso* to the end of *Pearl*, *The Romance of the Rose*, and *The Book of the Dutchess*, which all end with the dreamer waking up.

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