

The Gender Dance

**Irony Subversion in
C. S. Lewis's Cosmic Trilogy**

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Chapter One

The Invitation into the Gender Dance

"In the plan of the Great Dance plans without number interlock....
by the unions of a kneeling with a sceptred love. Blessed be He!"
(*Perelandra*, Ch. 17)

It is a truth [almost] universally acknowledged" that a woman who chooses marriage and especially motherhood over higher education and career must be lacking in intelligence. However little is known about the intellectual, imaginative, and moral qualities of such a woman, "this truth is so well fixed in the minds of the surrounding [society]"¹ that she is considered to be the victim of cultural sexism which relegates her to occupying an inferior role in the home.

So Jane Austen might have applied her ironic view of societal assumptions in *Pride and Prejudice* to the heated discussion surrounding one of the most controversial characters in C.S. Lewis's fiction today: Jane Studdock in *That Hideous Strength*. Arguably, the character of Jane serves as a test case as to whether or not readers regard C.S. Lewis to have been sexist, even misogynistic, or just hopelessly blind to the cultural sexism of his age. But rather than saying "yea" or "nay" to the question of Lewis's apparent sexism in the case of Jane, or any of his other fictional characters, or even dismissing the question in deference to the idea that the question itself is anachronistic, I suggest that Lewis explores in his cosmic trilogy,² *Out of the Silent Planet* (1938), *Perelandra* (1943), and *That Hideous Strength* (1945), a concept of gender³ that has not yet been widely grasped—and one that might be paradoxically liberating for all of humanity.

Clive Staples Lewis (1898–1963) is one of the most renowned, well-loved, arguably original, and, in some quarters, reviled authors of the twentieth century. His enduring prominence as an imaginative writer, literary scholar, and Christian apologist continues to command attention. And in Lewis studies today the most controversial question is whether or not he was sexist or even misogynistic—and

therefore (either implied or overtly stated) whether or not he ought to be regarded with a high degree of caution or even dismissed. From the 1960s on, critics, including Stella Gibbons, Doris T. Myers, Margaret Hannay, Kath Filmer, John Goldthwaite, Candice Fredrick and Sam McBride, Jean E. Graham, Karin Fry, Mary Stewart Van Leeuwen, and Ann Loades, have denounced Lewis's apparent sexism in his literature and, at times, in his life. Lewis's close friend Owen Barfield, for instance, is remembered for having concluded that Lewis "could properly be called a misogynist on at least the 'theoretical level', though decidedly not so in his personal relations with individual women" (qtd. in Green and Hooper 213-14). Fredrick and McBride charge Lewis for exhibiting a "Christian sexism" and "disturbing misogyny" which they predict that Christian churches will one day reject (xiv-xv). Authors J.K. Rowling (qtd. in Grossman) and Philip Pullman (qtd. in Ezard) have roundly criticized him for a presumably sexist portrayal of Susan in *The Last Battle*.⁴ And in reference to the trilogy, Tom Shippey observes, "Lewis's views on the nature of Christian marriage are probably unacceptable to almost everyone" (247-8).

But other critics, several using qualifying statements, have alternatively argued that Lewis affirmed females; these include Roger Lancelyn Green and Walter Hooper, Kathryn Lindskoog, Corbin Scott Carnell, Nancy-Lou Patterson, Paul F. Ford, Karla Faust Jones, David C. Downing, Michael Ward, Elizabeth Baird Hardy, and David Emerson. Sanford Schwartz notes "some surprising reversals" in Lewis's exploration of gender issues (186, 8n). Patterson, in reference to Jane Studdock in *That Hideous Strength*, speaks of "the inherent dignity of the feminine role" ("Some Kind of Company" 12). Loades, too, hints at the argument that Lewis suggests a Christ-like masculinity as an alternative to exploitive masculinity ("On gender" 170). Similarly, Ronda Chervin observes that Lewis's concept of heroism "strikes a special note in our times when the idea of the masculine has dimmed due to a false alternative between the negative macho man and the overly gentle man who cannot lead." She argues, "Lewis's path beyond that dilemma would be the Christian male, humble yet empowered by the Spirit" (6). Edward Zogby, S.J., speaks of Lewis himself as having become "feminized" in relation to God, and speaks

of Lewis's concept of gender as "triadic," wherein the opposites of Masculine and Feminine result in the individual's "restor[ation] to inner unity" (33–4, 37).

Clearly, there is much more to be said about Lewis's concept of gender rather than merely casting a vote on whether or not he was sexist and at what point he might have changed (if he did substantially change). But while there is no question that there is chauvinism in the cosmic trilogy, as in all of Lewis's other fiction, the decisive question is *whose* chauvinism? The author's? Or that of some of his characters? Or the reader's? Or some combination? Diana Pavlac Glyer helpfully calls for a full discussion of this subject that takes into account the body of Lewis's work, the context in which he was writing, doing so in the spirit of regarding his life as exemplary in terms of desiring "unity," "liberty," and "love" (483). However, Glyer herself perhaps speaks for many when she says that she is "[p]ersonally ... uncomfortable" with Lewis's use of the term "'masculine'" to denote qualities such as "strength, initiative, courtesy, protection, frankness, and chivalry," and "'feminine'" to denote qualities such as "tenderness, responsiveness, tact, and beauty"; thus, she concludes that his choice is unquestionably "problematic" (477). Alan Jacobs also speaks of "cring[ing]" upon seeing Lewis's traditional ideas of gender emerging (*Narnian* 261).⁵

Indeed, in a revolutionary age that typically associates liberty with the metaphor of democracy and therefore, the metaphor of hierarchy with enslavement, how does one respond to an earlier thinker who was far behind even his own times in insisting on the intrinsic value of hierarchy? And seemingly embraced gender essentialism? What is valuable, if anything, about Lewis's distinctions between the "masculine" and the "feminine"?⁶

In *Perelandra*, the narrator extols the related metaphors of hierarchy, "hegemony," and "subordination" as descriptive of the nature of existence (187). In *That Hideous Strength*, an intelligent young woman is encouraged to obey her husband. What is it that readers might learn from Lewis on the topic of gender, other than a seemingly antiquated view of unequal power relations in which females are to be subject to males? Wives to husbands? Church members to male

priests (Lewis, "Priestesses in the Church?")? And how can the male world of *Out of the Silent Planet* credibly speak to gender discourse?

Perhaps one is tempted to ignore, if possible, these potentially embarrassing features of the cosmic trilogy, especially in view of Lewis's otherwise significant prophetic vision. The novels, after all, address the scope of the culture wars of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries in which philosophical materialism is in increasing conflict with ancient claims of objective truth. In the trilogy Lewis explores the far-reaching effects of amoral scientism which reduces humanity and nature to function. Totalitarianism, eugenics, ethnic cleansing, a systematic destruction of nature—all aided by an increasing technocracy founded on faith in human reason, and therefore in defiance of universal moral law which Lewis refers to as the *Tao*—will culminate, if unchecked, in the abolition of humanity (*AM*). Therefore the topic of gender, at first glance, might seem even trivial next to matters of such import.

Martha C. Sammons, for instance, without reference to gender, points to the enormous significance of these novels: "the trilogy jolts us into a different way of seeing history and the future of the cosmos" ("*A Far-Off Country*" xiv). She believes "the books seem to be even more up-to-date" because "[t]he dangers Lewis warned were approaching back in the forties are becoming realities in our world" (xv). Others concur with Sammons' reading of the deep-going impact of the trilogy. Shippey asserts, "More people now owe their understanding of the Fall of Man to *Perelandra* than to any formal works of theology, even Lewis's" (248). Of *That Hideous Strength*, he observes that Lewis's use of the biblical story of the Tower of Babel "has provided a powerful corrective ... to the plague of bureaucratic and academic 'babble,'" a concern which George Orwell and Ursula K. Le Guin echo, he points out, and which "does remain a clear and present danger" (248). Matthew T. Dickerson and David O'Hara consider Lewis's "healthy environmental vision" (7) to be a compelling restorative voice in the current global ecological crisis that is driven by a technological view of humanity. Schwartz concludes, "it seems as though the major concerns of the Space Trilogy are becoming ever more ominous as we move further into the twenty-first century" (7).

In light of these urgent concerns, how important is Lewis's presumably old-fashioned view of gender?

But several scholars, including Owen Barfield, Alan Jacobs, and James T. Como, have commented on the essential, organic unity of Lewis's thinking. Barfield thought of it as Lewis's "'presence of mind'" (2),⁷ and Jacobs believes it to have been his "*willingness to be enchanted*" (*Narnian* xxi). Como goes so far as to say that "the constancy and consistency of his premises, intellectual and emotional" are "most challenging, even frightening," and that "an attempt to apprehend this compelling integrity ought to be made" (35). In this sense, it is worth considering that Lewis's view of gender is not a curious anomaly of an otherwise sane critique of culture, but likely, and for excellent reasons, an intrinsic part of his critique. Just as Lewis's vision of the great cosmic dance illustrates countless interwoven designs, so his vision of gender is part and parcel of everything else he believes. Thus, Jane Studdock's submission to her husband and her child-bearing, like her husband Mark's opening to her (*THS*), is a cameo image of the victory of organic life over technocracy. Similarly, Lewis's characterization of the druid Merlin (*THS*) revolutionizes conventional gender paradigms. As a whole, the trilogy, revealing what Sammons calls Lewis's "myth of Deep Heaven" ("*A Far-Off Country*" xiv), offers a distinctive view on gender and its relation to all things human and divine.

In this study I will investigate how Lewis's concept of gender metaphor illustrates his counter-text to modernism. Traditional gender metaphor may be more important than most of us would guess. Peter Kreeft, for instance, argues that when in an atheistic worldview "heaven is no longer a Father, nature is no longer a Mother [.] then "demythologized" nature becomes "'it'" (*Heaven* 24). What was once an organic unity of spirit and matter in hierarchical and therefore harmonious relationship becomes a site of predatory anarchy. The deadly effects of this loss of spirit and consequent objectification of nature, bereft of spirit, become obvious in the trilogy, beginning with Weston and Devine in *Out of the Silent Planet*, and culminating with the N.I.C.E. in *That Hideous Strength*. Strangely to modern ears, gender metaphor matters more than rationalism can measure.

Many critics regard the novels of the trilogy as products of Lewis's earlier sexism, not yet modified by the continuing influence of his household, female students, female correspondents, female colleagues, and especially the later arrival of his wife-to-be, Joy Davidman.⁸ Walter Hooper, by contrast, dismisses this notion that Lewis "did not know what life was about until the age of fifty-eight," and cautions rather against readers "determined to use C.S. Lewis instead of receive from him [,] [readers who] must make him other than he was" ("C.S. Lewis" 50). I too take the view that Lewis, especially after his conversion to Christianity, did not fundamentally change his views of gender, or anything else. His imaginative interest in gender as metaphor illustrates, rather, an important truth about what he believed about everything.

So, while gender distinctions often suggest to us harmful exclusivities, often for very excellent historical reasons, I will argue that Lewis rather uses gender metaphor throughout the trilogy to convey spirituality in a surprisingly gender-inclusive way. Often in a most playful manner, Lewis subverts typical gender discourse in ways intended to challenge and to liberate from chauvinism. To the spiritually minded, difference does not suggest covetousness with its consequences of competition and enslavement. Instead, difference invites comedy with its consequences of interdependence and liberation.

I do not consider Lewis to be beyond reproach; indeed, I believe he would have laughed heartily and even been appalled at the notion. Certainly Lewis had sexist attitudes at times, especially in his pre-Christian days, and sometimes later too. Instances of Lewis's personal sexism have been thoroughly debated, and I have addressed several in my discussion of the *Chronicles of Narnia*.⁹ One such example, written during the time while he was composing the trilogy, seems particularly offensive. In a letter to E.R. Eddison in 1942, he writes in witty and rather unforgivable prose:

... it is a thing openlie manifeste to all but disards and verie goosecaps that feminitie is to itself an imperfection, being placed by the Pythagoreans in the sinister column with matter and mortalitie. Of which we see dailie ensample in that men ... do gladlie withdraw into their own societie ... where we see no woman ... but will not of good will escape from her sisters and seeke to the conversation of men, as seyking by instincte of Nature so to receive the

perfection she lacketh. Accordant thereto is that maxim of the scholes *Materia appetit formam ut virum femina* ['Matter seeks out its form, as a woman seeks out a man'].¹⁰

Further to E.R. Eddison's response, Lewis dismisses the charge of misogyny with an airy comparison of male-and-female relations to owner-and-chattel relations:

Now for your calling me a *misogynist* by cause I allowe not all your fyne aerie fantasies of femininitee, it is all one as though you should call a man *hater of horses* because he hath it not commonlie in vse to let four grooms bundle his horse into the coache while he himself goeth presentlie into the shaftes to giue Master Bayard his morning dryve.¹¹

Need one further proof of Lewis's contextual and personal sexism? Even if one could forgive him for lack of judgment, clearly no discussion of Lewis and gender can blithely overlook such a blatant example of highly questionable humour. With such comments, taken together with his claim in *A Preface to Paradise Lost* that "whether the male is, or is not, the superior sex, the masculine is certainly the superior gender" (113) (a point I will return to), the wary contemporary reader is most likely to conclude that Lewis is guilty of sexism as charged.

However, instances of Lewis's guilt notwithstanding, and especially because of the weight of cultural sexism that he was heir to, I believe it is nothing short of astounding that Lewis by and large identifies with the "feminine." For one thing, he shows empathy with, even egalitarianism toward, women. In *The Four Loves*, he comments that in his own profession collegial friendship between the sexes is a common occurrence and that its historical rarity is "unfortunate" and an "impoverishment" (68–9). In "Equality," he argues for the emancipation of women in political and economic terms. In a letter, he writes of "learning so much ... about domestic tyrannies in the States," and asks with sardonic wit if that might be the reason why the statue of Liberty "turns her back on America?"¹² Lewis equates traditionally male roles with female ones, such as the soldier with the expectant mother¹³ or with the woman who works both inside and outside the home,¹⁴ the poet with the cleaning woman (CC 24), authors with

pregnant women,¹⁵ and the university professor with the housewife whose work is ever incomplete.¹⁶ Moreover, unlike many of his time and ours, he esteems the domestic labour of the housewife as “the most important work in the world.”¹⁷

Then, without exception, Lewis extols as heroic qualities that which Western thinking has gendered as “feminine.” Surely it was for this reason that he whimsically and willingly accepted the perception of himself as the “old woman” of Oxford.¹⁸ Seen from the lens of heroic qualities that we tend to privilege in the West, and have gendered as “masculine,” Jack Lewis was indeed a misfit, an “old woman” unafraid to critique Western thinking. To unpack this argument, I will address the two distinctive Western heroic models, classical heroism and spiritual heroism; the concept of theological feminism; and Lewis’s affinity with a hierarchical vision.

Two Western Heroic Models: Classical and Spiritual Heroism

Do we consider people to be heroic because they are “active” and self-reliant? Alternatively, do we consider people to be unheroic when they are “passive” and dependent? Our answers have everything to do with our ties to one of these two Western heroic models.

The predominant heroic image privileged in the Western imagination is the classical one of Greece and Rome. It is characterized by values such as reason, autonomy, activity, aggression, conquest, deceit, and pride. The wrath of Achilles, the deception of Odysseus, the despair of Aeneas, the martial valour of all heroes in establishing worldly power—these qualities have contributed to the typical idea of the hero as active and self-reliant. Noteworthy for any discussion of gender, these heroic qualities have been associated with masculinity, and in John Milton’s works are supreme in Satan and in Satanic pride. In *Paradise Lost* (1667) and *Paradise Regained* (1671),¹⁹ Milton associates classical “masculine” heroism with Satanic rebellion and seduction into rebellion: it is powerful and alluring, but ultimately doomed. Satan’s rousing call to independence epitomizes classical heroism: “To reign is worth ambition though in Hell:/ Better to reign in Hell, than serve in Heav’n/ Awake, arise, or be for ever fall’n” (*PL*

1.262–3,330). And Milton's judgment of classical heroism as hellish and therefore ultimately doomed is evident in Satan's private admission of despair: "Me miserable! which way shall I fly/... Which way I fly is Hell; myself am Hell" (4.73,75). The influence of Milton's vision on Lewis is clear in his own description of the Satanic predicament in *Paradise Lost*. The fallen arch-angel "has become more a Lie than a Liar, a personified self-contradiction": "From hero to general, from general to politician, from politician to secret service agent, and thence to a thing that peers in at bedroom or bathroom windows, and thence to a toad, and finally to a snake—such is the progress of Satan" (PPL 97, 99). Parallels between *Paradise Lost* and Lewis's *Perelandra* are plain, although Hannay, for instance, notes Lewis's criticism of Milton ("Preface"). Lewis himself comments, for instance, that Milton is one of various Christian writers who "have sometimes spoken of the husband's headship with a complacency to make the blood run cold" (FL 97). Still, as Dennis Danielson observes, "There is no doubt at all but that Lewis treasures Milton[,] and describes Lewis's *Preface* "as something of a fervent rescue attempt" (52). And whereas some regard the classical hero, Satan, as the ultimate hero of Milton's epic,²⁰ C.S. Lewis regards classical heroism as folly and this seventeenth-century epic essentially as a story about "obedience."²¹

Spiritual heroism in the Judeo-Christian tradition of centeredness in God is the lesser known and lesser understood Western heroic ethos. (I use the term "spiritual" to distinguish between the typically egocentric classical paradigm and the theocentric biblical paradigm.) In contrast to "masculine" classical heroism, biblical spiritual heroism is characterized by values such as imagination, interdependence, passivity, care, submission, truthfulness, and humility. Traditionally, these qualities have been associated with "femininity"—that is, females and all others who are socially marginalized by the dominant classical "masculine" ethos—both in the Bible and in popular imagination. A poor widow trusts God's prophet and discovers oil and flour that does not run out.²² The teenager David, too young to wear adult battle gear or use conventional weapons, believes that the battle is the Lord's and succeeds in slaying the giant Goliath.²³ Another teenager, Mary, submits herself to be God's servant, becomes pregnant out of wedlock, and is exalted as the mother of Jesus, blessed

among women.²⁴ And God himself becomes a human zygote, undertaking the journey of the "impossible possible" incarnation that brings him to the ultimate humiliation of dying on the cross for the sins of humanity.²⁵

Unlike classical martial valour exercised in order to establish worldly power through brute force, spiritual heroism requires inner valour in order to establish the kingdom of heaven through humility. This is not to say that martial valour is never required in a biblical vision; certainly, Lewis was no pacifist and a great admirer of the chivalric tradition for its emphasis on heroic courage and defense of the Christian faith.²⁶ The distinction though between classical martial valour and spiritual valour is that in spiritual valour violent warfare is never an end in itself and often is not even the mode of behaviour. In *Paradise Lost*, Milton celebrates "the better fortitude/ Of Patience and Heroic Martyrdom/ [hitherto] Unsung" (9.31–3). The attitude of self-sacrifice is first modeled by the Son: "Behold mee then, mee for him, life for life/... on me let Death wreck all his rage" (3.236,241). Likewise, the first human hero, Eve, initially imitating Satanic classical heroic rebellion, offers her own life in Adam's place (10.927–36) in penitent spiritual heroism in imitation of the Son. Whereas the ultimate classical hero, Satan, is the heroic idol, "strength from Truth divided" (6.381), Christ is the ultimate heroic image whose "weakness shall o'ercome Satanic strength" (*Paradise Regained* 1.161). Together, Eve and Adam emulate Christ-like spiritual heroism on their journey toward "A paradise within ... happier far" (*PL* 12.587).

The root metaphors of these two competing Western heroic models are illustrated in the following table. Of course, the visual power of a table also increases the risk that the attempt to point to the problem will be mistaken for the solution. But the table rather illustrates how we tend to gender characteristics; it is not a prescription for how we ought to perceive sex and gender. I am reminded of Lewis's citation of Wordsworth's warning about analytical reductionism, "We murder to dissect" ("The Tables Turned") (qtd. in *FL* 21), and am also somewhat consoled by the fact that we tend to learn by first looking at things in terms of binary opposites.²⁷ After an opposition of sorts, birth follows. I submit this discussion with Lewis's warning in mind that neat schematization can be problematic (*EL* 63).