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*A Sword between the Sexes? C. S. Lewis and the Gender
Debates* by Mary Stewart Van Leeuwen (review)

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(Review)

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equally applicable to the latter, they are clearly not his point of reference.

Another distracting publisher's idiosyncrasy is pagination: the text of both books begins on p. 7—well, actually, the editor's introduction to *The Word* begins on p. 7, but Barge's preface begins on p. 7, where most publishers would use small Roman numerals. Of course, it is not necessary that a publisher slavishly follow *The Chicago Manual of Style*. But most do. In any case, it is apparent that the press's editors emphasized design and appearance over style, editing, and proofreading—perhaps not the optimum way to reach an English teacher's attention.

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A Sword between the Sexes? C. S. Lewis and the Gender Debates. By Mary Stewart Van Leeuwen. Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2010. ISBN 978-1-58743-208-8. Pp. 264. \$19.99.

A Sword between the Sexes? C. S. Lewis and the Gender Debates is a welcomed addition to the neglected matter of Lewis and gender. While a handful of critical articles on this issue have been published, the only other book-length study, *Women Among the Inklings: Gender, C. S. Lewis, J. R. R. Tolkien, and Charles Williams* (Greenwood Press, 2001) by Candice Fredrick and Sam McBride paints on too broad a canvas; moreover, it looks at the matter of gender primarily through the published works of Lewis, Tolkien, and Williams while eschewing their correspondence (for an extensive bibliography on Lewis and gender, see "C. S. Lewis and Gender: 'Positively Medieval?'" *Christian Scholar's Review* 36.4 [Summer 2007]: 387-390; this entire issue is devoted to Lewis and gender with a lead article by Van Leeuwen). In addition, neither Fredrick (education) nor McBride (literature) has the academic training requisite to examine the issue of gender from a critically nuanced perspective. *A Sword between the Sexes* explores both Lewis' books and his correspondence in an effort to offer a comprehensive and chronological investigation of Lewis' views on gender, and Van Leeuwen's academic background in philosophy and the psychology of gender (including three other books on gender) well equips her to write with a seasoned, informed, and perceptive eye on the multifaceted aspects of this issue.

Readers of *A Sword between the Sexes* will find much to admire, including Van Leeuwen's honest, engaging voice, her broad reading of Lewis' oeuvre, and her fresh insights. For instance, while Van Leeuwen offers a critical assessment of Lewis' early defense of "gender essentialism"—the idea that men and women are "faint and blurred reflections of masculine and feminine"—and "gender hierarchy"—the idea that but for our fall into sin "patriarchal monarchy would be the sole

lawful form of government” (9)—she is fair-minded and has no personal axe to grind. In fact, she disarms readers in her opening chapter, “Surprised by Jack: An Ambivalent Journey,” by noting how her own intellectual and spiritual development had paralleled Lewis’, noting in particular that like Lewis she acquiesced to being confirmed in her church as a young person, resigning “my agnostic self to going through the motions of confirmation” (17). In addition, when Van Leeuwen went to university, she regarded Lewis “as a positive model, an advocate for a robust Christianity whose scope included the life of the mind as well as piety and personal morality” (28). In spite of this debt to Lewis, she is honest enough to add:

But now I need to point out that Lewis was at the same time a major stumbling block to my acceptance of Christianity. This was due to the mixed messages he sent about the nature (both actual and ideal) of women, men, and their relationships in books ... such as *Mere Christianity*, *The Four Loves*, and *Surprised by Joy*. Moreover, much of what he said about these topics he claimed as part of “mere” Christianity (“the belief that has been common to nearly all Christians at all times”) and thus presumably not open to dispute by any who call themselves orthodox believers. (28)

However, because of her own life experiences as a young adult, she shares how she never really soured on Lewis; instead, she became curious about “separating what might rightly be called ‘mere’ Christianity in his writings, especially about gender, from conclusions rooted in other influences” (34).

Chapters 2-4—“A More Fundamental Reality than Sex? C. S. Lewis’s Views on Gender”; “‘Mere’ Christianity? Sources and Results of Lewis’s Views on Gender”; and “‘Not the Only Fundamental Difference’: The Edwardian World of C. S. Lewis and Dorothy L. Sayers”—offer a broad reading of Lewis’ best known works wherein Van Leeuwen explores the issues noted in these chapter titles. Throughout these chapters readers will appreciate the careful research and detailed discussion of the issues she explores. Of special note is her comparison of the lives of Lewis and Sayers, and her suggestions that “Lewis’ slowly changing views [on gender] owed much to the intellectual and Christian ties he forged with Dorothy L. Sayers, a woman of his own class and educational background” (107). For example, in a letter (Nov. 27, 1955) to Sayers he confessed “he had only ‘dimly realized that the old-fashioned way (my Father did it exquisitely) of talking to all young women was v[ery] like an adult way of talking to young boys.’ With his improved understanding of the origin and effects of such condescension, he added: ‘It explains not only why some women grew up vapid but also why others grew up (if we may coin the word) *viricidal*’” (107; emphasis in the original).

Chapter 5, “A Better Man than His Theories: C. S. Lewis as a Mentor and Colleague to Women,” is one of the strongest in the book and has long needed to be written. Those who think that Lewis is misogynist are either wearing blinders

or have not taken the time to do exactly as Van Leeuwen does in this chapter: investigate the facts about Lewis' relationships with women. There is no doubt, as Van Leeuwen points out, that early in his life Lewis said condescending things about women (as did many men of his time). Just after World War II Sayers wrote a friend about Lewis: "I do admit ... that he is apt to write shocking nonsense about women and marriage. (That, however, is not because he is a bad theologian but because he is a rather frightened bachelor)" (109). Several years later Sayers added to another correspondent: "[I like Lewis] very much, and always find him stimulating and amusing. One just has to accept the fact that there is a complete blank in his mind where women are concerned" (110). But Van Leeuwen is careful to point out that Lewis was not condescending in his actual relationships with women, including Sayers, many female students (particularly Mary Shelley Neylan), Stella Aldwinckle (a Chaplin to Women Students), other female students responsible for the creation of the Oxford Socratic Club (a legendary debate society), Sister Penelope Lawson, poetess Ruth Pitter, and Joy Davidman. Van Leeuwen surveys these relationships effectively in the chapter, quoting from a very important letter Lewis wrote to one of his postwar American correspondents: "Who said I disliked women? ... I never liked or disliked any *generalization* [i.e., entire category of people]" (127; emphasis in original). To this we can also add the host of female correspondents who wrote Lewis about their personal, spiritual, and even medical problems. Nor should we forget the grace, courtesy, and long-suffering endurance he displayed during the many years he took care of Janie Moore, the mother of a friend from World War I who was killed in action.

Chapters 6 and 7—"You Can Only Get to Know Them': C. S. Lewis and the Social Sciences" and "Men Are from Earth, Women Are from Earth: The Psychology of Gender Since C. S. Lewis"—offer Van Leeuwen the opportunity to bring to bear her scholarly expertise regarding psychology and gender upon Lewis' biased and perhaps ill-informed attitude toward the social sciences. She is very good in explaining Lewis' critical analysis of Freudian psychoanalysis, his (according to Van Leeuwen) "theologically problematic affirmation of Platonic mind/body dualism" (151), and his seeming easy acceptance of Jungian psychology and archetypes. Van Leeuwen finds Lewis' position on the latter quite troubling:

To the extent that the [Jungian] archetypes are seen as ideals to which people should aspire, one's conformity to them can be treated as either pathological or perverse. When Jung postulated the masculine Animus and its feminine counterpart Anima, he was engaging in yet another version of the nature/grace dualism. He was suggesting—as Lewis did for much of his life—that the "eternal forms" of masculinity and femininity were on a higher plane than shortsighted whining about the confines of gender roles, and that "healthy" people should set aside the latter and embrace the former. (163)

Her look at numerous gender studies (including charts and tables) may tire some readers, but the empirical studies are interpreted clearly and go a long way toward supporting key arguments she makes throughout the book. The question Van Leeuwen poses of whether Lewis would have interpreted the data the same way is a fascinating one; of one thing, however, I think we can be certain: he would have enjoyed debating the matter with so worthy an adversary.

Chapters 8 and 9—“Nature Speaks Chiefly in Answer to Our Questions’: C. S. Lewis and Some Neglected Issues in the Psychology of Gender” and “‘True to the Kind of Things We Are’: C. S. Lewis and Family Life”—argue that some of “Lewis’ writings about gender relations had a prophetic edge to them, in the sense that they have steadily accumulated empirical support, even though they are treated as ‘paradigmatically incorrect’ by much of the secular academy” (193). Van Leeuwen focuses upon two issues specifically: Lewis’ writings on divorce and parenting. Regarding the former, Van Leeuwen explores in some detail Lewis’ late marriage to divorcée Joy Davidman. Those familiar with the story of Lewis and Davidman will not find much new here, but of note is Van Leeuwen’s review of several research studies on the negative impact of divorce upon children. She ends the chapter by saying Lewis would not be surprised by this research: “His aversion to divorce was never just a case of adherence to an isolated divine command about lifelong marriage. He regarded marriage as a crucible for testing and refining an entire web of basic Christian—indeed, essentially human—virtues” (212).

Regarding the latter, Van Leeuwen traces Lewis’ “informally recorded views about childrearing, beginning with his role as a godparent and ending with his step-parenting experiences with [Davidman’s sons] David and Douglas Gresham” (217). Again, for those who know the story, there are no new revelations; yet Van Leeuwen gives a fresh perspective on this part of Lewis’ life and believes that Lewis was in fact a very good step-parent to the Gresham boys.

The last chapter, “‘Suppressed by Jack’: The Two Sides of C. S. Lewis,” neatly pulls together the threads of Lewis and gender that Van Leeuwen has woven throughout; in addition, she offers a final assessment in which she argues that Lewis came to realize that gender essentialism and gender hierarchy are not monolithic for the Christian. Men and women “are defined by the nature of their *activities*—writing, teaching, composing, etc.—not by the sex or class of the people who partake of them. This does not mean that everyone will be on a level playing field everywhere ... What it *does* mean is that authority is much more horizontally dispersed than was envisaged in the era of Lewis’ ‘discarded image’ ... As Lewis was beginning to realize, the great vertical ‘chain of being’ represented by the discarded image is not chiseled in stone” (258-59; emphasis in the original).

Perhaps the book’s greatest strength is Van Leeuwen’s exploration of how Lewis’ public and private views on gender were in conflict; furthermore, her analysis of this conflict is penetrating, thought-provoking, and articulate. No book is without fault although I suspect the main weakness of this book is the responsibility of the

publisher: no bibliography is included. I think this is a serious oversight as it means readers find themselves constantly thumbing through the book looking at footnotes in order to find out more about the sources Van Leeuwen cites. That aside, *A Sword between the Sexes* is a very valuable contribution to Lewis scholarship.

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C. S. Lewis on the Final Frontier: Science and the Supernatural in the Space Trilogy. By Sanford Schwartz. New York: Oxford University Press, 2009. ISBN 978-0-19-537472-8. Pp. 240. \$27.95.

In *C. S. Lewis on the Final Frontier*, Sanford Schwartz presents a bold and intriguing thesis that, if accepted, will alter significantly the way we read Lewis' space trilogy. In fact, his book attempts to do for the Trilogy what Michael Ward's recent *Planet Narnia* (Oxford University Press, 2008) did for the *Chronicles*: Schwartz claims to have discovered an underlying unity in the series unnoticed by previous scholars. Schwartz, a scholar of twentieth-century Modernism and self-described latecomer to Lewis, has perhaps been able to see the books in fresh ways because he approaches Lewis' works from a different background and critical perspective. This is not to say that Schwartz has not done his homework: he acknowledges his debt to Lewis scholars like Peter Schakel, Alan Jacobs, David Downing, Doris T. Meyers, and Charles Huttar, many of whom read his work and offered their criticism and advice. While Schwartz's work enhances our appreciation of Lewis' trilogy in multiple ways, two major aspects of his thesis stand out: he argues that the Trilogy is more integrated and unified than has previously been assumed, and he presents their author as one deeply engaged with the modern intellectual revolution, contrary to Lewis' self-styled image as an "intellectual dinosaur stranded in the modern world" (8).

Schwartz begins by placing the space trilogy firmly in context, both of Lewis' literary career and social events. Specifically, he notes that the three novels (*Out of the Silent Planet*, 1938; *Perelandra*, 1943; and *That Hideous Strength*, 1945) were written during Lewis' most prolific writing period which saw him move from an academic, relatively unknown beyond the lecture halls of Oxford, to something of a celebrity in Britain and the rest of the English-speaking world because of his religious apologetic writings. Schwartz also places the books in the context of World War II, noticing, for example, that the setting for the first novel is, appropriately enough, the planet named for the god of war and that the violent conditions of the time are imprinted on the novels themselves.

Schwartz correctly points out, however, that, in spite of the physical violence in which the hero of all three novels, Elwin Ransom, participates, Lewis is more