

Unveiled: Seeking Self-Knowledge in Myth in C.S. Lewis' *Till We Have Faces*

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A most prolific novelist, poet, academic, critic, and theologian, C.S. Lewis is perhaps most well known for his publication of the fantasy novel *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* and the subsequent *Chronicles of Narnia*. A self-proclaimed atheist at 15, Lewis' works often deal with his eventual return to Christianity and showcase fantastical shifting scenes of allegory that treat humanity's fall from grace, original sin and redemption through Christ. In *The Chronicles of Narnia* and his space trilogy, two of Lewis' best-known works, fantastic settings serve as a proto-Christian backdrop for battles of easily identifiable characters of good and evil. These novels deal very explicitly with Christian themes, recreating Eve's fall in the Garden of Eden in *Perelandra* or humanity's redemption through Christ's crucifixion in *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*.

In *Till We Have Faces: A Myth Retold*, Lewis enters a pre-Christian world in which religious themes are whisperingly implicit and pagan mysticism forcibly dictates the plot. Lewis himself considered *Till We Have Faces* his most masterful and mature work, although it never received corresponding acclaim. The novel is at its heart a re-telling of Apuleius' tale of Cupid and Psyche, a much-beloved myth from *The Golden Ass*, a bawdy tale detailing the protagonist's exploits in pursuit of the practice of magic. Along with a history of allegorical interpretation that hinges on the fact that 'Psyche' means 'soul' and encompasses all the possible interpretation of a soul's quest for love, the myth has now been passed down to us in various forms that we take for granted. As a testament to the popularity of Apuleius, It has been suggested that these re-interpretations include the well-known fairy tale, *The Beauty and the Beast*, and the modern-day

supernatural romance trilogy, *Twilight*.¹ Unlike *The Beauty and the Beast* or *Twilight*, which cover Apuleius in a thick gloss of imaginative zeitgeist, Lewis strips down his re-telling to retain the central movement of the myth while uniquely re-imagining the complex motivations of its characters.² In employing Apuleius' tale to examine the rationalist suppression of inner truth in the face of divine judgement, Lewis steps away from the tale's long legacy of allegorical interpretation and through the secret dream-language of myth opens his readers to the quest for self-knowledge and its divine fulfillment in the highest forms of love.

The first extant version of the Cupid and Psyche myth was found in the only existing complete Latin novel, *Metamorphoses* or *The Golden Ass*, attributed to the Roman Apuleius in the mid-second century CE.³ Apuleius' partial adaptation of an earlier Greek work is the story ultimately of religious surrender, where the initially bawdy, adventurous narrator adopts vows of celibacy and simplicity of life as the disciple of the goddess Isis.⁴ This religious orientation is thought to reflect the influence of Christian spirituality: "Apuleius was fighting Christianity but doing his best to steal the rival religion's clothes."⁵ If this is true, the struggle between flippant magical allegory and redemption through Christianity is largely what remains most captivating about the tale of Cupid and Psyche, which was intended to be an amusing diversion within the

¹ John Stanifer, "Tale as Old as Time: A Study of the Cupid & Psyche Myth, with Particular Reference to C.S. Lewis's *Till We Have Faces*." *Inklings Forever* 7 (2010) www.taylor.edu/cslewis. Although the case for the *Beauty and the*

² Readers may be tempted here to confront the assumption that Leprince de Beaumont's *The Beauty and The Beast* and Apuleius' *Cupid and Psyche*; they would not be wrong. In "Cupid and Psyche vs. Beauty and the Beast: The Milesian and the Modern" Ruth Bottigheimer argues that certain parallels undoubtedly exist between Psyche and Belle, but ultimately concludes that there are "differing narrative motors" (8) in the two tales, that the "barebones plots of the two tales...mask radically different world views." (10)

³ Apuleius. 2012. *Golden Ass*, trans. Sarah Ruden (New Haven, US: Yale University Press, Accessed May 10, 2016. ProQuest ebrary), x. Translator's preface.

⁴ Richard Jenkyns, "Silver Latin Poetry and the Latin Novel" in *The Oxford History of the Classical World: The Roman World*, eds. John Boardman, Jasper Griffin, Oswyn Murray (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), p. 282. Jenkyns points out that an abridged version of a Greek novel, *Lucius* or *The Ass*, possibly written by Lucian, is extant and likely served as a model for Apuleius.

⁵ Jenkyns, "The Latin Novel"...

novel. The tale itself is introduced as an “anilis fabula”,⁶ a “worthless fiction” that “makes no claims of didacticism” and “is entertaining fantasy, no more”.⁷ Yet there exists countless scholars who, inspired by the symbolism and allegory in the novel, interpret the tale as Platonic myth, an Isiac mystery text, or a combination of both. To a reader unaccustomed to Platonic philosophy, the tale of Cupid and Psyche seems largely innocuous:⁸

A King and Queen in a far-off land have three beautiful daughters, the third of which is beautiful beyond compare. Her beauty at once inspires the devotion of the masses and the irate jealousy of Venus. The King, despairing of ever finding his daughter a suitor, consults the Oracle at Delphi. The Oracle informs the King that the only solution is to sacrifice Psyche on a desolate mountaintop. Once abandoned, Psyche finds herself the mistress of a palace of gold and gems and the bride of god to whom it belongs. Although she loves her husband dearly, she knows him only as the being who, having prohibited her from seeing his true form, appears to her each night and sneaks away with the morning.

Psyche is visited by her two jealous sisters, who contrive to destroy her luxurious life. They convince her to discover her husband by lighting a lamp as he sleeps. When she does, she discovers that he is the most beautiful god of all, Cupid. A drop of hot oil falls on his shoulder and wakes him up, however, and he reveals that his secrecy was Psyche’s only protection against his mother. In his anger at her betrayal, Cupid banishes Psyche, leaving her to Venus’ wrath. Psyche sets out into the world to take revenge on her sisters, after which she is found by Venus and put through a series of impossible tasks. Finally, Cupid relents and carries his suffering lover

⁶ Apuleius, *Metamorphoses*, trans. John Arthur Hanson (Cambridge, Mass. : Harvard University Press, 1989), 4.27

⁷ Paula James, *Unity in Diversity: A Study of Apuleius’ Metamorphoses with Particular Reference to the Narrator’s Art of Transformation and the Metamorphosis Motif in the Tale of Cupid and Psyche*, (Hildesheim, Germany: Georg Olms AG, 1987), p. 119-120

⁸ James, *Unity in Diversity...*

up to Olympus, where Jove allows her and their child, Pleasure, to become part of the immortal lineage.

The most straightforward interpretations hold that the tale of the god of love succumbing to love is above all, a love story.⁹ Other scholars, tempted by Apuleius' knowledge of Platonic ideas delve into the translation of 'Psyche' to mean soul and its passion for desire (Cupid), its victimisation by Lust (Venus) and her attendants, Anxiety and Sorrow, and the ultimate birth of their immortal child, Joy.¹⁰ An early allegorical interpretation is given by Fulgentius Planciades, a fifth century writer. Expounding on Apuleius' narrative, Fulgentius claims that Psyche's two sisters represent the Flesh and Free Will, who ultimately fashion the demise of the Soul (Psyche).¹¹ Eduard Zeller puts forth the notion that the Cupid and Psyche myth, more than just a mere story, is a "representation of the fallen soul for re-union with its Good Spirit (or with the Divine)."¹² To Hildebrand, the episode represents the dissolution of the union of the Soul with Heavenly Love (Cupid) by base desires and jealousy (the sisters); the soul can only regain Love through suffering, inflicted by fate (Venus).¹³ Hildebrand echoes the fourteenth century writings of Boccaccio, who saw Psyche as the rational function of the soul rejecting the lower functions (her sisters) and seeking the noble love of God himself.¹⁴ The allegorical theme of divine love was exceedingly common (in the eighteenth century William Warburton wrote of the tale as "the

⁹ In *Latin Fiction: the Latin Novel in Context* Hoffman fleshes out the idea of a love story to envelop the Socratic equation of a love of truth, a love of god and a love of beauty in a person who has fallen in love with the god-like beauty of another person; reading into Psyche the crazed longing that renders one a slave to love. Other scholars, however, are simply to accept *Cupid and Psyche* as a happy aside with romantic leanings.

¹⁰ Heinz Hoffman, *Latin Fiction: the Latin Novel in Context*, (Psychology Press, 2004), "The Tale of Cupid and Psyche", p. 133.

¹¹ Louis C. Purser, *The Story of Cupid and Psyche as related by Apuleius*, (London: George Bell & Sons, 1910), "Excursus II", p. 129

¹² Eduard Zeller, *Die philosophie der Griechen in ihrer geschichtlichen entwicklung*, book iii, part 2 (Germany: Reisland, 1903, ed. 4) p. 228. Note that the translation from the original German is the work of Purser, *Story of Cupid* (see pg. 2, n. 9)

¹³ Purser, *Story of Cupid...* p. 180

¹⁴ Boccaccio, *The Book of Thesues*, trans. Bernadette M. McCoy (New York: Medieval Text Association, 1974), p. 201

progress of the soul to perfection, in the possession of divine love, and the reward of immortality”¹⁵) although more modern writings see Cupid and Psyche as “the progress of the rational soul toward intellectual love.”^{16 17}

In *Till We Have Faces* Lewis, however, Lewis finds no use for these various allegorical interpretations. To him, the tale is supremely one of love, both divine and mortal. By the time the novel was written, Lewis had begun to subscribe to the idea that “myth [was] one of the best means available for embodying and conveying the truth,”¹⁸ and that his earlier apologist works simply showcased spiritual truth through reason. Myth, Lewis realized, immersed his readers in an imaginative state that allowed them to consume his truths with all their senses while searching deeply within themselves for their own. In *Till We Have Faces: A Myth Retold*, Lewis wields the imaginative power that themes of self-deception, divine judgement, and ultimate redemption hold over his (predominately Christian) audience to convey his truths of spiritual enlightenment that ultimately would influence how his readers communicate with a divine God and the divine truths within themselves. For Lewis, the semi-dream state of myth in which human and gods communicate freely in a pre-Christian, almost pre-Greek age, is entirely conducive to this aim, largely unlike the fabricated myths of Lewis’ mind, such as that of Aslan and the White Witch in Narnia.¹⁹ Lewis, however, found the communication of these truths could only be achieved

¹⁵ William Warburton, *The Divine Legation of Moses Demonstrated* (London: Thomas Tegg and Son, 1837), I, 324

¹⁶ Robert Graves, ‘Introduction’, *The Golden Ass* (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 1951), p. xix

¹⁷ For those interested in a more comprehensive cataloguing of Cupid and Psyche throughout the ages, Robert H. F. Carver in *The Protean Ass: The Metamorphoses of Apuleius from Antiquity to the Renaissance* elegantly surveys interpretations and adaptations of Apuleius from antiquity to renaissance England, where as Julia Gaisser in *The Fortunes of Apuleius and the Golden Ass. A Study in Transmission and Reception* looks at the reception of Apuleius spanning antiquity to the Italian Renaissance.

¹⁸ Peter J. Schakel, ‘Introduction: the Background’, *Reason and Imagination in C. S. Lewis* (Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1984) p. 6

¹⁹ *Till We Have Faces* takes place in the barbarous city-state of Glome, a civilisation that is only just begging to come into contact with Greek culture and thought. It is my belief that Lewis hoped his readers would find in a time like this (much like the Greek Heroic age) the division between God and mortal would be particularly thin, allowing for unchecked contact through dream, visions, or altered mental state: a time suffused with the very essence of

through the use of a Classical myth, one well known to capture the human imagination:
Apuleius' Cupid and Psyche.

Undoubtedly, the Cupid and Psyche myth had a strong purchase on Lewis' own imagination. Accounting for his need to create the novel, Lewis said of himself: "This re-interpretation of an old story has lived in the author's mind, thickening and hardening with the years, ever since he was an undergraduate. That way, he could be said to have worked on it most of his life."²⁰ ²¹ It should therefore be unsurprising that the novel contains autobiographical elements in its reworking of the original myth, most importantly, the cascading revelations that end the book. By 1956, when the book was first published, Lewis had spent many years of his life torn between rationalist and romantic tendencies. A self-proclaimed atheist at a young age, Lewis forsook the difficulty of uniting rationalist thought with a romantic imagination through religion, instead writing, "I believe [sic] in no religion. There is absolutely no proof for any of them... All religions, that is, all mythologies to give them their proper name are merely man's own invention."²² Myth then, was nothing more to Lewis than the comfort of the primitive man who seeks to know the world around him.²³ To Lewis, "paganism had been only the child of

myth. For the purposes of this paper, the terms "myth" and "mythic" will relate to this freedom of communication, the liberties gods and mortals take with one another, and Lewis' faithfulness to Apuleius' original Cupid and Psyche.

²⁰ C. S. Lewis, "Preface", *Till We Have Faces: A Myth Retold* (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1956) p.1

²¹ Of the "making" of his adaptation Lewis writes in a note at the end of his novel, "if 'making' is not the wrong word for something which forced itself upon me, almost at my first reading of the story, as the way the thing must have been." *Till We Have Faces*, p. 313 Clearly, his re-telling is not the product of a rational process of re-imagination, but rather a gripping phenomenon Lewis could not escape.

²² C.S. Lewis in a letter dated 12 October 1916 in *They Stand Together* eds. Arthur Greeves and Walter Hooper (New York : Macmillan Publishing Co., 1979), p. 134-135

²³ In Lewis' understanding of myth and the comfort of paganism we can perhaps eke out echoes of Emile Durkheim, who suggested that the elevation of state from profane to sacred that occurred in social gathering drew its power from the gathered crowd itself and that power abstracted found its way in Myth. This intangible power that Lewis finds in sacred, unknowable myth is not singular to him alone, and works to great effect in *Till We Have Faces* to allow readers, and Orual herself, to enter a dream-state in which inner truths become apparent.

religion, or only a prophetic dream.”²⁴ Yet in this primitive dream-like comfort there was a deep undercurrent of truth: Lewis found that “in Pagan stories [he] was prepared to feel the myth as profound and suggestive of meanings beyond [his] grasp even tho’ [he] could not say in cold prose ‘what it meant’.”²⁵ In a letter, he wrote, “Into an allegory a man can put only what he already knows: in a myth he puts what he does not yet know and could not come to know in any other way,”²⁶ and it is therefore expected that in *Till We Have Faces* readers come to know truths about themselves and about Lewis, awoken by the profound intangibility of the mythic dream-state.

It is largely Orual’s quest for self-knowledge by which Lewis guides his readers to the ultimate actualisation of self and its divine fulfillment. Lewis strays greatly from Apuleius’ original myth in the character of Orual, refocusing the narrative through her perspective as Psyche’s older, uglier sister. Lewis makes it clear that Orual’s training, and largely her system of thought, is fiercely rational, which comes across in the strict formality of tone and straightforwardness of purpose with which she begins:

I will write in this book what no one who has happiness would dare to write. I will accuse the gods, especially the god who lives on the Grey Mountain. That is, I will tell all he has done to me...as if I were making a complaint of him before a judge. There is no judge between gods and men, and the God of the Grey Mountain will answer me.²⁷

Her rationalist training derives from her years of tutelage by a Greek prisoner of their royal household, the Fox.²⁸ In Orual, the Fox finds a receptive mind for his Stoic and rationalist

²⁴ C. S. Lewis *Surprised by Joy* (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1955) p. 221-22

²⁵ Lewis, in a letter dated 1 October 1931, in in *They Stand Together* eds. Arthur Greeves and Walter Hooper (New York : Macmillan Publishing Co., 1979), p. 425

²⁶ C. S. Lewis *The Collected Letters of C. S. Lewis: Volume III: Narnia, Cambridge, and Joy, 1950-1963* ed. Walter Hooper (San Francisco: Harper, 2007), p. 789-790

²⁷ C. S. Lewis, *Till We Have Faces: A Myth Retold* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1957) p. 3. All further references to *Till We Have Faces* will be to this edition, unless otherwise noted, with page number indicated.

²⁸ Schakel suggests that the Fox’s thinking strongly echoes that of Lewis’ own tutor, W. T. Kirkpatrick, an unflinching rationalist for whom the world was quantifiable through empirical logic. These parallels have been

training. After relating to her the story of Aphrodite and Anchises he quickly adds, “Its only the lies of poets, lies of poets, child. Not in accordance with nature’,” (8) he dismisses her father’s superstitions “all folly, child’,” (10) and wards off Orual’s fears of his comparison of Psyche to Helen and Aphrodite, “The divine nature is not like that. It has no envy.” (24)

Lewis, however, knew that this was not strictly true. In Lewis’ barbarous city-state Glome, where Orual and Psyche are princesses, news of Psyche’s beauty spreads. Her divine beauty inspires the prayers of the populace, and invokes the jealousy of the priest of Ungit (Glome’s Aphrodite). Lewis “[combines] the mythic traditional story...with the realism of early-twentieth century anthropology about sacrifice in a primitive society”²⁹ in the Priest’s inconsistent platform for the sacrifice: the sacrificed must be steeped in sin, be “the Accursed” (46) but “the best in the land is not too good for this office.” (49)

Through this anthropological realism it is understood that Psyche’s sentence stems not from divine jealousy, but from the common ignorance of the people. The Priest introduces his condemnation as follows: “I am speaking to you, King, with the voice of Ungit and the voice of all the people and elders and nobles of Glome.” (44) Gathered together, the people of Glome “reckoned up all the woes” (45) they suffer (natural plagues, droughts and poor harvests), and the priest warns the King, “The people will fear. Their fear will be so great that not even I will be able to hold them... You would be wiser to make the great offering.” (48) Psyche, sentenced to sacrifice atop the Grey Mountain, calmly accepts her fate with a faithful resignation to the judicious will of the gods. While the rational Orual rages against Psyche’s faith in her divine

noted and drawn before, such that this idea exists uncontested in the literature. It is entirely likely that on Lewis, like Orual, his feats of logic and rationalist naturalism made a great impression.

²⁹ Doris T. Myers, *Bareface: A Guide to C. S. Lewis’ Last Novel*, (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2004) p.31. Myers emphasises how in Jewish and pagan custom, “there was a memory of human sacrifice, but it was considered horrible,” (32) and that even in Greek and Roman literature, human sacrifice was to be found only in myth or absolute scandal. In the barbarous Glome, where sacrifice was regularly practiced, “the seriousness of the offense is measured by the fact that the sacrifice must be human.” (32)

preservation (“how if there were no god of the Mountain and even no holy Shadowbrute, and those who are tied to the tree only die, day by day, from thirst and hunger and wind and sun?” (70), readers both familiar and unfamiliar with Psyche’s bridegroom in Apuleius’ tale rage as well: having not yet entered the state of myth (standing quite removed from it), Orual’s logic seems faultless: how is Psyche not to die?

Psyche, as beautiful as a goddess (this being the exact source of contention between her and Venus), who when born resembled “Helen newly hatched” (21) is a character to whom Orual (and the sympathetic reader) has been a sister and mother. In Psyche’s calm state before her sacrifice Lewis reveals the depth of her faith, “I’ll not believe it” (70) she says of Orual’s logic, “If I am to go to the god, of course it must be through death.” (72) In her longing for death and the Grey Mountain, she reveals a spiritual faith that Schakel claims is “an intuitive response to God, an inner loveliness and lovingness that is reflected in her physical beauty.”³⁰ Psyche, connected to the gods through her physical beauty and her inner spirituality, is mythic in herself and thus largely aware of her own inner truths.³¹

Orual, however, remains deluded. To her, unlike the stoic Fox, “the gods are real, and viler than the vilest men.” (71) She cannot see that her anger in losing Psyche is not anger against the gods, but against Psyche herself: “Is it nothing to you that you leave me here alone? Psyche; did you ever love me at all?” (73) In the face of Psyche’s resignation, Orual “grudged her that calm and comfort. It was as if someone or something else had come in between us.” (75) That someone is, of course, the gods against whom Orual has written *Till We Have Faces* as a complaint. She remains blind to the possibility of her possessive love even though she ends her

³⁰ Schakel, *Reason and Imagination*...p. 14

³¹ In that she is both a figure drawn out a citational mythology (naïve and faithful, Lewis changes very little about her from Apuleius’ original) and in that in her inner loveliness and physical beauty are god-like and draw the gods to her, even though she is mortal.

final meeting with Psyche by saying “‘ I see that you have never loved me’...’It may be well you are going to the gods. You are becoming cruel like them’.” (76)

Very briefly, Lewis allows Orual a glimpse of Psyche’s palace as the bride of a god:

“There stood the palace, grey...it was like no house ever seen in our land and age. “ (132)

Terrified of the truth, Orual realizes that she must ask for forgiveness, but her rationalizing self-delusion catches her, “...*if* what I saw was real. I was in great fear. Perhaps it was not real.”(133)

³² Even though the empirical evidence is right before her eyes, an exotic palace the likes of which she has never seen, her stoic training squelches any truth she begins to grasp. In this moment of doubt, perhaps born of it, the vision disappears, as does her knowledge of divine truth.³³ She returns to her complaints against the gods, “There’s divine mockery in it. They set the riddle and then allow a seeming that can’t be tested...If they had an honest intention to guide us, why is their guidance not plain?” (134) Lacking Psyche’s faith in the divine will, Orual can only question. Orual’s brief entanglement with Apuleian myth begins her questioning of herself, yet remains too fleeting to induce any lasting revelation.

Unsurprisingly, Orual eventually betrays Psyche. To her, it matters only that “some evil or shameful thing had taken Psyche for its own. Murdering thief or spectral Shadowbrute- did it matter which?”³⁴ (151) As she watches the disastrous outcome of Psyche’s discovery of her husband, she is approached by the very god her sister has married: “There came as if it were a lightning that endured...In the centre of the light was something like a man.” (172) Like the truth

³² Italics added

³³ In a note at the end of his book, Lewis explains why this momentary vision was pivotal in building the character of Orual: “this change of course brings with it a more ambivalent motive and a different character for my heroine and finally modifies the whole quality of the tale.” (313) This motive is, of course, Orual’s self-deception; she *knows* she has seen Psyche’s palace. Her refusal to face the consequences of this knowledge guides her back into blind anger against the gods.

³⁴ Here, perhaps, Orual’s rationality most clouds her judgement: she puts great effort into weighing the opinions of both Bardia, her trusted bodyguard, and the Fox to conclude that she must intercede on Psyche’s behalf, though never once questions the intangible evidence in her soul. Her focus on external evidence blinds her to the possessive love she harbors for Psyche.

that must come from dream-state of myth or vision, Orual's encounter with the divine can only take place with her mind altered by physical weakness: she has fainted, "for there seems to be some gap in my memory," (168) and is only aware of the "cold, and the pain in my arm, and thirst." (168) She begins to see that her situation is so perilous that "[she] might die, thus wounded and fasting, or at least get such a chill as would bring my death soon after." (169) In this borderline existence between life and death, the god sits in silent judgement upon Orual. In the infinite mythic capacity of his gaze, all her truths are laid bare:

Though my body crouched where I could almost have touched his feet, his eyes seemed to send me from him to an endless distance. He rejected, denied, answered, and (worst of all) he knew, all I had thought, done or been...He made it to be as if, from the beginning, I had known that Psyche's lover was a god, and as if all my fears, guessings, debatings, questionings...had been trumped-up foolery, dust blown in my own eyes by myself.
(173)

This Apuleian moment (in his myth, Psyche's sisters were indeed jealous of her god-lover), lays bare all of Orual's possessive love. It is first made obvious that Orual, the unreliable narrator, may be wrong in her conviction against the gods. Yet she still does not see, even though the god speaks to her: "You, woman, shall know yourself and your work. You too shall be Psyche." (174) For her selfish betrayal of her sister, Orual is condemned to the harshest fate of all: self-knowledge. For Lewis, the Augustinian idea that pure love proceeds from self-awareness is crucial in displaying the depth of her wrongdoing. On Augustine, Rowan Williams writes, "when we say that someone lacks self-knowledge, we don't mean that she lacks information, or even that she is given to thinking about herself...Lack of self-knowledge is a spiritual and moral *habit*...it is inseparable from a failure in love, in the sense that the mind misconceives its own

nature when it loves.”³⁵ Orual’s spiritual failings are symbolised in the ugliness of her face, which she veils (against the god’s injunction) immediately upon her return to Glome and subsequent ascension to the throne. In her veil, Orual adopts an alteration of self-identity, becoming ever more the diligent, just ‘Queen,’ and less the guilty betrayer ‘Orual’: “The Queen of Glome had more and more part in me and Orual had less and less. I locked her up or laid her asleep as best as I could somewhere deep inside me,” (226) “If Orual could vanish altogether into the Queen, the gods would almost be cheated.”(201)

Of course, the gods and their judgement will not be forgotten, regardless of the veils and titles Orual surrounds herself in to escape her own truths. Orual concludes her first book with a complaint against the gods: ‘I say the gods deal very unrightly with us...nor will they show themselves openly and tell us what they would have us do...But to hint and hover, to draw near us in dreams and oracles, or in a waking vision that vanishes as soon as seen, to be dead silent when we question them.’ (249) It is then, into waking dreams and visions that Orual must slip in order to find within herself the answers she seeks from the gods.

Orual’s dreams begin in her old age, at the brink of her death, with the ghostly appearance of the old tyrannical King, her father, who orders her to remove her veil, “‘None of that folly, do you hear?’” (274) Together, they dig through layers of earth and rock, layers of Orual, until she faces herself in a great mirror in which she sees herself truly, “‘I am Ungit.’” (276) Ungit, in Glome, is the dark stone that pushed itself out of the earth, “an ambassador from whatever things may live...all the way down under the dark and weight and heat.” It is now into the earth that Orual must go to meet her truth, for in Glome “Holy places are dark places” (50), and the darkest places in Orual are where her divine truths lie.

³⁵ Rowan Williams, “The paradoxes of Self-Knowledge in the *De Trinitate*.” *Collectanea Augustiniana* Ed. T. J. Van Bavel (Holland: Leuven UP, 1992) p. 129

Looking into the mirror, Orual sees the thousand ugly faces of Ungit: one found “when we gaze into the fire,” (270) another “in the little clots and chains” (270) of the sacrificial blood poured over her, and “a face as you might see in a loaf, swollen, brooding, infinitely female”. Orual realizes that she is not simply akin to the jealous, fearsome god she has spent her life hating, but she herself is a creature of possessive love, all-devouring: “To say that I was Ungit meant that I was as ugly in soul as she; greedy, blood-gorged.” (281-282) She begins to find, as Lewis has always known, that in her dreams there are “spears and water-spouts of truth from the very depth of truth” (277) and her echoing Apuleian dreams are the very substance of myth itself.

Empowered by the truths of her dream-state, Orual continues to seek answers from the gods. Whereas once she worried that they would not answer her (“I say, therefore, that there is no creature...as noxious to man as the gods. Let them answer my charge if they can.”(250)), she now fears they will not allow her to become Orual (not Ungit) once more: “I could mend my soul no more than my face. Unless the gods helped. And why did the gods not help?” (282) Orual’s dreams bring her closer to Psyche; she watches as Psyche performs the impossible tasks set upon her in Apuleius’ original, but these visions serve only to convince her of her ugliness of soul and the blinding pleasure she takes in her love of Psyche: “I had at least loved Psyche truly. “(285), confessing to “[gorging] myself with comfort, by reading over how I had cared for Psyche and taught her and tried to save her and wounded myself for her sake.” (285) Even in the truth of her vision of self as Ungit, Orual remains confident in the purity of her love for Psyche, all rationality pushed aside.

Orual is brought before the gods in a vision, complaint in hand. Stripped of her veil and clothing, she stands as “the old crone with her Ungit face,” (289) naked before the masses

assembled in the “unquiet darkness” (288) of the court. In a sense, it is this unveiling that makes her known to herself and the gods: “by unveiling... we assume the high rank of persons before Him. And He, descending becomes a Person to us... The Person in Him... meets those who can welcome or at least face it”,³⁶ Lewis would write of the divine state of complete self-awareness. In her dream-state Orual finds that her complaint is not the book she has written against the gods (the novel itself), but a tattered scroll on which her possessive love is exposed:

The girl [Psyche] was mine. What right had you to steal her away into your dreadful heights? You'll say I was jealous. Jealous of Psyche? Not while she was mine... Oh, you'll say you took her away into bliss and joy such as I could never have given her, and I ought to have been glad of it for her sake. Why? What should I care for some horrible, new happiness which I hadn't given her and which separated for her from me... Do you ever remember whose girl she was? She was mine. *Mine*. Do you not know what the word means? Mine!” (291-292)

Orual realises that she has been reading her complaint, over and over in a voice she does not recognise, “there was given to me a certainty that this, at last, was my real voice.” (292) She is at last answered and find that it is Psyche's desertion that she cannot forgive, that her blindly possessive love for Psyche has had her condemn the gods for the joy they brought her sister: she confesses to Psyche, “I never wished you well. Never had one selfless thought of you. I was a craver.” (305) This self-knowledge relies entirely on her waking visions of myth, of the figures of her dead father and Fox sitting in silent judgement, her participation in Psyche's torments.

In her judgement, Orual learns, “why the gods do not speak to us openly, nor let us answer. Till that word can be dug out of us, why should they hear the babble of what we think we mean? How can they meet us face to face till we have faces?” (294)³⁷ To have a face is to be unveiled, to know yourself as truly and equally as you are known to god. Orual's physical ugliness and the impurity of her soul remain veiled to her until her visions force her to confront

³⁶ C. S. Lewis, *Prayer: Letters to Malcom: Chiefly on Prayer*, (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2002) p. 21

³⁷ Originally, the title of the novel was to be *Bareface*,

the truth. It is this fundamental truth from which the title of the book derives. *Till We Have Faces* is a *myth* retold, but the truths it tells are Lewis' own. Actualisation of self-knowledge, for Orual, was impossible without her appearance before the gods, and for Lewis, declaiming the need for self-knowledge to find faith would have felt contrived, or as fabricated as his *Narnia Chronicles*, if it were not for Apuleius' existing mythic framework.

Orual and Psyche's reunion is fraught with the weight of Orual's revelation: "Never again will I call you mine; but all there is of me shall be yours" (305) she tells Psyche. Orual, now self-aware of the jealousy that drove her to "keep a soul from being united with the Divine Nature" (304), can experience an Augustinian love. Psyche forgives Orual, reminding her of the casket she has been sent to fetch for Ungit, "you must stand up. I have not given you the casket. You know I went on a long journey to fetch the beauty that will make Ungit beautiful." But it is her forgiveness and Orual's self-knowledge that are transformative, not the casket of beauty from Apuleius' original myth. Orual is transformed into a beautiful Psyche, beautiful in soul and face, filled with divine and absolute truth. Orual's vision fades as soon as the god proclaims to her, "you are also Psyche," (308) and she dies redeemed. Her redemption is, unsurprisingly, a dream-vision of myth: Psyche's forgiveness does not lie in the day-to-day administration of Glome, but re-works the very objects of myth itself.

Lewis' last novel would open an autobiographical window into his soul and his search for answers in the divine. Sympathetic to Orual, Lewis understood that self-deception was part of the human condition: "I do not think it is our fault we cannot tell the real truth about ourselves; the persistent, life-long, inner murmur of spite, jealousy, prurience, greed and self-complacence, simply will not go into words."³⁸ Telling an absolute self-truth, however, would prove to be the difficulty, and in *Till We Have Faces* he sought to convey the struggle to become barefaced, to

³⁸ C. S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain*, (London: Fount Paperbacks, 1977) p. 48

be a person: “a human being must become real... must be speaking with its own voice (not one of its borrowed voices), expressing its actual desires (not what it imagines it desires), being for good or ill itself, not any mask or veil or *persona*.”³⁹ Orual’s realization that, “I know now, Lord, why you utter no answer. Before your face questions die away. What other answer would suffice?” (308), may as well be Lewis’ own, for it has been suggested that “[Orual’s] story of self-deception is intended to aid the reader in a reading of his or her own life, jolting the reader into recognition.”⁴⁰ What of the writer? Rowan Williams claims that “truthful self-knowledge thus entails a constantly self-critical autobiographical project, striving to construct the narrative least unfaithful to the divine perspective.”⁴¹ If so, in constructing a narrator whose grasp at an absolute truth leads to divine revelation, Lewis has constructed the narrative of his own self-knowledge of divine truth.

Till We Have Faces was never meant to be a re-imagination of Apuleius, or a work of creative genius, but rather a *myth retold*. To Lewis, the myth lived beyond Apuleius, who was “its transmitter, not its inventor.” (313) Drawing on Apuleius as a “source” (313) of the myth most untainted by any known interpretation, Lewis evokes the pagan atmosphere of a world before time, in which myth and truth were inescapably linked. His “retelling,” unlike *Beauty and the Beast* or *Twilight*, evokes in the reader a fundamental preparedness to join Orual on her quest for self-knowledge by engrossing the reader in the language, formality and proximity with the divine found only in myth. In these mythic qualities Lewis imbues his own quest for truth, and communicates to his readers the importance of self-knowledge, not through blatant allegory, but

³⁹ C. S. Lewis, *Letters to a Sister from Rose Macaulay* Ed. Constance Babington-Smith, (London: Collins, 1964) p. 261

⁴⁰ Sharon Jebb, “I Lived and Knew Myself”: Self-Knowledge in *Till We Have Faces*,” *Renascence: Essays on Values in Literature* 63, no. 2 (2011) p. 117

⁴¹ Rowan Williams, “Know Thyself: What Kind of an Injunction?” *Philosophy, Religion and the Spiritual Life* Ed. Michael McGhee (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1992) p. 221

through the indescribable powers of truth that lend classical myths their purchase on the human imagination.

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