

HEROES AND HEROINES:
A FEMINIST ANALYSIS OF FEMALE CHILD PROTAGONISTS IN
THE EPIC FANTASIES OF GEORGE MACDONALD,
C.S. LEWIS, AND PHILIP PULLMAN

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ABSTRACT

The genre of epic fantasy, with its origins in patriarchal mythologies, has traditionally been the realm of male protagonists and masculine modes of heroism. Authors of *children's* epic fantasy, however, often portray pairings of male *and* female child protagonists working together in the fight against evil. And yet, despite the inclusion of female protagonists in many epic fantasies for children, patriarchal values dominate the genre, as aggression, physical prowess, rational detachment, and action define the hero. Through the lens of post-structural feminist theory, this study—spanning twelve texts, seven main characters, and 130 years of literary history—examines the female child protagonist and the intersection of girlhood and heroism as depicted in the epic fantasies of George MacDonald, C.S. Lewis, and Philip Pullman.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract.....	ii
Table of Contents	iii
Acknowledgments	v
Dedication	vi
CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION	1
CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW	3
2.1 Introduction.....	3
2.2 Defining Heroism.....	3
2.3 Defining Children’s Epic Fantasy.....	6
2.4 Overview of George MacDonald and the <i>Princess</i> Books	9
2.5 Overview of C.S. Lewis and <i>The Chronicles of Narnia</i>	14
2.6 Overview of Philip Pullman and <i>His Dark Materials</i>	18
CHAPTER THREE: THEORETICAL APPROACH AND METHODOLOGY	22
3.1 Introduction.....	22
3.2 Liberal Feminist Theory vs. Post-structural Feminist Theory	23
3.3 Research Questions	27
CHAPTER FOUR: GEORGE MACDONALD’S PRINCESS IRENE.....	29
4.1 Introduction.....	29
4.2 <i>The Princess and the Goblin</i> : Irene as Hero	29
4.2.1 Irene as Model Victorian Princess	30
4.2.2 Irene’s Autonomy and Agency	35
4.2.3 Irene and Her Great-Great-Grandmother.....	43
4.3 <i>The Princess and Curdie</i> : Irene as Heroine	48
4.4 Conclusion	51
CHAPTER FIVE: C.S. LEWIS AND THE GIRLS OF NARNIA.....	53
5.1 Introduction.....	53
5.2 Polly Plummer	54
5.3 Aravis	59
5.4 Susan Pevensie.....	66
5.5 Jill Pole.....	73
5.6 Lucy Pevensie	78
5.7 Conclusion	84
CHAPTER SIX: PHILIP PULLMAN’S LYRA	86
6.1 Introduction.....	86
6.2 Lyra as Trickster	86

6.3 Lyra as Eve, Eve as Hero	98
6.4 Conclusion	102
CHAPTER SEVEN: CONCLUSION	104
WORKS CITED.....	105
Primary Sources	105
Secondary Sources	105

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DEDICATION

To the female hero in us all.

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

With its roots in various patriarchal mythologies, the genre of epic fantasy has traditionally been dominated by the male hero and his hard-fought journey from boy to man. These grand epics, from *Beowulf* to *The Lord of the Rings*, portray male heroes as unflinching warriors, righteous defenders of nations, virtuous and wise wielders of justice, revered conquerors, and rightful kings. Boys and men are exalted while girls and women are diminished, present only to be mastered. Epic fantasy has long been popular among children's authors as the genre provides a fertile and vast playground for the imagination as well as an easy channel for the transmission of social values. And while the marginalization of females can be found in every genre of children's literature, children's epic fantasy, so dependent on mythology, has always been especially vulnerable to oppressive, sexist ideology, despite the frequent inclusion of female protagonists. A female protagonist is by no means the same as a female *hero*; and while many authors depict female characters in their fantasies for children, these same authors (almost invariably male) do not often celebrate them as heroes in their own right.

In search of the disappointingly rare female child hero in fantasy, this thesis, through the lens of post-structural feminist theory, examines the epic fantasies of three prominent children's authors: George MacDonald, C.S. Lewis, and Philip Pullman. Analyzing seven female protagonists and twelve primary texts—Irene in MacDonald's two *Princess* books; Lucy and Susan Pevensie, Polly Plummer, Aravis, and Jill Pole in Lewis' seven-part Narnia series; and Lyra Belacqua in Pullman's *His Dark Materials* trilogy—I explore the three authors' portrayals of girlhood and heroism, and expose how the two constructs can clash, producing the heroine, or intersect, thus giving birth to the

transformative female hero.

The selection of MacDonald, Lewis, and Pullman is the rather serendipitous result of discovering a chain of influence connecting them. Pullman, an Englishman and the only contemporary writer of the three, vehemently dislikes Lewis (who died in 1963, when Pullman was seventeen) and regularly condemns him for racism, misogyny, religious exclusivity, and a “sado-masochistic relish for violence,” going so far as to claim that the Narnia series is “one of the most ugly and poisonous things” (“Dark Side” 6) he has ever read. On the other hand, Lewis, an Irish essayist, fantasist, and Christian apologist, considered MacDonald (who died in 1905, seven years after Lewis’ birth) a literary and spiritual mentor, openly lauding the Scottish cleric as his “master,” and insisting, “I fancy I have never written a book in which I did not quote from him” (“Preface” xxxii). Once I learned of the connections among the three authors, the interplay in their writing—primarily manifested in mimicry and allusions—became evident, particularly in each author’s depiction of heroism and portrayal of the female protagonist. Created during three distinct eras, the female protagonists examined in this thesis reveal much about shifting gender paradigms and the slow evolution of feminism.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Introduction

Before exploring the works of MacDonald, Lewis, and Pullman, I will first define two major terms used throughout this study—*heroism* and *children's epic fantasy*—and survey the scholarship that has contributed to my analysis of the female protagonists in the *Princess* books, *The Chronicles of Narnia*, and *His Dark Materials*.

2.2 Defining Heroism

The concept of heroism is ever evolving and always subjective. What defines a hero? Strength, courage, determination? Kindness, compassion, sacrifice? And who can achieve heroism? Men, women, children? As noted in Chapter 1, patriarchal ideologies have long dominated the Western world's mythology and literature, and have long defined heroism as a male province or achievement. While Joseph Campbell, for example, contends in *The Power of Myth* that not all heroes are men, he simultaneously subscribes to patriarchal tradition: "The male usually has the more conspicuous role, just because of the conditions of life. He is out there in the world, and the woman is in the home" (153). For Campbell, the hero's journey is a transition from boyhood to manhood, and he sees no parallel struggle in the development from girl to woman: "It's harder for the boy than for the girl, because life overtakes the girl. She becomes a woman whether she intends it or not, but the little boy has to intend to be a man. At the first menstruation, the girl is a woman. The next thing she knows, she's pregnant, she's a mother" (168). Heroism, Campbell implies, is a choice, a conscious decision to become an adult, a *male* adult; females, it seems, cannot achieve true heroism because the female body alone

dictates the transition from girl to woman. Nearly forty years after first declaring that “the woman is life, the hero its knower and master” (120) in *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, Campbell’s view of female heroic potential remained unchanged. His static theory of gendered heroism is especially surprising given the feminist movement of the 1960s and 70s (*The Power of Myth* [1988] was published well after this revolutionary period.). Yet despite Campbell’s failure to rethink the gender bias behind his work, many feminist scholars have, by revisiting, revising, and reclaiming the hero.

In *The Female Hero in American and British Literature*, Carol Pearson and Katherine Pope explore the biases of Western culture’s mythology:

Our understanding of the basic spiritual and psychological archetype of human life has been limited...by the assumption that the hero and central character of the myth is male. The hero is almost always assumed to be white and upper class as well. The journey of the upper-class white male—a socially, politically, and economically powerful subgroup of the human race—is identified as the generic type for the normal human condition; and other members of society—racial minorities, the poor, and women—are seen as secondary characters, important only as obstacles, aids, or rewards in his journey. (4)

Pearson and Pope criticize Campbell for his “stereotypical thinking about male and female behavior,” which they contend “translates heroism into ‘macho’ terms.” While the male protagonist traditionally “demonstrates his heroic power by killing or dominating others,” Pearson and Pope claim that “it is not accurate to assume that this macho heroic ideal is *the* archetypal human pattern” (4). Instead, they argue that an “exploration of the heroic journeys of women—and of men who are relatively powerless

because of class or race—makes clear that the archetypal hero masters the world by understanding it, not by dominating, controlling, or owning the world or other people” (5).

Similarly, Lee R. Edwards, in her seminal feminist text, *Psyche as Hero: Female Heroism and Fictional Form*, insists that heroism “involves both doing and knowing”:

For if heroism is defined in terms of external action alone and heroic actions are confined to displays of unusual physical strength, military prowess, or social or political power, then physiology or a culture that limits women’s capabilities in these areas thereby excludes women from heroic roles. But if action is important primarily for what it tells us about knowledge, then any action—fighting dragons, seeking grails, stealing fleece, reforming love—is potentially heroic. Heroism thus read and understood is a human necessity, capable of being represented equally by either sex. (11)

Denouncing gender stereotypes, Edwards argues that the female hero “denies the link between heroism and *either* gender *or* behavior.... Assuming a position equal to that of the male hero, she challenges the compulsions of aggressivity and conquest, subverts patriarchy’s structures, levels hierarchy’s endless ranks” (5).

Edwards also offers an essential distinction between the hero and the heroine, one that will be valuable to this paper’s argument. The female hero, Edwards affirms, “is no sheep in wolf’s clothing, no mere heroine in armor. A primary character, the hero inspires and requires followers; the heroine obeys, falls into line, takes second place. Although a hero can theoretically exist in a narrative without a heroine, the reverse is not the case” (5). Further distinguishing the two, Edwards characterizes the hero as possessing “vision, daring and power: to charm; move; break with the past; endure hardship and privation;

journey into the unknown; risk death and survive—at least in spirit”; the heroine, on the other hand, “is eclipsed, upstaged, in darkness” (6). And just as the hero is not always male, the heroine is not always female: “Role, not sex, divides the two” (5).

In my study, *heroism* is a necessarily fluid concept since there is no single, prescribed way to define the heroic. However, for the purposes of clarity, throughout this analysis of MacDonald, Lewis, and Pullman, the term *hero* will apply to those female characters who refuse to let patriarchal tradition and expectations define them or restrict their actions, voices, thoughts, feelings, abilities, or choices; those female protagonists who discover and maintain their autonomy, who struggle throughout their journeys to better their own lives as well as society at large, never through the use of force but with compassion and the promotion of egalitarian ideals.

2.3 Defining Children’s Epic Fantasy

Fantasy, more than any other genre, is the literature of the imagination, of possibilities, and *impossibilities*. In her comprehensive history of children’s fantasy, *Worlds Within*, Sheila Egoff describes fantasy’s potential and purpose:

[Fantasy] can...transport us to another world, another time, or another dimension clearly separate and different from our own, or it can project the supernatural into the natural world. It can evoke a mood or an atmosphere that places a work slightly beyond the bounds of everyday reality, or it can wrench that reality out of shape....It has served purposes ranging from moral instruction to the creation of a universal order of morality. Fantasy has been a vehicle used by writers to express their

dissatisfaction with society, to comment on human nature, or to bridge the gap between the visible and invisible worlds. (1)

As fantasy literature defies the bounds of reality, so too does it elude strict and universal definition. While Colin Manlove proposes that fantasy is “a fiction evoking wonder and containing a substantial and irreducible element of the supernatural with which the mortal characters in the story or the readers become on at least partly familiar terms” (*Modern Fantasy* 1),¹ Egoff more carefully suggests that “[p]erhaps all that can be said with conviction is that fantasy is a story in which the sustaining pleasure is that created by the deliberate abrogation of any natural law, no matter how slight, or by the taking of a step beyond it” (17). Diana Waggoner, in *The Hills of Faraway*, further characterizes fantasy by distinguishing it from science fiction, fantasy’s “sister” genre:

[Fantasy and science fiction’s] association in the minds of readers and writers is no accident; but science fiction is bound to its sociological and technological bases in the real world. Only fantasy allows the writer the godlike power of creating characters, settings, worlds, and powers wholly different from our own.... The fantasist’s imagined world must make emotional sense, but need make physical sense only on its own terms.... [T]he science-fiction writer may extend actuality, but he cannot cross its boundaries. The fantasist alone creates new actualities to describe. (25)

Regarding fantasy written for children, Manlove provides a traditional definition, characterizing children’s fantasy as “either written or published for a child readership up

¹ Crucial to fantasy, the term “wonder” appears frequently throughout the critical literature; Manlove clarifies the term: “By *wonder* is meant anything from crude astonishment at the marvelous, to a sense of ‘meaning-in-the-mysterious’ or even the numinous. Wonder is of course generated by fantasy purely from the presence of the supernatural or impossible, and from the element of mystery and lack of explanation that goes with it” (*Modern Fantasy* 7).

to eighteen...it will...have child characters, an exciting plot and a happy ending...[and] absolute distinctions of good and bad” (*From Alice* 11). Manlove’s definition is generally accurate, although he overlooks the changing attitude toward “absolute distinctions of good and bad” in the works of contemporary children’s fantasists like Ursula K. Le Guin, J.K. Rowling, and Philip Pullman, as well as the subjective complexity of the “happy ending.”²

A genre of limitless possibilities, fantasy encompasses a wide range of subgenres—from fairy tales and ghost stories to tales of talking animals—the most timeless and grand of which is the epic. Typically, children’s epic fantasy depicts young heroes embarking upon formidable, punishing quests to preserve truth and moral goodness and overthrow corruption. Egoff offers a succinct definition: “[E]pic fantasies are chiefly concerned with the unending battle between Good and Evil that is fought in wide but well-defined landscapes...[Epic fantasy] is dominated by high purpose. There are worlds to be won or lost, and the protagonists engage in a deeply personal and almost religious battle for the common good” (6). Karen Patricia Smith echoes Egoff’s definition, describing children’s epic fantasy as “a type of serious fantasy that has mythic overtones, life and death battles between good and evil, and critical tasks for young protagonists to undertake. These tasks are accomplished through some form of magic, mystery, and not a little mayhem” (136).

² The conclusions of both George MacDonald’s *The Princess and Curdie* and Pullman’s *The Amber Spyglass* attest to the inaccuracy of characterizing all children’s fantasy as ending “happily.” Although MacDonald’s second *Princess* novel ends in the marriage of Irene and Curdie, the narrator notes that after the couple’s death, their kingdom crumbles and vanishes due to the utter depravity of their subjects. And while the final installment of Pullman’s trilogy ends with the triumph of Dust (or human consciousness) and the death of the corrupt Authority, Lyra and Will are forever separated only days after declaring their love for one another.

The following sections will explore MacDonald, Lewis, and Pullman's contributions to the genre of children's epic fantasy, as well as consider the most significant critical analyses of the female hero in the three authors' texts.

2.4 Overview of George MacDonald and the *Princess* Books

Although relatively unknown among contemporary readers, nineteenth-century Scottish fantasist George MacDonald is considered by numerous scholars to be the grandfather of modern fantasy. MacDonald is perhaps most famous for imbuing the popular fairy-tale form of the nineteenth century with "greater narrative sweep and significance" (Attebery 6), thus giving rise to what we now call the fantasy genre. According to critics, MacDonald was the first author to use fantasy as a tool for conveying real moral truths; Brian Attebery testifies that "MacDonald opened the way for later fantasists by asserting and demonstrating that truth can reside in the very shape of a story" (8), while John Goldthwaite, in *The Natural History of Make-Believe*, asserts that MacDonald "was the first, and perhaps still the only, author...to regard the images and miracles of make-believe as actual representations of reality and not merely a literary convenience" (170). Before MacDonald, children's fantasy was almost invariably didactic, allegorical, and, to a great extent, frivolous. According to Diana Waggoner, What MacDonald did to fantasy was to take moralizing out and put in morality, which was derived from the basic assumptions of the new universe he described. He did not personify spiritual qualities in human form; he showed them operating in real people. At the same time, he

proved that the fantasy form could support serious consideration of religious and psychological questions. (32)

The qualities Waggoner describes here are some of the most important components of a children's epic fantasy—questions of morality depicted in the battle between good and evil; new universes; ordinary people embarking on spiritual journeys; and deeply personal religious and psychological struggles—and they are all evident in two of MacDonald's most famous works, *The Princess and the Goblin* (1872) and *The Princess and Curdie* (1883).

The *Princess* books tell the story of eight-year-old Princess Irene and the twelve-year-old miner Curdie. In *The Princess and the Goblin*, guided by Irene's otherworldly, benevolent great-great-(many times great) grandmother, Irene and Curdie unite against the threat of an invading kingdom of subterranean goblins. In *The Princess and Curdie*, Curdie, again guided by Irene's grandmother, embarks on a spiritual journey as he battles the morally corrupt, degenerate subjects of Irene's kingdom.

While most scholarly analysis of George MacDonald focuses almost exclusively on the spiritual aspects of the author's writing, several sources have contributed to the development of this study's argument. Both Claudia Nelson's *Boys Will Be Girls: The Feminine Ethic and British Children's Fiction, 1857-1917* and Edith Lazaros Honig's *Breaking the Angelic Image: Woman Power in Victorian Children's Fantasy* explore the gender ideologies of the Victorian era and provide a context for the *Princess* books.

The early Victorian era was a period of strict educational philosophies and even stricter gender divides. Children's novelists of the time were not expected to provide entertainment for the young, but to instill behavioral, emotional, and social ideals. Lessons of "manliness" and "womanliness" pervaded children's literature as authors

sought to transmit modes of acceptable behavior to the child audience, since, as Nelson argues, the “primary responsibility” of the Victorian children’s author was “in many ways the socializing of gender” (2). In both society and literature, Honig explains, “Girls were expected to be religious, serious, moral, intellectual in a refined, socially acceptable way, and above all, obedient to parents and older brothers” (65). And yet, Honig theorizes that one prominent genre liberated both authors and fictional females: “With fantasy or fairy tale came the freedom to project the author’s own conceptions of what females were really like, or at least what they had the potential to be, in a freer, less repressed society” (3).

In *Breaking the Angelic Image*, Honig argues that the strong female characters of Victorian children’s fantasy—including mothers, spinsters, girls, and magical women—led to the emergence of the liberated female in twentieth-century adult fiction, and speculates that the fantasy genre provided authors with a medium for subversive thinking: “[A]nything written in a fantasy... would not be regarded so seriously as the content of more realistic fiction or certainly nonfiction, giving writers of fantasy more room for the free expression of radical ideas” (108). Most relevant to the current study is Honig’s description of Victorian children’s fantasy’s young female protagonist: “She is distinctly Victorian in upbringing—polite, well-mannered, and somewhat limited by a typical Victorian home education—but also as assertive, adventurous, independent, and even aggressive as any male hero, breaking the mold of the ideal girl” (69). While Honig applauds MacDonald for his girl hero Tangle in the short story “The Golden Key”—claiming that the tale “resoundingly proclaimed the equality of the sexes... with the creation of a truly courageous, nonstereotypical heroine for the first time in a very serious work of fantasy”(92)—she ignores Irene of the *Princess* books. In Chapter 4, I will argue

that Irene is a hero, at least in *The Princess and the Goblin*; in *The Princess and Curdie*, MacDonald fails to maintain Irene's heroic qualities, and she becomes a mere heroine, "eclipsed, upstaged, in darkness" (Edwards 6).

Similar to Honig, Judith Gero John, in "Searching for Great-Great-Grandmother: Powerful Women in George MacDonald's Fantasies," considers MacDonald an early contributor to the feminist cause, although John insists that "it would be a mistake to call MacDonald a feminist" since "the magnificent and powerful female characters he created cannot quite escape their Victorian heritage" (27). John does claim, however, that it "is in his effort to understand women that MacDonald proves most valuable" (28) to the study of feminism's evolution. While John focuses her analysis on MacDonald's recurrent grandmother figure, she briefly discusses Irene, praising MacDonald for his depiction of the strong bond between the young princess and her great-great-grandmother, which avoids "the rivalry...a patriarchal society creates" (32): "It is MacDonald's attempt to enter into a female bonding ritual that makes him unique in his time and important in our time" (31).

Three other sources contributed to my analysis of MacDonald, all of which argue that he uses a feminine voice in his children's stories. In "Feminine Language and the Politics of Children's Literature," Deborah Thacker explores the issue of autonomy in children's fantasy and argues that MacDonald uses a "feminist perspective" to provide the reader with a "more 'feminine' discourse that calls attention to the autonomy of any individual to pursue his or her own interpretation" (9) of narrative meaning. Thacker also notes that MacDonald frequently (and significantly) uses powerful and wise female figures to guide his child characters "to their understanding of faith and spiritual truth" (10).

Similarly, John Pennington, in “Muscular Spirituality in MacDonald’s Curdie Books,” claims that MacDonald “feminizes” muscular Christianity³ by balancing “his conceptions of the masculine, active body with the feminine, more spiritual body to create a composite hero in Curdie and Irene” (136). In MacDonald’s universe, Pennington argues, “[M]asculinity and femininity can exist symbiotically, with no role privileged over the other” (146). Although much of Pennington’s argument is sound, he ignores Irene’s blatant absence and lack of influence, voice, and action in *The Princess and Curdie*, an oversight that weakens his insistence that in “creating a feminine muscular Christianity, MacDonald requires that both the male and female work together to defeat unbelief” (147).

Finally, in “Kore Motifs in *The Princess and the Goblin*,” Nancy-Lou Patterson compares Irene’s story to the archetypal myth of the *Kore*, or the Maiden, a myth that is “a quintessentially female story” (169). Patterson argues that the two *Princess* books “present a dichotomy of feminine and masculine” (170), and that *The Princess and the Goblin* “begins, continues, and ends with Irene as the dominant element, presenting with remarkable power a female structure and meaning” (181). While Patterson acknowledges that Curdie dominates “the masculine world” of *The Princess and Curdie*, she does not explore Irene’s inconsequential role in the second book and therefore fails to recognize the inevitable devolution of *The Princess and the Goblin*’s “female structure.”

³ Donald E. Hall defines the Victorian, patriarchal concept of “muscular Christianity” as “an association between physical strength, religious certainty, and the ability to shape and control the world around oneself” (7).

2.5 Overview of C.S. Lewis and *The Chronicles of Narnia*

C.S. Lewis is one of the Western canon's most famous fantasists, and his *Chronicles of Narnia* is among the most beloved and enduring series in all of children's literature. The seven-part *Chronicles*—(in order of publication) *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* (1950), *Prince Caspian* (1951), *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader* (1952), *The Silver Chair* (1953), *The Horse and His Boy* (1954), *The Magician's Nephew* (1955), and *The Last Battle* (1956)—follows four English siblings—Peter, Susan, Edmund, and Lucy Pevensie (as well as several other children)—as they are magically transported from war-ridden England to the fantastical land of Narnia. There, with the guidance of the lion and Christ-figure Aslan and the aid of a variety of mythical creatures and talking animals, the children embark on extraordinary quests and battle a medley of evil forces. Sheila Egoff explains the books' lasting appeal:

The Narnia Chronicles commanded a wide readership in their day, and they still do. They are extensions of a literary world with which children are familiar—that of the fairy tale. The series' characters—both human and non-human—its code of ethics, and its swift action make an entry to Narnia easy indeed, even for those readers not particularly enamored of fantasy. (152)

One of the most cherished fantasy realms, Narnia is the literary manifestation of Lewis' Christian faith. While MacDonald's children's fantasies are structured around the author's Christian belief, his religious ideas are infrequently explicit; Lewis' are more so—Aslan's death and resurrection in *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* leave little room for interpretation—although his writing is generally subtle enough so that most child readers do not immediately recognize the particularly Christian nature of *The*

Chronicles' themes. Lee D. Rossi, in *The Politics of Fantasy*, explains that in writing the Narnia series, Lewis was "engaging in the translation of Christian mythology into a slightly different language, not so that it [became] unrecognizable but so that it [gained] freshness" (52). Like MacDonald's *Princess* books, *The Chronicles* do not shy away from heavy moral issues; Colin Manlove, in *The Chronicles of Narnia: The Patterning of a Fantastic World*, asserts that with

[the series'] use of...Christian themes and their admission of profound topics of sacrifice, death and resurrection, the nature of evil, the measure of faith, the divine creation and the ending of a world, and the quest for the divine, they bring into children's literature an "adult" profundity of which it had long been felt incapable. (8)

Many critics agree, however, that the Narnia stories suffer from frequent bouts of didacticism, the result of Lewis too often forcing his moral ideals on the narrative. Ann Swinfen, in *In Defense of Fantasy*, observes that although "Lewis's best scenes arise from religious concerns united with imaginative intensity, the element of didacticism and Christian apologetics sometimes conflicts with the creative spontaneity of the novels" (188).

While most critics find Lewis' didactic tendencies harmless, many consider his depiction of females thoroughly distressing, if not misogynistic. Regarding Lewis' depiction of heroism, several critics contend that Narnia embraces patriarchal ideologies of gendered heroics, much to the detriment of the series' five female protagonists. In *Deconstructing the Hero*, Margery Hourihan uses the Narnia series as a recurrent example of the patriarchal hero story, claiming that while "both girls and boys are transported into Narnia to play heroic roles...the girls are required to behave exactly like

the boys” (68). Similarly, Candice Fredrick and Sam McBride, in “Battling the Woman Warrior,” address Lewis’ view of females in battle and suggest that Lewis’ “hierarchical understanding of gender, grounded in a medieval worldview, identifies war as a man’s realm” (29). Fredrick and McBride argue that within Narnia, “women’s entrance into combat is contradictory, confusing, and itself a site of conflict” (30), and, like Hourihan, conclude that Lewis’ females must “distance themselves from femininity in order to fight” (40). However, in both their article and *Women Among the Inklings*,⁴ another collaboration, Fredrick and McBride contradict their own argument by first enumerating the many gender biases evident in Narnia’s female characters and then insisting that “[Lucy, Susan, Jill, Aravis, and Polly] are enjoyable because they are realistic. They are actual girls” (*Women* 147). Inexplicably, the authors seem unaware that they equate gender stereotypes with realistic characters, especially odd for a feminist analysis.

Another critic who condemns Lewis for his sexist portrayal of females, Kath Filmer, in *The Fiction of C.S. Lewis*, explores Lewis’ dislike of feminist and progressive philosophies, and claims that he “saw feminism as a modern evil” (104). Describing Lewis as stuck in the past, Filmer suggests that Narnia’s antiquated overtones—such as Father Christmas rejecting Lucy’s desire to engage in battle, telling her that “‘battles are ugly when women fight’” (*Lion* 160)—allowed Lewis “to establish very clearly the correspondence between chivalric values and those he projected on his ‘ideal’ for twentieth-century women” (104).

⁴ *Women Among the Inklings* examines women as represented in the fiction of Lewis and his fellow writers J.R.R. Tolkien and Charles Williams, all of whom belonged to the exclusive Oxford literary circle, The Inklings. Fredrick and McBride reveal the inherent sexism of the group, and, concerning Lewis, argue that he believed women’s liberation was “not only bad for the individual women” but “a sin against God” (108).

Similarly, John Goldthwaite, in *The Natural History of Make-Believe*, asserts that Lewis—a “misanthrope, misogynist, xenophobe, and classroom bully” (223)—saw femininity as an “imperfection, the sin of Eve, unspiritual and sinister” (230). And like Hourihan, Goldthwaite believes the patriarchal hero story dominates Narnia, and that Lewis forbids his female characters from being both heroes *and* females: “[I]f girls [in Narnia] are to be of any use...they must learn to conform to the code as set out in boy’s adventure novels” (227).

While a large number of critics find Narnia deeply rooted in sexism, even more defend the books and their author. Many of Lewis’ advocates excuse any evident sexism as a product of his orthodox religious background, while others believe that Lewis actually liberates and empowers his female protagonists. In “Girls in Narnia: Hindered or Human?” Karla Faust Jones analyzes each of Lewis’ five female protagonists and concludes that none of them

conforms to a familiar female stereotype. As athletes, leaders, soldiers, and adventurers, they are free to develop their individual talents unbound by social convention and unhindered by being ‘girls.’ Although Lewis is guilty of occasional sexist remarks when referring to the girls, these are neutralized by the girls’ actions. The sympathy with which Lewis portrays the girls and the freedom with which they share danger and adventure with the boys betrays not an underlying prejudice, but rather a basic sensitivity to females as people. (19)

In Chapter 5, I explore (and dispute) Jones’ interpretation, arguing instead that Lewis’ five female protagonists are consistently confined by patriarchal convention and, more often than not, portrayed as stereotypes.

Other champions of Lewis, such as David C. Downing, argue that Lewis' detractors ignore the author's deliberate creation of the many negative male characters who "are most easily identified by their patronizing attitudes toward others, especially females" (159). Downing specifically questions Filmer's argument, eventually going so far as to make the surprising observation that "if the 'C' in C.S. Lewis stood for Claire instead of Clive, some male critic might wonder why it is always the little boys from earth—Digory, Edmund, Eustace—who cause so much trouble in Narnia or why the narrator tells the story much more often from the point of view of female characters than males" (157). While I agree that a number of malicious male characters in Narnia indulge in sexist rhetoric, so too do the male protagonists, with whom Lewis would have us sympathize. If both villains *and* heroes engage in misogynistic discourse, what then is Lewis trying to say about gender and stereotyping, or the worth of females? I will explore this question in Chapter 5.

2.6 Overview of Philip Pullman and *His Dark Materials*

One of the most literarily complex epic fantasies for children, Philip Pullman's *His Dark Materials* trilogy is a reinterpretation of John Milton's *Paradise Lost*, an exquisitely imagined adventure story, and a self-described atheist's answer to the overtly Christian fantasies of C.S. Lewis. And yet, at its heart, Pullman's ambitious trilogy is the story of a boy and girl and their path to adulthood. *The Golden Compass* (1995), *The Subtle Knife* (1997), and *The Amber Spyglass* (2000) follow Lyra (the lone child protagonist of the first book) and Will (who joins Lyra in the second) on their treacherous journey to protect the integrity of "Dust"—or human consciousness and knowledge—from the insidious forces of "the Magisterium," Pullman's corrupt and ubiquitous Church.

Throughout their epic quest, Lyra and Will discover parallel worlds; encounter witches; armored bears, and angels; enter and escape the underworld; and even witness the death of God.

Compared to traditional writing for children, including the fantasies of MacDonald and Lewis, Pullman's trilogy is often brutal and devastating. The trip to the underworld; the agonizing separation of Lyra and her daemon; the shocking and violent loss of Will's fingers; the deaths of Roger, Lee Scoresby, and Will's father; Lyra and Will's heartbreaking farewell: these are the kinds of obstacles Pullman's protagonists face. Karen Patricia Smith defends and explains Pullman's decision to write a children's series that has such emotional intensity: "Pullman's respect for the intellectual, emotional, and physical potential of young people will not permit less fidelity to the art of storytelling and narrative direction. Thus, he expects his readers to make a leap in understanding and acquire emotional strength...just as his protagonists must do" (145).

Similarly, Pullman's depiction of good and evil differs from that of most epic fantasies. Burton Hatlen, comparing *His Dark Materials* with the fantasies of Lewis and J.R.R. Tolkien, claims that, unlike his predecessors, "Pullman rejects...metaphysical dualism," and explains that "[e]very time we imagine that we've sorted out the good guys and the bad guys, Pullman pulls the rug out from under us" (79). Indeed, the reader is never quite sure what to make of Lyra's fearsome parents Lord Asriel and Mrs. Coulter, from the time her father kills Roger up to the moment when both Asriel and Lyra's mother sacrifice their lives to protect their daughter. Hatlen describes Pullman's moral ideology: Pullman "refuses to predicate Good and Evil as cosmic forces. Rather, for him the words 'good' and 'evil' (lowercase now) describe certain potentials mixed together in

every human being, and the relationship between them is worked out within the human heart” (80).

Because Pullman’s trilogy is so new, the majority of scholarship focuses on the most controversial aspect of the texts: the critique of religion. Consequently, most discussions of Lyra concentrate on her contribution to the death of “the Authority” and not on her role as a female hero. There is, however, much critical speculation about Lyra’s kinship with the biblical Eve, which is relevant to my argument since the myth of the fall perpetuates the gender hierarchy that can be found in almost every patriarchal hero story.

In “‘Eve, Again! Mother Eve!’: Pullman’s Eve Variations,” Mary Harris Russell describes Lyra as a “vibrant young girl-becoming-woman who apparently avoid[s] the fate of far too many women in high fantasy, of being drafted into subaltern service to the patriarchy” (212). Comparing Lyra to the traditional Eve, as depicted in the Bible, Russell observes that when Lyra frees the dead from the underworld in *The Amber Spyglass*, “she breaks out of an enclosed territory instead of being expelled from one” (220), thus embracing autonomy and activity instead of defeat and passivity.

Like Russell, Naomi Wood, in “Paradise Lost and Found,” examines Lyra’s relationship to Eve as she explores the theme of obedience in the fantasies of Pullman and Lewis. Insisting that Eve’s tasting of the forbidden fruit is “the most important instance of disobedience in Judeo-Christian scripture,” Wood argues that the “themes and symbols surrounding Eve’s disobedience and its metaphoric reflection of humanity’s moral status” (237) can be found in both *His Dark Materials* and the Narnia series as the “conservative Lewis advocates obedience, and the progressive Pullman questions it” (238). Wood describes Lewis’ view of obedience as “decorous and appropriate, even

beautiful,” while on the other hand, “Pullman advocates repeatedly the disobedient pursuit of knowledge as the key to maturity, and his heroine Lyra is called ‘Eve again’ to reinforce her role as disobedient liberator of humanity through knowledge” (239). While Wood does not explicitly connect obedience to the authors’ ideas of heroism, her argument strengthens my own: for in Lewis’ moral universe, obedience—a stereotypically feminine behavior—is fundamental to heroism, and the characters he considers most heroic are those most faithful to God (or Aslan). Conversely, Pullman’s heroes replicate Eve’s original defiance by disobeying God and questioning authority. Pullman, I argue, reinterprets the biblical fall from a feminist perspective as he hails Eve’s disobedience as a heroic act.

CHAPTER THREE: THEORETICAL APPROACH AND METHODOLOGY

3.1 Introduction

To examine the concept of female heroism in the fantasies of MacDonald, Lewis, and Pullman, I analyze twelve selected texts through the lens of feminist literary theory. Over the last several decades, scholars have become increasingly aware of the natural kinship between children's literature and feminist thought. Lissa Paul, in "Enigma Variations: What Feminist Theory Knows About Children's Literature," explains that there is "good reason for appropriating feminist theory to children's literature":

Both women's literature and children's literature are devalued and regarded as marginal or peripheral by the literary and educational communities. Feminist critics are beginning to change that. By tracing the history of women's writing...feminist critics are giving definition and value to women in literature and literature by women. As it happens, the forms of physical, economic and linguistic entrapment that feminist critics have been revealing in women's literature match the images of entrapment in children's literature. (187)

(While Paul emphasizes *women's* writing, Roderick McGillis notes that "no one feminist approach to literary texts exists" (156). The examination of the female as portrayed by *male* authors, as I have chosen to conduct in this study, is just one of many paths a feminist critique can take.) Similarly, Roberta Seelinger Trites insists that "[b]ecause feminism and childhood are both imbued with issues of freedom and choice, they complement each other well" (2).

3.2 Liberal Feminist Theory vs. Post-structural Feminist Theory

In analyzing children's literature, feminist scholars tend to favor one of two schools of thought: liberal feminism or post-structural feminism. Relying on the theory of sex-role stereotyping, liberal feminist critiques examine texts written for children in terms of "positive images and strong role models" (Hubler 84). Elizabeth Marshall describes the liberal feminist agenda's dependency on "a definition of gender as a binary made up of two stable variables, male and female...[T]he focus centers on how girls' attributes are similar to or different from those of boys" (259). On the other hand, post-structural feminist theorists view liberal feminism as overly simplistic and reliant on a theory of gender that is static and dualistic in its characterization of male and female traits as inherent. Such characterization is known as "essentializing," or as Trites explains, "the practice of linking specific character traits to sex as if they are biologically determined": "For example, some people believe that it is part of the essence of women's souls to nurture or that the essence of masculinity necessitates aggression." Trites also criticizes the liberal feminist's tendency to "attribute positive traits to women and negative ones to men" (81). Trites and other post-structural theorists reject "essentializing" in favor of the "belief that people are constructed into their gender roles by what they learn about 'performing' their gender from societal influences" (81).

From the post-structural feminist's view, the construction of gender involves a complex web of social, historical, and ideological factors. These feminist scholars, recognizing children's literature's long history of socializing children into gender-specific modes of behavior, seek to deconstruct literary representations of femininity and girlhood. Elizabeth Marshall, in "Stripping for the Wolf: Rethinking Representation of Gender in Children's Literature," emphasizes the importance of contextualizing gender

discourse:

From [the post-structural] perspective, certain dominant modes of girlhood will arise in specific time periods and cultural locations and require particular performances of femininity to sustain them...Modes of girlhood are often contradictory and capture not so much the lived experience of girlhood as cultural struggles around gender, sexuality, and power...Denaturalizing girlhood through a focus on discourses of femininity rather than on sex roles allows a theoretical shift that seeks to understand how gender is produced within particular cultural practices. (260-61)

Similarly, Margery Hourihan explains that “stories are the products of the time and the social group which gave rise to them, and the values of that time and that group will inform the language in which they are written” (4).

While many post-structural feminist critiques of children’s literature exist, Roberta Seelinger Trites’ *Waking Sleeping Beauty: Feminist Voices in Children’s Novels* is one of the most thorough. Trites defines the feminist children’s novel as one in which “the main character is empowered regardless of gender”: “[I]n a feminist children’s novel, the child’s sex does not provide a permanent obstacle to her development. Although s/he will likely experience some gender-related conflicts, s/he ultimately triumphs over them” (4). A successful feminist children’s novel, Trites theorizes, will feature a protagonist who recognizes her or his agency and voice, and embraces a more androgynous expression of gender, thus incorporating “both stereotypically masculine and feminine characteristics into a balanced whole” (25). The aim of a feminist children’s novel is a transcendence of social hierarchy; Trites explains that “[a]ny time a character in

children's literature triumphs over the social institutions that have tried to hold her down, she helps to destroy the traditions that have so long forced females to occupy the position of Other" (7). And when the protagonist triumphs, the child reader becomes, to some extent, more aware of the forces that seek to control her: "Above all else, feminist children's novels...call the reader to awaken herself and to reject the role of Sleeping Beauty" (9).

Another significant application of post-structural feminist theory to children's literature, and one especially helpful to this study's examination of female heroism, is Margery Hourihan's *Deconstructing the Hero: Literary Theory and Children's Literature*. By carefully dissecting the traditional, male-dominated hero tale that is so prevalent in children's stories, Hourihan exposes the ways in which females are devalued and marginalized through the literary transmission of patriarchal ideologies. Although Hourihan's analysis is exhaustive in scope, two points are particularly useful to my own thinking.

The first is Hourihan's critique of the hero's point of view. Regardless of a first- or third-person narrator, "the most obvious feature of the hero story is that it is *his* story":

Other characters are included only insofar as they impact upon him. The reader perceives the world of the text and the events which occur in it from the hero's point of view, or the point of view of a narrator who admires him and places him in the foreground, so that the story imposes his perspective and his evaluations. Therefore one of the overriding meanings which readers construct from these stories is that it is the hero who is of primary importance and the activities of such men that matter in the world. (38)

Of equal importance to what the narrator *includes*, Hourihan argues, is what the narrator *excludes*: “[T]he selections involved in a particular narrative stance imply views about the relative worth and significance of various kinds of human activities. So the overwhelming concentration, in hero tales, upon physical action and conflict, relegates not only domestic activities and relations, but also creativity, imagination and emotion to the margins” (39). Therefore, young female readers are made to view the story through a male-centered lens and see themselves as somehow inferior in comparison.

The theme of female inferiority is also central to Hourihan’s discussion of dualisms and binary opposition. As mentioned above, post-structuralists reject dualistic thinking; Hourihan further elucidates this strong objection, explaining that

[a] dualism is more than a dichotomy, for in a dualism one of the two contrasting terms is constructed as superior and the other as inherently inferior in relation to it. The inferiorized ‘other’ is treated in a variety of ways: It may be backgrounded, that is simply regarded as not worthy of notice, as is the case with females in boys’ adventure stories....It may be defined as radically different, distinct in as many ways as possible from the superior norm, thus underlining its inferiority....[T]he inferior group is defined only in relation to the superior; its members’ lack of the superior qualities is presented as the essence of their identity. No attempt is made to elucidate their own qualities from their own perspective or to show them as significant in their own right. (Hourihan 16-17)

In an attempt to contest gender stereotyping, many contemporary children’s authors simply invert the binary oppositions of “male” and “female,” making female characters active (rather than passive) and adventurous (rather than domestic), a practice that post-

structural feminists view as “a severely limited analysis of and remedy for sexism” (Hubler 85). (Elizabeth Marshall explains that “liberal feminist interventions often take the form of replacing or supplementing representations of weak girls with assertive ones” (260) while Lissa Paul argues that “a story that simply exchanges a female protagonist for a male one usually ends up making the heroine look like a hero in drag” (199).) Hourihan identifies children’s hero stories, especially those within the fantasy genre, as presenting “a particular problem because of the gendered nature of the protagonist’s role,” and insists that “stories in which a conventional heroic role is played by a woman do little to modify” the marginalization of females:

The inference readers are likely to draw from such stories is that, if they wish their lives and deeds to be worthy of notice, women must strive to behave as much like men as possible. Nor do such stories pose any challenge to the heroic definition of ideal manhood, for the women display the same courage, prowess, arid rationalism and rigid sense of purpose [as traditional male heroes]. (206)

Instead, Hourihan, like Trites, suggests that a truly subversive depiction of a female protagonist will combine traits into a balanced whole that defies strict gender classification.

3.3 Research Questions

In my examination of female protagonists, I apply post-structural feminist theory to the fantasies of George MacDonald, C.S. Lewis, and Philip Pullman. By conducting a close reading, as well as comparative and contextualized readings, of the twelve selected texts, I analyze how the depiction of the female protagonist in children’s epic fantasy has

developed from MacDonald to Lewis to Pullman, and I explore how the authors' constructions of girlhood intersect with their heroic ideals. In my close reading, I have been guided by the following questions: Does the author rely on gendered dualisms? Are qualities traditionally associated with the feminine (e.g., nurturing, emotional, imaginative) celebrated or derided throughout the text? How does the narrative voice contribute to the construction of gender and heroism? What characteristics and values does the author depict as heroic? Is there a notable difference in the way females and males are depicted as heroic (e.g., is a female considered heroic because she nurtures a sick person back to health while a male is heroic because he kills an enemy in battle)? Does the female protagonist embrace, develop, and maintain her autonomy and voice? How does the female protagonist interact with other female characters? With male characters? Does the author uphold or subvert patriarchal ideologies? How does the portrayal of the female reflect the social mores of the time? How does it break with them? And finally, how do MacDonald, Lewis, and Pullman's constructions of gender, heroism, and the female protagonist compare?

CHAPTER FOUR: GEORGE MACDONALD'S PRINCESS IRENE

4.1 Introduction

Published in 1872, in the midst of the Victorian era and Britain's Golden Age of children's literature, *The Princess and the Goblin* represents a significant tonal shift in the writing of children's books. Rejecting the didactic moralizing and Calvinistic rigidity of a number of his predecessors, George MacDonald embraced a childlike sense of spiritual curiosity that was entirely new to literature for children, and in doing so created an original and "alternative religious landscape which a child's mind could explore and which could offer spiritual nourishment" (Carpenter 83). While much has been written about the spiritual or religious aspects of *The Princess and the Goblin*⁵ and MacDonald's considerable contribution to the fantasy canon, relatively little has been said about the novel's title character, Princess Irene, one of the first female heroes of children's literature.

4.2 *The Princess and the Goblin*: Irene as Hero

In exploring Irene's groundbreaking (and largely unacknowledged) role in the first of MacDonald's *Princess* books, I have broken my argument into three sections, analyzing first her portrayal as a model Victorian girl, next her powerful sense of autonomy, and finally her liberating relationship with her great-great-grandmother.

⁵ Such as Rolland Hein's *The Harmony Within: The Spiritual Vision of George MacDonald*, the collection *For the Childlike: George MacDonald's Fantasies for Children* (edited by Roderick McGillis), and Robert Lee Woolf's *The Golden Key: A Study of the Fiction of George MacDonald*.

4.2.1 Irene as Model Victorian Princess

In *Breaking the Angelic Image*, Edith Lazaros Honig argues that “the truly fine and classic fantasies that represent a Golden Age in children’s literature...present a very different sort” of girl in comparison with the conventional Victorian depiction of young females as “ornamental, domesticated, and submissive” (69). More complex than her repressed predecessors, the female hero of Golden-Age children’s fantasies is, according to Honig, “distinctly Victorian in upbringing—polite, well-mannered, and somewhat limited by a typical Victorian home education—but also assertive, adventurous, independent, and even aggressive as any male hero, breaking the mold of the ideal girl” (69). While Honig’s argument reveals a liberal feminist bias that relies on dualistic thinking and favors female characters who exhibit stereotypically male, dominant traits like aggression, the distinction she draws between the ideal Victorian girl and the autonomous female hero is an important one, as is her recognition that in Golden-Age children’s fantasy, the two paradigms often intersect.

Although *The Princess and the Goblin* is comparably free of the harsh moralizing so prevalent in the children’s books of the time, a didactic impulse (however light-hearted) does recur throughout the novel as MacDonald’s narrator repeatedly praises Irene for being a “true princess” while playfully admonishing more inelegant, unthinking children. And while a modern reader might suspect that a “true princess” in Victorian terms would be “ornamental, domesticated, and submissive” (Honig 69) in MacDonald’s estimation, a “true princess” is instead an exemplar of a civilized, compassionate, ethical and intelligent member of society, a standard applicable to both sexes.

MacDonald’s story begins on a rainy day when Irene decides to escape the confinement of her nursery to explore the upper floors of the castle in which she lives.

Her exploration quickly turns sour when she becomes lost in her home's labyrinthine passages:

She ran for some distance, turned several times, and then began to be afraid. Very soon she was sure that she had lost the way back...Her little heart beat as fast as her little feet ran, and a lump of tears was growing in her throat...At last her hope failed her. Nothing but passages and doors everywhere! She threw herself on the floor, and burst into a wailing cry broken by sobs. (8)

Instead of reprimanding Irene for being emotional (as more conventional, stricter narrators of the time would have done), the narrator acknowledges the necessity of a good cry, and describes how Irene turns frustration and panic into action: "She did not cry long, however, for she was as brave as could be expected of a princess of her age. After a good cry, she got up, and brushed the dust from her frock...Next, like a true princess, she resolved on going wisely to work to find her way back" (8-9). Conquering fear is a recurrent theme throughout *Goblin*, and Irene is tested often. Later, while once again searching the castle, Irene finds herself lost and alone, with only moonlight to guide her. "Some little girls would have been afraid to find themselves thus alone in the middle of the night," the narrator tells us, "but Irene was a princess" (85), and therefore entirely capable of calmly finding her way.

Along with composure and rationality, a "true princess," according to MacDonald's narrator, also has a developed sense of decorum, responsibility, and humility. When Irene first meets her great-great-grandmother, she is stunned and momentarily stares in bewilderment at this strange old woman. However, she is anything but rude: "That the princess was a real princess you might see now quite plainly; for she

didn't hang on to the handle of the door, and stare without moving, as I have known some do who ought to have been princesses but were only rather vulgar little girls. She did as she was told, stepped inside the door at once, and shut it gently behind her" (12). "Real princesses" are neither rude nor deceitful. When Lottie, Irene's nurse (and an example of what "vulgar little girls" become), does not believe Irene's account of her mysterious great-great-grandmother, Irene is dejected, for not being believed "does not at all agree with princesses: for a real princess cannot tell a lie. So all afternoon she did not speak a word. Only when the nurse spoke to her, she answered her, for a real princess is never rude—even when she does well to be offended" (21). Keeping promises is a princess' badge of honor, and when Lottie tries to prevent Irene from bestowing Curdie with a promised kiss, Irene is resolute:

'Lottie! Lottie! I promised a kiss,' cried Irene.

'A princess mustn't give kisses. It's not at all proper,' said Lottie.

'But I promised,' said the princess.

'There's no occasion; he's only a miner-boy.'

'He's a good boy, and a brave boy, and he has been very kind to us.

Lottie! Lottie! I *promised*.'

'Then you shouldn't have promised.'

'Lottie, I promised him a kiss.'

'Your Royal Highness,' said Lottie, suddenly grown very respectful, 'must come in directly.'

'Nurse, a princess must *not* break her word,' said Irene, drawing herself up and standing stock still. (42-43)

(This passage also exemplifies Irene's autonomy and self-command, which will be further explored in the next section.) Although Curdie grants her a reprieve—"“Never mind, Princess Irene,” he said. ‘You mustn’t kiss me tonight. But you shan’t break your word. I will come another time’” (43)—Irene inevitably kisses him, “because a princess never forgets her debts until they are paid” (75). And despite Lottie's best efforts to keep the young princess away from Curdie and the rest of the working-class children, Irene forms friendships with them all, as “Lottie had very foolish notions concerning the dignity of a princess, not understanding that the truest princess is just the one who loves all her brothers and sisters best, and who is most able to do them good by being humble towards them” (199). Indeed, Lottie's classist misconceptions prevent her from recognizing Curdie's sterling character, for he is *not* ““only a miner-boy,”” but a counterpart to MacDonald's “true princess.” After haranguing Irene, whom he wrongly accuses of “making game” of him, Curdie soon realizes his mistake and eagerly awaits the chance to apologize. His haunted conscience impresses the narrator:

Here I should like to remark, for the sake of princes and princesses in general, that it is a low and contemptible thing to refuse to confess a fault, or even an error. If a true princess has done wrong, she is always uneasy until she has had an opportunity of throwing the wrongness away from her by saying: ‘I did it; and I wish I had not; and I am sorry for having done it.’ So you see there is some ground for supposing that Curdie was not a miner only, but a prince as well. Many such instances have been known in the world's history. (200)

Significantly, the narrator here uses the model of the *princess* (“If a true princess has done wrong”), rather than the male counterpart, the prince, as the normative to illustrate

commendable behavior, thus suggesting that the “true princess” is a standard to be emulated by both sexes.

A paragon of virtue, the “true princess” is an ideal child—polite, composed, humble, fair-minded, loyal, and earnest. In an essay comparing Lewis Carroll’s Alice and Carlo Collodi’s Pinocchio, Ann Lawson Lucas characterizes the “preformed model child”—that insipid but ubiquitous figure so popular amongst eighteenth- and nineteenth-century authors of didactic moral tales—as one

who knows exactly who she or he is, and dutifully awaits guidance as to what he or she must do; dangerous experiment is to be avoided; the status quo of adult expectation is the ideal...Never questioning their own role, model children have no hesitation about their actions; they either know where they have to go or follow adult instruction. (160-61)

At first glance, Irene, ever a “true princess,” appears to fit this mold. Certainly, she “dutifully awaits” the instruction of her great-great-grandmother, at one point literally following the old woman’s guiding thread into the goblins’ caves, a daunting journey which Irene undertakes without question: “A shudder ran through her from head to foot when she found that the thread was actually taking her into the hole out of which the stream ran...She did not hesitate. Right into the hole she went” (153). Departing from moralistic tradition, however, MacDonald, like Carroll and Collodi, recognized that ideals alone are seldom realistic or interesting, especially to the imaginative mind of child readers. Consequently, as much as Irene is a product of Victorian values, propriety and her role as princess do not define her; rather, Irene is an individual with a powerful sense of autonomy that anticipates the more fully liberated female heroes of twentieth-century children’s fiction.

4.2.2 Irene's Autonomy and Agency

Shortly before MacDonald's narrator informs us that "a real princess is never rude," Princess Irene is just that. Accused of telling lies, Irene becomes defensive and insults Lottie: "'I'm not talking nonsense,' returned Irene, rather offended. 'I will tell you all about [my great-great-grandmother]. She's much taller than you, and much prettier'" (20). Although Irene does not mean to hurt Lottie's feelings, she is, by most standards of decorum, quite rude. What then does MacDonald intend when he prefaces the declaration that princesses are never rude with an example of Irene breaking this very rule? As noted in Chapter 2 of this thesis, Honig argues that during the Victorian era, the fantasy genre allowed authors with liberal attitudes toward women the freedom to express "radical ideas" (108). Whether or not MacDonald was a conscious advocate of women's rights, his depiction of Irene is a progressive feat, one cleverly veiled not only by the fantasy mode but by the recurrent insistence that she is a "true princess," an ideal Victorian child. Underneath this cover of acceptable girlhood—which likely placated the average Victorian adult reader—is a female protagonist who is heroic not only because she is good and humble and true, but because she has a voice and a transformative sense of self.

As is typical of protagonists in children's fantasy literature, Irene is an inquisitive child, and her curious nature is one of the first things we discover about the eight-year-old princess.⁶ Accustomed to being under the careful watch of her nurse, Irene quickly realizes when she is left alone and immediately seizes the opportunity to explore:

⁶ Curiosity is a characteristic shared by Lewis' Lucy Pevensie (as well as Polly Plummer and Jill Pole), whose solitary foray into the wardrobe begins her family's adventures, and Pullman's Lyra Belacqua, whose epic journey starts after she is caught spying on a room of gentlemen scholars. Interestingly, MacDonald's, Lewis', and Pullman's series each begin when a female character goes exploring on her own.

The next moment after you see [Irene] sitting there, her nurse goes out of the room.

Even that is a change, and the princess wakes up a little, and looks about her. Then she tumbles off her chair, and runs out of the door, not the same door the nurse went out of, but one which opened at the foot of a curious old stair of worm-eaten oak, which looked as if never anyone had set foot upon it. She had once before been up six steps, and that was sufficient reason, in such a day, for trying to find out what was at the top of it. (7)

The speed with which Irene takes advantage of being alone signals an urgent need for independence; she is bored to the point of ennui—“She [gets] very tired, so tired that even her toys [can] no longer amuse her” (6)—and literally leaps at the chance to do something new. The possible danger of experimentation and “adult expectation” (both of which keep the “preformed model child” in line, according to Lawson) are far from Irene’s thoughts. Even when she becomes lost, curiosity trumps fear: as “[f]rightened as she was...she could not help wishing to see where yet further the stair could lead” (9). And again, when she hears strange sounds coming from behind a door, “She [is] rather afraid, but her curiosity [is] stronger than her fear, and she open[s] the door very gently and peep[s] in” (11). Irene’s inquisitiveness is not limited to exploration, as her first encounter with her great-great-grandmother illustrates. In one of the book’s most endearing and comical scenes, Irene is all questions upon meeting her elder namesake:

‘Is it long since you came? Was it yesterday? Or was it today, because it was so wet that I couldn’t get out?’...

‘Do you live in this room always?’...

‘Where is your crown then?’

‘In my bedroom.’

‘I *should* like to see it.’

‘You shall some day—not today.’

‘I wonder why nursie never told me.’

‘Nursie doesn’t know. She never saw me.’

‘But somebody knows that you are in the house?’

‘No; nobody.’

‘How do you get your dinner, then?’

‘I keep poultry—of a sort.’

‘Where do you keep them?’

‘I will show you.’

‘And who makes the chicken broth for you?’ (14-15)⁷

And on she goes, asking her great-great-grandmother—or Queen Irene as I shall refer to her—about her age, her white hair, and more about chicken eggs, even asking if she can have one to eat; for all her politeness, Irene has no qualms asking her elder for a snack. While the princess cheerfully interrogates Queen Irene with ease, it is difficult to imagine the typical Victorian-era model child being so forward, especially when the sentiment of the day was for children to “speak only when spoken to.”

Not only does the passage above illustrate Irene’s abundant curiosity, but it also exemplifies her comfort in vocalizing her thoughts and feelings. From the start, Irene embraces her own agency and self-expression. When Irene and Lottie find themselves

⁷ As shall be further discussed in the next section, this passage also illustrates Irene’s immediate comfort with her great-great-grandmother, and the ease with which the two females bond.

lost in the goblin-infested mountains near the castle, Curdie happens upon them and offers to lead the way back, for he knows the simple secret to keeping the goblins at bay: “If you’re not afraid of them, they’re afraid of you. I’m not afraid of them. That’s all” (36). While this initial damsel-in-distress scenario has the potential to establish a traditional male-female dynamic between the protagonists, Irene quickly asserts her autonomy and establishes an entirely different pattern, one in which Curdie repeatedly believes the princess to be in need of help, clarification, or guidance, only to learn that she is entirely capable on her own (or at least with the aid of another female, albeit an omniscient one). Though initially frightened by the threat of the goblins, Irene refuses Curdie’s offer to carry her; “Shall I carry your little Highness?” he asks, to which Irene replies, “No, thank you...I can walk very well” (37). While walking back, Irene initiates conversation between her and Curdie, declaring, “I want to talk to you...but it’s so awkward! I don’t know your name” (38). After the children exchange names, Lootie “indignantly” insists that Curdie call Irene by the proper “Your Royal Highness,” to which Irene responds, “My Royal Highness! What’s that? No, no, Lootie. I won’t be called names. I don’t like them...Curdie, my name’s Irene” (39). As she embraces her given name, Irene claims authority over herself, while also making it clear to both Lootie and Curdie that her royal status—conferred to her by a patriarchal social system—neither restricts nor defines her. Indeed, her identity consists of much more than just the ideal Victorian construct of the “true princess.”

Long after first meeting Curdie, the princess wakes one morning to find Queen Irene’s guiding thread leading her out of the castle and into the heart of the untamed mountains. Despite the ever-present threat of goblins and the unknown trajectory of the thread, Irene feels exhilarated: “[The thread] was leading her she knew not whither; but

she had never in her life been out before sunrise, and everything was so fresh and cool and lively and full of something coming, that she felt too happy to be afraid of anything” (152). Eventually, the thread guides her to Curdie, imprisoned by the goblins and helpless save for his goblin-repelling nonsense rhymes.⁸ The subsequent scene in which Irene frees him and leads the way to safety subverts traditional (and typically masculine) chivalric codes and Victorian notions of proper girlhood. To reach Curdie, Irene must clear an impressive pile of rubble, a task she undertakes “with a will; and with aching back, and bleeding fingers and hands, she worked on, sustained by the pleasure of seeing the heap slowly diminish” (158). Had these words been written in a contemporary work, I would hardly note them; however, the novel’s historical context lends this passage added significance. The prominent Victorian image of woman as the “Angel in the House”⁹ extended to girls as well, who would ideally be “virginal miniature[s]” of their mothers (Honig 69). The division of the sexes was founded on a symbolic dichotomy between heaven and earth. While females were viewed as ethereal and closer to the spiritual realm, males were thought to be physical beings, and more easily corruptible. Clearly, MacDonald agreed, as his initial descriptions of Irene and Curdie reveal: Irene’s face “was fair and pretty, with eyes like two bits of night sky, each with a star dissolved in the blue. Those eyes you would have thought must have known they came from there, so often were they turned up in that direction” (2), while Curdie “was a very nice-looking boy, with eyes as dark as the mines in which he worked and as sparkling as the crystals in

⁸ Perhaps a nod to MacDonald’s good friend Lewis Carroll, whose trademark is nonsense verse.

⁹ Personified by Curdie’s mother, that paragon of working-class womanhood who “made and kept a little heaven in that poor cottage on the high hillside—for her husband and son to go home to out of the low and rather dreary earth in which they worked” (93).

their rocks” (35-36).¹⁰

But MacDonald’s portrayal of Irene is a complex one, and while he subscribed to certain tenets of Victorian thought, he was not restricted by them. By exerting considerable physical strength and digging until her hands bleed (also a symbol of sexual awakening) while saving Curdie, Irene defies strict Victorian gender classification and embraces her physical self, thus incorporating “both stereotypically masculine and feminine characteristics into a balanced whole” (Trites 25). The act of freeing Curdie through physical means emboldens Irene and as she leads the way through the rough terrain of the caves, we witness a blossoming of self-confidence.¹¹ On the trek to safety, Curdie quickly falls behind: “‘Aren’t you coming, Curdie?’” Irene asks, “And when he turned the corner there she stood waiting for him.” The princess instructs him what to do next, saying, “‘I knew you couldn’t go wrong in that narrow hole, but now you must keep by me, for here is a great wide place’”; she then walks “in a straight line, as confidently as if she knew every step of the way” (163). Meanwhile, Curdie, baffled by Irene’s insistence that Queen Irene’s thread (which he cannot see) is guiding them, convinces himself that she is somehow mentally unstable, and thus in need of his protection: “‘What nonsense the child talks!’ said Curdie to himself. ‘I must follow her, though, and see that she comes to no harm. She will soon find that she can’t get out that way, and then she will come with me’” (162). As they continue on, Curdie, “utterly astonished that she had already got so far,” decides to humor the princess, thinking,

‘At all events...I know nothing about the way, miner as I am; and she seems to think she does know something about it, though how she should

¹⁰ MacDonald’s recurrent use of the divine, wise old woman in his children’s stories (including *At the Back of the North Wind* and *The Golden Key*, in addition to both *Princess* books) also testifies to his belief that the female sex was closer to God.

¹¹I will shortly argue that her confidence is also a product of her relationship with Queen Irene.

passes my comprehension. So she's just as likely to find her way as I am, and as she insists on taking the lead, I must follow. We can't be much worse off than we are, anyhow.' (163)

While the tension between Irene and Curdie here stems primarily from Curdie's inability to see Queen Irene's thread, symbolic of his lack of spiritual faith, he also appears to be unaccustomed to and uncomfortable with being led by a young female. Irene, however, remains untroubled by Curdie's disbelief, and when they accidentally happen upon the king and queen of the goblins, she disregards Curdie's order to "Run, Irene!" and instead she

looked once round, saw the fearful creatures awake, and like the wise princess she was, dashed the torch on the ground and extinguished it, crying out:

'Here Curdie, take my hand.'

He darted to her side, forgetting neither the queen's shoes nor his pickaxe, and caught hold of her hand, as she sped fearlessly where her thread guided her. (165)

Here Irene controls the situation and neither needs nor heeds instruction from Curdie. When he then dismisses Irene's claims that her great-great-grandmother is guiding them to safety—"That's all nonsense...I don't know what you mean"—she rebukes him and sharply points out his poor logic: "Then if you don't know what I mean what right have you to call it nonsense?" asked the princess, a little offended" (165). Although Curdie ranks below Irene in social status, he is still four years her elder and a male, two factors which typically conferred authority in Victorian times. Irene does not hesitate to question and even command female authority figures, as we have seen in her interactions with

Lootie and Queen Irene, and as this scene illustrates, she is no less comfortable speaking her mind with their male counterparts.

With Irene's growing confidence comes a new awareness of her autonomy and voice. Irene reaches the pinnacle of her maturity and self-realization when Lootie once again accuses her of lying; to this the princess patiently (she "somehow did not feel at all angry") and astutely observes, "When I tell you the truth, Lootie... you say to me "Don't tell stories": it seems I must tell stories before you will believe me." Lootie calls her rude; Irene responds as if she were the adult and Lootie the child, declaring, "You are so rude, Lootie, that I will not speak to you again till you are very sorry. Why should I, when I know you will not believe me?" (195-96). Dismissing her longtime nurse, Irene turns to the other servants, who are struck speechless by the princess' presence and command:

'Please, Mrs. Housekeeper,' said the princess, 'will you take me to your room, and keep me till my king-papa comes? I will ask him to come as soon as he can.'

Every one stared at these words. Up to this moment they had all regarded her as little more than a baby. (196)

The housekeeper, who is afraid of Lootie, tries to mediate—"I am sure...nursie did not mean to be rude to you"—to which Irene, unmoved, replies, "If [Lootie] thinks I tell lies, she had better either say so to my papa, or go away" (196). Eventually, Lootie collapses into tears and Irene takes pity, telling the captain of the guard,

'I think, Sir Walter...I will keep Lootie. But I put myself under your care; and you need not trouble my king-papa until I speak to you again. Will you all please to go away? I am quite safe and well, and I did not hide

myself for the sake either of amusing myself, or of troubling my people.

Lootie, will you please to dress me.’ (197)

Significantly, MacDonald entitled this chapter “Irene Behaves like a Princess,” suggesting a more progressive vision of girlhood than the conventional Victorian construct, and one which maintains that the truest princess embraces her own voice and recognizes the authority she has over herself.¹²

4.2.3 Irene and Her Great-Great-Grandmother

Describing the traditional patriarchal male hero-story, Margery Hourihan contends that the “women in the hero’s story are rarely shown as involved in any kind of relationship with each other, and where a relationship between women, especially between mother and daughter, is featured it is almost invariably hostile and destructive. The story permits no solidarity amongst the oppressed” (200). Subverting both this convention and the male-centered focus on the egoistic individual, twentieth-century feminist texts emphasize the power of female interdependency. Roberta Seelinger Trites argues that

[o]ne revisionary way that some feminists have incorporated the strengths of traditional femininity into their politics is by continuing to embrace the importance of interpersonal relationships, so that feminist children’s

¹² At the same time, however, this chapter also exemplifies the tension Judith Gero John alludes to when she argues that “it would be a mistake to call MacDonald a feminist” since “the magnificent and powerful female characters he created cannot quite escape their Victorian heritage” (27-8). While Irene here defies “adult expectation” as she comfortably commands her elders, both female *and* male, she must still depend on them to “take charge” (196) of her, to keep her safe and even clothe her. Of course, one could argue that any eight-year-old, no matter how precocious, must depend on adult supervision. However, Irene’s male counterpart, Curdie, only a few years her senior, is all but independent from adult intervention, as his frequent solitary late-night shifts in the mines demonstrate. The contrast between Irene and Curdie’s differing degrees of autonomy validates Gero John’s argument: although a progressive figure, Irene is still in many ways a product of her time.

novels often focus on networks of relationships and how human interdependency can succor the child...The purpose of interdependency in a feminist novel focuses more on the child's or adolescent's development as an individual than on her being inculcated into a prescribed social role. Rather than relying on her family or community to teach her how to continue in the repressed roles that women have so long been forced into, the protagonist of a feminist children's novel will learn from relationships how to take the subject position as a strong and independent person. (83-4)

By the end of *The Princess and the Goblin*, Irene achieves an impressive (and for the era, rare) sense of selfhood, resulting from a journey of female empowerment that begins when she meets her great-great-grandmother and that evolves as the two bond. In portraying a strong, nurturing relationship between two generations of females, MacDonald anticipated the twentieth-century feminist works Trites describes.

When the two Irenes first meet, their bond is immediate as demonstrated by the instant familiarity and trust between them. Irene quickly confides that she has been crying because she was lost and afraid. Queen Irene asks, ““Then why didn't you come to me to wipe [your tears] for you?”” The princess, already understanding that here is someone she can rely on now and in the future, responds, ““Please, I didn't know you were here. I will come next time”” (12). The queen proceeds to wash Irene's face, the first of several such baths that symbolize both a spiritual baptism and a physical and emotional communion between the two females. Next ensues Irene's spirited inquisition in which she launches an endless volley of questions at her ever patient and, more importantly, encouraging great-great-grandmother. Finally, the time comes for the two to part so that Irene can return to a concerned Lottie; Irene asks the queen to accompany

her back, to which the old woman significantly replies, “I can’t go all the way, but I will take you to the top of the stair, and then you must run down quite fast into your own room” (17). Here Queen Irene begins the process of encouraging Irene’s independence; she cannot “go all the way,” for Irene must learn self-reliance.

The next time the two meet, the queen tends to Irene’s injured hand and her “touch [is] so pleasant and cool that it seem[s] to drive away the pain and heat wherever it c[o]me[s]” (89). Then, in what some critics interpret as a mildly “incestuous” scene, Queen Irene asks the princess if she would like to spend the night with her. The experience solidifies their bond and introduces the child to the reviving power of female intimacy, which Irene finds instantly soothing: “The little princess nestled close up to the old lady, who took her in both her arms and held her close to her bosom. ‘Oh dear! this is so nice!’ said the princess. ‘I didn’t know anything in the world could be so comfortable. I should like to lie here for ever’” (91). The next morning, Irene’s hand is “perfectly well” (92), signifying the healing nature of their relationship.

Irene finds her great-great-grandmother again after being chased by one of the goblins’ creatures. The queen then gives the princess a ring and thread, the physical symbol of their bond. The old woman explains that Irene must “follow the thread wherever it leads,” and the princess instinctively knows that the thread will guide her always to the safety of her great-great-grandmother’s arms: “Oh, how delightful! It will lead me to you, grandmother, I know!” “Yes,” replies Queen Irene, affirming their connection, “But remember, it may seem to you a very roundabout way indeed, and you must not doubt the thread. Of one thing you may be sure, that while you hold it, I hold it too” (119). Indeed, Irene never forgets these words, and it is a combination of self-confidence (which Queen Irene has helped foster) and the certainty of the queen’s love

and protection that enables the princess to travel through the goblins' caves with little fear and much determination: "Another thing which helped to keep up her courage was that, as often as she uncovered a turn of the thread, instead of lying loose upon the stones, it tightened up; this made her sure that her grandmother was at the end of it somewhere" (158).

Inevitably the thread leads Irene back to the welcoming embrace of the queen and the cozy warmth of her tower apartments. Irene feels perfectly at ease with her great-great-grandmother, and after only a brief while, she recognizes the sense of security and belonging their relationship inspires within her. When Queen Irene tells the princess she must return to her own rooms downstairs, Irene replies, "'I'm so glad, grandmother, you didn't say 'Go home,' for this is my home. Mayn't I call this my home?'" to which the queen assures her, "'You may, my child. And I trust you will always think it your home'" (120-1). It is in this space of female trust and affection that the queen later teaches Irene her most important lesson, one that reflects the feminist claim that the "archetypal hero masters the world by understanding it, not by dominating, controlling, or owning the world or other people" (Pearson and Pope 5). Irene, distraught that Curdie can neither see nor believe in her great-great-grandmother, sobs, "'What does it all mean, grandmother?'" The queen comforts the young girl with wise words:

'[Y]ou must be content, I say, to be misunderstood for a while. We are all very anxious to be understood, and it is very hard not to be. But there is one thing much more necessary.'

'What is that, grandmother?'

'To understand other people.' (177)

While many scholars have dissected and analyzed other aspects of *The Princess and the Goblin*, few have celebrated MacDonald's achievement in creating Irene, a female hero ahead of her time. In fact, a surprising number of scholars overlook Irene's heroic role entirely, instead focusing their critical attention on Curdie, and thus perpetuating a kind of scholarly sexism by fault of omission. Summarizing *Goblin*, Julia Briggs and Dennis Butts write that "[In the book], Curdie the miner saves Princess Irene from the goblins who are digging their way to her beneath her house" (148), thus portraying Irene as the helpless victim, the classic Victorian heroine. Joseph Sigman, in his Jungian analysis of both *Princess* books, declares that "it is important to emphasize" that the novels "are about Curdie": "Although the first book initially focuses on Irene, it is Curdie's struggle with unbelief that comes to be the dramatic center" (187). Sigman proceeds to reduce Irene to nothing more than an *anima*, or the personification of Curdie's unconscious, completely disregarding Irene's role as a female hero who successfully navigates her way through the male-dominated landscape of epic fantasy. Margery Hourihan warns that "the most obvious feature of the hero story is that it is *his* story" (38), and although MacDonald wrote a tale equally devoted to both a male *and* a female protagonist—the first chapter of *Goblin* is significantly titled "Why the Princess Has a Story About Her"—many critics fail to acknowledge his singular achievement.¹³

But perhaps the fault is MacDonald's own, for he too forgets Irene. At the beginning of *The Princess and Curdie*, MacDonald offers his own synopsis of the preceding novel: "At that time the hollow places of the mountain were inhabited by creatures called goblins, who for various reasons and in various ways made themselves

¹³ Nancy-Lou Patterson is an exception. In her "Kore Motifs in *The Princess and the Goblin*," Patterson observes that a female character in C.S. Lewis' *That Hideous Strength* fondly remembers "the *Curdie* books." "When I first read those words," Patterson writes, "I was surprised, because I had always thought of *The Princess and the Goblin* and *The Princess and Curdie* as being about the princess" (169).

troublesome to all, but to the little princess dangerous. Mainly by the watchful devotion and energy of Curdie, however, their designs had been utterly defeated” (6). Irene’s heroics are not deemed worth recounting, and in this second story, she becomes “eclipsed, upstaged, in darkness” (Edwards 6), no longer a hero, now merely a heroine.

4.3 *The Princess and Curdie: Irene as Heroine*

In defining the roles of hero and heroine, Lee R. Edwards observes that “[a]lthough a hero can theoretically exist in a narrative without a heroine, the reverse is not the case” (5). Published ten years after *The Princess and the Goblin*, *The Princess and Curdie* perhaps should have been titled just *Curdie*, for despite Irene’s recurring appearance in the novel, her presence and participation are limited and her spirit stifled, as she is relegated to no more than a prize for Curdie’s mighty deeds. And although Irene’s abject diminishment is surprising after her substantial role in *Goblin*, MacDonald does foreshadow this disappointing devolution in the first novel.

While Irene’s kinship with her great-great-grandmother liberates, the princess’ relationship with her father debilitates. Dubbed her “king-papa,” Irene’s father represents masculine tradition and supreme authority, acting as patriarch to both his kingdom and his daughter. Upon his first visit in *Goblin*, we learn that Irene “loved her king-papa very dearly and was nowhere so happy as in his arms” (75). While Irene contentedly clings to her father, she shrinks before our eyes and becomes a faceless “little lady”:

as Irene sat on the saddle and hid her glad face upon his bosom [...] the great beautiful [horse], which had been prancing so proudly a little while before, walked as gently as a lady—for he knew he had a little lady on his back. (76-7)

After hearing tales of Irene's great-great-grandmother and the princess' late-night adventure with Lottie and Curdie, the king assigns a small army of men to protect his daughter, to make sure that no unwelcome guests enter the castle, and more importantly, to ensure that she can no longer get out:

When in the evening he rode away upon his great white horse, he left six of his attendants behind him, with orders that three of them should watch outside the house every night, walking round and round it from sunset to sunrise. It was clear he was not quite comfortable about the princess. (80-81)

The king's discomfort with his daughter's blossoming autonomy eventually leads him to whisk Irene away, far from her great-great-grandmother and the strong bond the two females share.

The King succeeds, and in *The Princess and Curdie*, with Irene no longer at hand, the queen all but abandons her female protégé, instead focusing her omniscient powers on Curdie and restoring the integrity of a corrupt and dying kingdom. When Irene first appears in *Curdie*—about two-thirds through the book—we discover that the only communication between princess and queen occurred a year prior when Queen Irene sent her great-great-granddaughter a pigeon, signifying that Curdie was not in fact dead as the girl believed. The king has been ill this entire year and only after Curdie arrives and reveals the dark conspiracy destroying both king and kingdom does Irene recognize the danger surrounding her. The queen, we might infer, has no great faith in Irene as she never bothers to warn the girl of the treacherous plot to kill her father, instead sending Curdie, the traditional male hero, to rid the kingdom of evil.

When Curdie arrives at the king's bedside, he immediately unravels the plot—a feat which Irene has not been able to accomplish in over a year; indeed she has had no inkling of wrongdoing whatsoever. Everything is “clear” and “plain” to Curdie: he “was already sufficiently enlightened as to how things were going...It was clear that among those about the king there was a plot against him...and it was plain also that the doctor was working out a design against the health and reason of His Majesty” (153). Believing the princess a fragile girl, Curdie briefly considers keeping her in the dark—“Curdie would have preferred leaving her in ignorance of the horrors from which he sought to deliver her. He feared also the danger of her knowledge betraying itself to the evil eyes about her”—but he finally deigns to trust her as “she had always been a wise child.” Irene, whom Curdie earlier likens to a dying pigeon, is capable of little more than “childish love and womanly tenderness” (154), and functions solely as her father's caretaker. A thread of dependence and expectation connects father and daughter (very different from the liberating thread that once connected princess and queen) as Irene is prisoner to her father's illness:

‘Does the king wander like this every night?’ [Curdie] asked.

‘Every night,’ answered Irene, shaking her head mournfully. ‘That is why I never go to bed at night. He is better during the day—a little, and then I sleep—in the dressing room there, to be with him in a moment if he should call me. It is *so* sad he should have only me and not my mamma! A princess is nothing to a queen!’ (147)

Not only does Irene sacrifice her own health for that of her father, but she openly belittles her own abilities. She no longer has faith in herself as she places all her confidence in

Curdie: “Irene slept through the whole [night]—so confidently did she rest, knowing Curdie was in her father’s room watching over him” (183).

What has happened to the once spirited, autonomous Irene? Why did MacDonald’s portrayal of the princess change so completely? Honig’s analysis of Victorian literature and convention may offer a clue. As noted in Chapter 2 of this thesis, Honig argues that the fantasy genre gave Victorian writers the freedom to express subversive ideas, particularly in depicting females as more than domesticated, subservient “angels.” She also asserts that for Victorian authors, “presenting a heroic... girl would not be as socially taboo as presenting a... bold mother, for example. Victorian society made certain allowances for the freedom of childhood” (108). Considering Honig’s analysis, Irene’s metamorphosis into a heroine can be interpreted as the result of her maturation. While MacDonald defied social convention in *Goblin* with his portrayal of an eight-year-old female child, in *Curdie*, Irene is a year or two older (MacDonald does not specify her age), on the cusp of adolescence and sexual maturity; she will soon be a woman and if portraying an autonomous adult female was considered offensively defiant, perhaps MacDonald was unwilling to face the backlash.

4.4 Conclusion

While most critics argue that *The Princess and Curdie* fails to match the wonder and charm of the first novel, some even question if it should be termed children’s literature, considering the book’s dark tone and the utter despair of the last chapter in which we learn that although Irene and Curdie eventually marry, they die childless, and the kingdom falls into total ruin. While scholars debate the meaning and the causes of this significant shift in tone—be it the product of MacDonald’s eventual religious

disillusionment or that “his insight into life had developed significantly beyond the immature and rather adolescent stage that we find” in his previous works (Sigman 193)—one thing seems, to me, perfectly clear: *The Princess and Curdie* fails because Irene, our hero, is gone.

CHAPTER FIVE: C.S. LEWIS AND THE GIRLS OF NARNIA

5.1 Introduction

In her essay, “Girls in Narnia: Hindered or Human?” Karla Faust Jones argues that none of the female protagonists in C.S. Lewis’ seven-book series *The Chronicles of Narnia* “conforms to a familiar stereotype.” Rather, Jones posits that

[a]s athletes, leaders, soldiers, and adventurers, they are free to develop their individual talents unbound by social convention and unhindered by being ‘girls’[...] The sympathy with which Lewis portrays the girls and the freedom with which they share danger and adventure with the boys betrays not an underlying prejudice, but rather a basic sensitivity to females as people. (19)

Jones’ analysis, however, lacks a sufficient theoretical framework, and her argument fails under close scrutiny. As a fantasist, Lewis held his pen to a blank slate; as the creator of a whole new world, he had the opportunity to envision a society better than our own, a universe fresh not only in its geography and people, but in its values, ideas, and essence. In building Narnia, Lewis could have questioned the tenets of his society and conceived a civilization founded on principles of equality. Instead, he chose to adhere to tradition as he relied on stale gendered dualisms to create his characters and establish the patriarchal kingdom of Narnia. In this fantasy land, age-old stereotypes testify to the supposed natural inferiority of womankind while men and boys battle one another for supremacy. While magic exists in this imaginary world, sadly, female heroes do not. In this chapter, I will examine Lewis’ five female protagonists beginning with Polly and Aravis, who appear as main characters in only one novel each, and ending with Lucy, who features

prominently in three of the series' installments.

5.2 Polly Plummer

Published five years and four books after Lewis' first foray into Narnia with *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, *The Magician's Nephew* (1955) tells the tale of the legendary kingdom's birth. Through the eyes of two English schoolchildren, Digory Kirke and Polly Plummer, we watch in awe as Aslan turns a dark void into a universe abundant with light and new life, and we watch in horror as evil—in the form of the sorceress Jadis—creeps into Narnia and takes root. Many of Lewis' defenders cite the titular magician of *The Magician's Nephew*, the scheming, condescending, avaricious Uncle Andrew, as proof that Lewis was no sexist. Indeed, the most blatant misogynistic jabs come from this villainous clown, and as he is a wholly unsympathetic figure, we can surmise that Lewis intended for both Uncle Andrew and his sexist rhetoric to be read as distasteful and foolish. When Uncle Andrew experiments on Polly by tricking her into touching the ring that transports her to Narnia, Digory accuses him of cowardice, against which the aspiring magician defends himself by comparing Polly to a guinea pig: ““You don't understand. I am the great scholar, the magician, the adept, who is *doing* the experiment. Of course I need subjects to do it *on*. Bless my soul, you'll be telling me next that I ought to have asked the guinea-pigs' permission before I used *them!*”” (22). Digory, overall a likable character, also makes occasional sexist generalizations; however, these statements are always met with a sharp retort from Polly, signaling to the reader that we should not sympathize with Digory at these moments:

‘That's all *you* know,’ said Digory. ‘It's because you're a girl.

Girls never want to know anything but gossip and rot about people getting engaged.’

‘You looked exactly like your Uncle when you said that,’ said Polly. (36)

While Lewis appears to suggest that the sexist discourse of vulgar, pompous men like Uncle Andrew is immature, misguided, and laughable, his depiction of Polly undermines his attempts at liberalism as she can never quite escape the constraints of a 1950s stereotype.

At first, however, Polly does show promise of being something more. Like MacDonald’s Irene, Polly is a curious child who delights in exploration; and like Irene, Polly’s adventures begin when she wanders the upper floor of her own home:

It is wonderful how much exploring you can do with a stump of candle in a big house, or in a row of houses. Polly had discovered long ago that if you opened a certain little door in the box-room attic of her house you would find the cistern and a dark place behind it which you could get into by a little careful climbing. (13)

She is a natural leader, even among her male counterpart: “Polly’s curiosity got the better of her. She blew out her candle and stepped out into the strange room.... ‘It’s all right; there’s no one here,’ said Polly over her shoulder to Digory.... And Digory came out, blinking and looking extremely dirty” (15). She also refuses to be bullied and dominated by Digory, confronting him after he hurts her wrist and makes her cry “not with fear,” but rather “with furious anger” (36):

‘[I]f you want me to come back, hadn’t you better say you’re sorry?’

‘Sorry?’ exclaimed Digory. ‘Well now, if that isn’t just like a girl!
What have *I* done?’

‘Oh, nothing of course,’ said Polly sarcastically. ‘Only nearly
screwed my wrist off in that room with all the waxworks, like a
cowardly bully.’ (47)

Polly does not shrink with fear at Digory’s use of violent force but instead comfortably vocalizes her outrage; and Digory, “very surprised” (48) at Polly’s censure and perhaps unaccustomed to being reprimanded by a female peer, must apologize before she will agree to see him again.

Lastly, Polly is imaginative, even a fledgling writer:

Polly had used a bit of the tunnel just beside the cistern as a smugglers’
cave. She had brought up bits of old packing cases and the seats of broken
kitchen chairs, and things of that sort, and spread them across from rafter
to rafter so as to make a bit of floor. Here she kept a cash-box containing
various treasures, and a story she was writing and usually a few apples.
(13)

In *Waking Sleeping Beauty*, Roberta Seelinger Trites identifies the subgenre of feminist children’s stories called *Künstlerroman*, or “the novel of artistic development” (63); these stories, Trites argues, emphasize the liberating power of the female authorial voice as the child discovers and sustains her autonomy through the act of writing. The focus of *The Magician’s Nephew* is, of course, not Polly’s literary aspirations, and indeed, the above passage is one of only two references to Polly’s writing; the second reference immediately follows the first: “Digory quite liked the cave (she wouldn’t let him see the story) but he was more interested in exploring” (13). Instead of embracing her writerly

self, like the protagonists of the more feminist *Künstlerroman*, Polly hides her story from Digory, embarrassed rather than proud. Here is an example of how Lewis—often with unnecessary parenthetical asides like “(she wouldn’t let him see the story)” —consistently subverts his female protagonists’ potential for greater autonomy by showing us that they are not as independent, confident or capable as they first appear.

As asserted previously, Lewis’ portrayal of Polly as a spirited individual, an empowered female hero, is undermined by the conflicting depiction of Polly as a stereotype of mid-century femininity. Although initially wary of Uncle Andrew, Polly is easily manipulated by flattery and material goods as the crass magician cajoles her into taking his magic ring:

‘But I must give you a present before you go. It’s not every day that I see a little girl in my dingy old study; especially, if I may say so, such a very attractive young lady as yourself.’

Polly began to think he might not really be mad after all.

‘Wouldn’t you like a ring, my dear?’ said Uncle Andrew....

Polly had now quite got over her fright and felt sure that the old gentleman was not mad. (17)

Uncle Andrew, the sexist boor, stereotypes Polly, believing he can appeal to her feminine vanity, and succeeds effortlessly, suggesting that even the most foolhardy misogynists are right sometimes: females, Lewis implies, are inherently vain. Soon after, when the two children find themselves in Jadis’ realm, surrounded by a court frozen in time, there “was something in this room which interested [Polly] more than it interested Digory: all the figures were wearing magnificent clothes”; Digory, on the other hand, is “more interested in the faces” (33-34). Upon meeting Jadis, Polly is immediately jealous of the sorceress:

“Years afterwards when he was an old man, Digory said he had never in all his life known a woman so beautiful. It is only fair to add that Polly always said she couldn’t see anything specially beautiful about her” (34). Polly feels competitive with and overshadowed by Jadis as she “thought it was high time the Queen took some notice of her as well as of Digory” (38). Though one could argue that Polly here displays admirable powers of intuition while Digory plays the fool by falling prey to Jadis’ extraordinary beauty—the sorceress does turn out to be evil after all—Lewis portrays Polly as pouty rather than repelled and horrified by this personification of depravity: “‘Come,’ [Jadis] added, and held out a hand to each of the children. Polly, who was disliking the Queen and feeling rather sulky, would not have let her hand be taken if she could have helped it” (39). Lewis’ use of “sulky” suggests a moodiness and resentment brought on by envy, thus placing Polly into that category of the stereotypical jealous female.

In addition to being vain and envious, Polly is often lacking in comparison with Digory. While she is “quite as brave as he about some dangers (wasps, for instance),” Polly does not share Digory’s intellectual curiosity: “[S]he was not so interested in finding out things nobody had ever heard of before; for Digory was the sort of person who wants to know everything, and when he grew up he became the famous Professor Kirke” (29). She takes no interest in history—“[N]obody can be made to learn it. Battles and dates and all that rot” (86)—and cannot swim: “Polly went down and had her bath; at least she said that was what she’d been doing, but we know she was not much of a swimmer and perhaps it is best not to ask too many questions” (90). While helping the two children mount their horses, Frank, the cabby-turned-king, gives “Digory a rough heave” and sets “Polly as gently and daintily on the horse’s back as if she were made of

china and might break” (85), suggesting Polly’s physical fragility and, by extension, inferiority. Although Polly accompanies Digory nearly every step of the journey, in the end, the story belongs to him. It is Digory, not Polly, who frees Jadis and lets evil into Narnia; it is he who must repent by banishing the sorceress, resisting temptation (by himself; Polly is not even allowed into the recreated Garden of Eden, for Digory “understood at once that the others wouldn’t and couldn’t come in with him” (91)), and saving his dying mother. It is Digory’s heroic journey of self-discovery and repentance that helps forge the patriarchal underpinnings of Narnia, his story that will be “handed down from father to son in that new world for hundreds of years and perhaps for ever” (96). Polly, a character of great potential weakened by stereotyping, is merely along for the ride, more heroine than hero.

5.3 Aravis

Like Polly, Aravis appears in a leading role in only one book of the series, *The Horse and His Boy* (1954). While the tale centers on young Shasta’s return to Narnia and the discovery of his royal birthright, it is Aravis, the proud, imperious princess who ultimately learns the most from their journey. Arguably, Aravis is the least likable of Lewis’ female protagonists—she is haughty, hostile, selfish, and insensitive—and therefore, the female character most in need of transformation. Significantly, she is also the female protagonist who most resembles a traditional *male* hero.

Indeed, Shasta and Bree, the Narnian horse, initially mistake Aravis for a grown man. While speeding toward Narnia at night, Shasta and Bree hear someone riding nearby. Shasta hopes that the rider is only a local farmer on his way home; Bree, however, insists, ““ *That’s* not a farmer’s riding. Nor a farmer’s horse either. Can’t you tell by the

sound? That's quality, that horse is. And it's being ridden by a real horseman'" (216). Bree believes the rider is male, and soon after, when he and Shasta realize lions stalk them, he takes comfort in the proximity of this capable horseman:

When they had galloped for several minutes without any further noise from the lions Shasta said, 'I say! That other horse is galloping beside us now. Only a stone's throw away.'

'All the b-better,' panted Bree. 'Tarkaan on it—will have a sword—protect us all.'

As they approach, Shasta notices that the other rider "was a very small, slender person, mail-clad...and riding magnificently. He had no beard" (217). Finally, Bree and Shasta realize their mistake after hearing the rider's voice:

'Why, it's only a girl!' [Shasta] exclaimed.

'And what business is it of yours if I am *only* a girl?' snapped the stranger. 'You're only a boy: a rude, common little boy—a slave probably, who's stolen his master's horse.'

'That's all *you* know,' said Shasta. (218)

Here Lewis momentarily promotes fair-mindedness by demonstrating the inaccuracy of assumptions based on gender and status: Shasta stereotypes Aravis as "only a girl"—thus automatically discounting her already proven capabilities—while Aravis wrongly profiles him as a "common little boy." Once again, however, Lewis contradicts himself as he further develops Aravis' character by relying on gendered dualisms and extremes, portraying Aravis as the tomboy, the masculine warrior female in comparison with the pampered, vacuous, and vain Lasaraleen.

Throughout *The Horse and His Boy*, Lewis depicts Aravis and Lasaraleen as opposites, symbols of both ends of the female spectrum. At one end is Aravis, the budding Amazon, the aggressive, independent female who would rather die than marry and face the threat of male domination. (After meeting Bree and Shasta, Aravis recounts the tale of her arranged marriage to a man “at least sixty years old” with “a hump on his back” and a “face that resembles that of an ape” (221), and how her horse Hwin convinced her not to commit suicide but rather flee to Narnia, where “no maiden is forced to marry against her will” (222).) In the world of Narnia, Aravis’ equestrian prowess is abnormal for a female, thus Bree and Shasta’s initial assumption that she is a man, and their subsequent surprise when they learn the proficient rider is actually a girl; such physical adeptness, Lewis implies, is unusual in females, while perfectly commonplace among males. Aravis is also exceptionally self-assured for a female—“She was proud and could be hard enough” (244)—a characteristic that, while natural, even necessary, for *male* heroes, makes her stand out as Bree notices while they try to sneak through the city of Tashbaan:

‘Now, Aravis, do droop your shoulders a bit and step heavier and try to look less like a princess. Try to imagine you’ve been kicked and cuffed and called names all your life.’ (229)

Here Bree encourages Aravis to look and feel weak, submissive, and diffident in order to blend in and appear to be an average female, suggesting that weakness and diffidence are common feminine traits. Lastly, in typical Amazonian fashion, Aravis is combative, not only in her contentious relationship with males (especially Shasta), but in longing to participate in actual combat. Although she does not fight in the climactic battle—Lewis only allows females to fight from afar (with bow and arrow), if at all—she envies

Shasta's experience: "[Y]ou were in battle," said Aravis. "It must have been wonderful" (301).

At the opposite end of the spectrum is Lasaraleen, Lewis' personification of feminine excess.¹⁴ An old acquaintance of Aravis, Lasaraleen first appears while Aravis tries to lie low among Tashbaan's crowds. The differences between the girls are explicit from the moment the two meet; afraid that Lasaraleen will give her away, Aravis is commanding and hostile, while Lasaraleen remains unconcerned and self-absorbed:

'Shut up! Do you hear? Shut up. You must hide me. Tell your people—'

'But darling—' began Lasaraleen in the same loud voice. (She didn't in the least mind making people stare; in fact she rather liked it.)

'Do what I tell you or I'll never speak to you again,' hissed Aravis.

Lasaraleen is frivolous, a "terrible giggler" who cannot begin to understand the urgency of Aravis' predicament as her excitement over her new dress dominates her thoughts and conversation: "'Darling, you're sitting on my dress.... It is a new one. Do you like it?..It's not much fun with the curtains drawn. I want to see people. There's no point in having a new dress on if one's to go about shut up like this.... But you haven't even told me yet what you think of the dress'" (250). Lasaraleen adores material things and insists on dressing Aravis in the best finery before she will help her; indeed, the "fuss she made about choosing the dresses nearly drove Aravis mad. She remembered now that Lasaraleen had always been like that, interested in clothes and parties and gossip. Aravis had always been more interested in bows and arrows and horses and dogs and swimming. You will guess that each thought the other silly" (251).

¹⁴ Lasaraleen is, in Lewis' opinion, the worst sort of female and exactly what Susan eventually becomes: only interested in "nylons and lipstick and invitations" (741). At the end of *The Last Battle*, Susan is banned from Narnia for her interest in these material pursuits, and I do not imagine Lasaraleen ending up there either.

To Lewis, neither Lasaraleen nor Aravis is a positive figure; Lasaraleen because she is too feminine (and thus incapable of contemplation or gravity), and Aravis because she is too masculine. Comparing Aravis to other characters in *The Chronicles*, she most resembles Peter Pevensie and Prince Caspian, the two most consistently admirable male heroes in the series. All three are confident, commanding, physically skilled, assertive, outspoken, independent leaders; but while these characteristics make Peter and Caspian heroes, conversely, they make Aravis an anomaly. In Aravis, traits that are positive in Lewis' male characters are instead negative: confidence is portrayed as arrogance, command as hostility, physical skill as abnormal ability, assertiveness as aggression, outspokenness as rudeness, and independence as shrewishness. By the end of the novel, however, Aravis softens into the kind of female Lewis finds acceptable, a transformation that results from a violent encounter with Aslan and one of the most disturbing scenes in *The Chronicles*.

When Aravis first meets Shasta and Bree, she tells them the story of her escape from an evil stepmother and an arranged marriage. As part of her getaway plan, Aravis explains, she tricked and drugged a servant girl; when Shasta inquires after the hapless girl, Aravis replies coldly: “‘Doubtless she was beaten for sleeping late....But she was a tool and spy of my stepmother’s. I am very glad they should beat her’” (224). Cold and callous, her answer realistically reflects adolescent egotism as Aravis cares only for herself and fails to consider the possibility that the servant girl was similarly ill-used by her stepmother. But instead of letting Aravis mature into a recognition of her misdeed, Lewis has Aslan claw the guilt out of her—literally. Nearing the end of their journey, Shasta, Bree, Aravis, and Hwin find themselves once again stalked by a lion. Shasta watches helplessly as the lion attacks Aravis:

Before they reached him the lion rose on its hind legs, larger than you would have believed a lion could be, and jabbed at Aravis with its right paw. Shasta could see all the terrible claws extended. Aravis screamed and reeled in the saddle. The lion was tearing her shoulders...Aravis still kept her seat but her back was covered with blood. (271-2)

The lion, we soon discover, is Aslan himself; as he later explains, ““It was I who wounded you...The scratches on your back, tear for tear, throb for throb, blood for blood, were equal to the stripes laid on the back of your stepmother’s slave because of the drugged sleep you cast upon her. You needed to know what it felt like”” (299). While Aravis’ wrongdoing is not the worst transgression committed by a main character in *The Chronicles*, her punishment is the severest (except for Susan’s final exclusion from Narnia), and the only time Aslan physically harms a protagonist. In comparison, the males who commit even graver mistakes, including Digory Kirke and Edmund Pevensie, receive only patient lectures.¹⁵ While this disparity helps expose the author’s worrisome attitude toward gender, it is Lewis’ justification of using violent force against a female as divine and righteous retribution that merits serious consideration from his scholarly defenders; Jones, for example, overlooks the misogynistic implications of this scene, instead focusing on Shasta’s dominant male heroics and claiming that Aravis

has to be shown the folly of her superior attitude toward Shasta by Aslan, who anonymously attacks her while she is on horseback and rips her back

¹⁵ In *The Magician’s Nephew*, Aslan gently scolds Digory—““Son of Adam...Are you ready to undo the wrong that you have done to my sweet country of Narnia on the very day of its birth?”” (83)—after the boy harms Polly and releases evil into Narnia; while in *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, Edmund Pevensie receives a private lecture after he betrays his entire family to Jadis (thus nearly leading them to their deaths): “There is no need to tell you (and no one ever heard) what Aslan was saying, but it was a conversation which Edmund never forgot” (174).

with his claws. Shasta bravely faces the lion and ‘scares’ it away, thereby rescuing Aravis and humbling her into admitting her arrogance. (17)

In the end, Aravis’ punishment inspires her transformation into a gentler, more agreeable sort of female. As a result, she becomes more compassionate, obedient, and even surprisingly enthusiastic about the fripperies she earlier ridicules Lasaraleen for liking. When Aravis meets Lucy Pevensie for the first time, they “liked each other at once and soon went away together to talk about Aravis’s bedroom and Aravis’s boudoir and about getting clothes for her, and all the sort of things girls do talk about on such an occasion” (305). While Karla Faust Jones disregards the significance of this passage, claiming that this “portrayal of Aravis is so incongruous with her total character development that it can be considered inconsequential” (17), I believe that Lewis here suggests that Aravis has accepted her role as a more “normal” girl, trading her armor for more proper attire, and embracing an interest in fashion—which he associates with frivolity, excess, and superficiality, as exemplified by Lasaraleen (and later, Susan)—and thus an innate element of girlhood, as he sees it. According to Lewis, all girls, no matter how much they *say* they are not interested, enjoy clothes and decorating, and cannot help but share their enthusiasm when the opportunity arises.

By the end of *The Horse and His Boy*, Aravis goes from tomboy to wife as she grows up to marry Shasta (now Prince Cor) and live happily ever after in a stereotypically combative marriage: “Aravis also had many quarrels (and, I’m afraid, even fights) with Cor, but they always made it up again: so that years later, when they were grown up, they were so used to quarrelling and making it up again that they got married so as to go on doing it more conveniently.” Aravis is the only female protagonist

to mature into adulthood, marry, and have children,¹⁶ and the last we hear of her is that she and Shasta “made a good King and Queen of Archenland, and Ram the Great, the most famous of all the kings of Archenland, was their son” (310). Aravis’ lasting legacy, it seems, is her son; Narnia, after all, is a *kingdom*, and the deeds of a queen are not often worth retelling.

5.4 Susan Pevensie

In 1950, with the publication of *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, Lewis introduced the Pevensies, arguably the most famous four siblings in all of children’s literature. From the very beginning, each of the Pevensies is defined and motivated by a distinct role: Peter is the leader, Edmund the selfish snitch (until Aslan reforms him; then he becomes rather unremarkable), and Lucy the pious and truthful innocent. Susan, the eldest sister, is the unadventurous nag, the “wet blanket” (*Caspian* 370), as Edmund calls her. Susan’s characteristic rationality and cautiousness clash with the spontaneity and magic of Narnia, and she frequently expresses her distaste for adventure and exploration. When the children first enter Narnia, Susan hesitates and seems to miss the significance of their momentous discovery, instead focusing on the weather:

‘And now,’ said Susan, ‘what do we do next?’

‘Do?’ said Peter, ‘why, go and explore the wood, of course.’

‘Ugh!’ said Susan, stamping her feet, ‘it’s pretty cold. What about putting on some of these coats?’ (135)

(Of course, her plan is a “very sensible” one and her trademark rationality serves her family well—as it often does—and they proceed to wrap themselves in warm fur coats.)

¹⁶ Jill Pole and Lucy Pevensie die in their teens and Polly is still “Miss Plummer” in her old age, we discover in *The Last Battle*. We never learn what becomes of Susan.

Resigned to follow her brothers and sister, Susan quails at the first hint of danger when they find that the faun Tumnus has been arrested: “‘I—I wonder if there’s any point in going on....I mean, it doesn’t seem particularly safe here and it looks as if it won’t be much fun either. And it’s getting colder every minute, and we’ve brought nothing to eat. What about just going home?’” (136-7). Later, after Edmund runs away, she similarly declares, ‘How perfectly dreadful!...Oh, how I wish we’d never come’ (148).

Susan’s feelings and decisions are noticeably influenced by the weather—as demonstrated by her repeated complaints about the cold—and food. When the children meet Mr. Beaver, Susan uncharacteristically advocates taking a risk and following him primarily because she is peckish:

‘I think it’s a nice beaver,’ said Lucy.

‘Yes, but how do we *know*?’ said Edmund.

‘Shan’t we have to risk it?’ said Susan. ‘I mean, it’s no good just standing here and I feel I want some dinner.’ (140)

Upon hearing Aslan’s name for the first time, “Edmund felt a sensation of mysterious horror. Peter felt suddenly brave and adventurous,” while Susan “felt as if some delicious smell...had just floated by her” (141). At the beginning of *Prince Caspian*, after being suddenly transported back to Narnia, Susan’s first thoughts are not of the possible adventures that await her, but of food: “‘I suppose we’ll have to make some plans. We shall want something to eat before long’” (318). Though seemingly insignificant, Susan’s recurrent preoccupation with food and the weather is not merely incidental, but rather establishes her fixation with the physical, material side of life and her difficulty embracing the spiritual—a deficiency of character that must have offended Lewis and contributed to Susan’s exclusion from Narnia at the end of the series.

The only protagonist whose experience in Narnia and relationship with Aslan does not change her for the better, Susan grows increasingly problematic throughout the books. Her tendency to affect maturity and sophistication—hinted at in *Lion* when Edmund accuses her of “[t]rying to talk like Mother” (111)—develops into a persistent flaw in *Caspian*, one that her brothers and sister find deeply irritating. When the children get lost on their way to help Prince Caspian, Peter takes responsibility while Susan claims, “I knew all along we’d get lost in these woods”; Lucy “reproachfully” replies, “Susan!...Don’t nag at Peter like that. It’s so rotten, and he’s doing all he can” (372). The other Pevensies repeatedly accuse Susan of condescension and nagging as her behavior gradually alienates them. When Lucy insists that she has seen Aslan in the woods, the rest of the children doubt her, and Susan asks, “Where did you think you saw him?” which infuriates the ever-faithful Lucy: “Don’t talk like a grown-up,” said Lucy, stamping her foot. ‘I didn’t *think* I saw him. I saw him” (373). Shortly after, Lucy encounters Aslan by herself and shares her frustration at not being believed. She then tries to wake her family with the news of Aslan’s presence: “Susan did really wake up, but only to say in her most annoying grown-up voice, ‘You’ve been dreaming, Lucy. Go to sleep again” (381). As Lucy becomes more insistent that they follow Aslan (who the rest still cannot see), Susan becomes more hostile:

‘I can’t see anything,’ said Peter after he had stared his eyes sore. ‘Can you, Susan?’

‘No, of course I can’t,’ snapped Susan. ‘Because there isn’t anything to see. She’s been dreaming. Do lie down and go to sleep, Lucy.’

‘And I do hope,’ said Lucy in a tremulous voice, ‘that you will all

come with me. Because—because I’ll have to go with him whether anyone else does or not.’

‘Don’t talk nonsense, Lucy,’ said Susan. ‘Of course you can’t go off on your own. Don’t let her, Peter. She’s being downright naughty.’

(383)

Susan’s anger with Lucy and her refusal to believe her sister presages what Lewis sees as her spiritual failings. As the group travels on, Susan is the last of her family to see Aslan¹⁷, and once she does, she shamefully admits that she has been too preoccupied with her own bodily discomfort (again focused on the physical instead of the spiritual) to think of him: “‘I really believed it was him tonight, when you woke us up. I mean, deep down inside. Or I could have, if I’d let myself. But I just wanted to get out of the woods and—and—oh, I don’t know’” (386). In *Prince Caspian*, Susan’s faith wavers precariously, foreshadowing her eventual fall from Aslan’s grace at the end of *The Last Battle*.

Though largely negative, Lewis’ depiction of Susan is complicated by repeated references to her kind and empathetic nature. In the chapter of *Lion* in which Jadis and her minions crucify Aslan, all the Pevensie children feel a sense of foreboding, but this “‘feeling affected Susan so much that she couldn’t get to sleep when she went to bed. And after she had lain counting sheep and turning over and over she heard Lucy give a long sigh and turn over just beside her in the darkness” (178). Both Susan and Lucy have a “horrible feeling” and they agree to go after Aslan. In the following scene, Lewis gives no indication that Susan’s faith will eventually fail or that she loves Aslan less than Lucy;

¹⁷ “Seeing” Aslan is a matter of believing in him. Only once you accept your faith will he appear to you.

in fact, Lewis portrays the girls' despair and heartbreak equally.¹⁸ Aslan asks the sisters to walk with him and lay their hands on his mane, "And so the girls did what they would never have dared to do without his permission, but what they had longed to do ever since they first saw him—buried their cold hands in the beautiful sea of fur and stroked it and, so doing, walked with him." When he bids them farewell, "both the girls cried bitterly (though they hardly knew why) and clung to the Lion and kissed his mane and his nose and his paws and his great, sad eyes" (179). After discovering Aslan's dead body,

they both knelt in the wet grass and kissed his cold face and stroked his beautiful fur—what was left of it—and cried till they could cry no more. And then they looked at each other and held each other's hands for mere loneliness and cried again; and then again were silent. (182)

Susan also shows empathy for Edmund after he betrays them, as she convinces Lucy that he should not be told of Aslan's sacrifice:

‘Does he know,’ whispered Lucy to Susan, ‘what Aslan did for him? Does he know what the arrangement with the Witch really was?’

‘Hush! No, of course not,’ said Susan.

‘Oughtn't he to be told?’ said Lucy.

‘Oh, surely not,’ said Susan. ‘It would be too awful for him. Think how you'd feel if you were he.’ (193).

At the end of *Lion*, Lewis describes the sort of Kings and Queens the Pevensies become, and once again his description of Susan lacks any hint of her later spiritual devolution, instead suggesting that she matures into an admirable, compassionate queen: “And Susan

¹⁸ Karla Faust Jones, however, completely disregards Susan and the above text when she claims that Lucy “is the only one of the children to detect Aslan's sadness following his initial resolve to die for Edmund” (15).

grew into a tall and gracious woman with black hair that fell almost to her feet and the kings of the countries beyond the sea began to send ambassadors asking for her hand in marriage. And she was called Queen Susan the Gentle” (194). Even in *Caspian*, Lewis credits Susan for her kindness. When the dwarf Trumpkin challenges her to an archery contest (Susan excels at the sport) immediately after losing to Edmund in a sword fight, Susan feels sorry for having to embarrass him: “She was not enjoying her match half so much as Edmund had enjoyed his; not because she had any doubt about hitting the apple but because Susan was so tender-hearted that she almost hated to beat someone who had been beaten already” (364-5). Perhaps the most complicated protagonist of *The Chronicles*, Susan is often irritating in her affectations and frustrating lack of enthusiasm even as she remains “tender-hearted” and compassionate. Though she cannot be labeled a hero, Susan is certainly no villain, and for that, her final punishment is both unexpected and inexplicable.

At the end of *The Last Battle*, the final book of the series, all the (good) characters of the previous six novels reunite in the final Narnia, Lewis’ version of heaven—with one exception. When King Tirian notices Susan’s absence and asks after her, we learn that she has stopped believing in Narnia altogether and is now fully engrossed in a kind of soulless materialism that Lewis suggests is a primarily female affliction¹⁹ (by referring to specifically feminine products like nylons and lipstick):

‘My sister Susan,’ answered Peter shortly and gravely, ‘is no longer a friend of Narnia.’

‘Yes,’ said Eustace, ‘and whenever you’ve tried to get her to come and talk about Narnia or do anything about Narnia, she says ‘What

¹⁹ See also discussion of Lasaraleen (Section 5.3).

wonderful memories you have! Fancy your still thinking about all those funny games we used to play when we were children.’

‘Oh, Susan!’ said Jill. ‘She’s interested in nothing nowadays except nylons and lipstick and invitations. She always was a jolly sight too keen on being grown-up.’ (741)

This is the last time we hear of Susan, and while her friends and family are coldly dismissive and apparently unconcerned over her fate—not entirely surprising given that they never seemed to like her much—the reader may feel differently. Philip Pullman, our third author, certainly does, as he explains in his critique of Lewis, entitled “The Dark Side of Narnia.” Pullman sees the exclusion of Susan from the salvation of Narnia as representative of Lewis’ dislike of females and, more importantly, female sexuality. Comparing Susan to Cinderella, Pullman theorizes that she “is undergoing a transition from one phase of her life to another. Lewis didn’t approve of that... He was frightened and appalled at the notion of wanting to grow up. Susan, who did want to grow up, and who might have been the most interesting character in the whole cycle if she’d been allowed to, is a Cinderella in a story where the Ugly Sisters win” (“Dark Side”). Whether or not “the Ugly Sisters win” in the end, Pullman astutely observes that Susan is in the process of development, a process that more accurately reflects the average child’s own sexual transition—including a heightened and acute awareness of one’s own physical and social attractiveness, thus the interest in “nylons and lipstick and invitations”—as opposed to the kind of strange, unrealistic asexuality of Lewis’ other child protagonists. In excluding Susan and showing how the other children speak of her with such disdain, Lewis suggests to his young readers that spiritual faith and physical maturity—or, more importantly, an *enthusiasm* for physical maturity—are mutually exclusive concepts; to

fully embrace one's faith and be worthy of Narnia, Lewis implies, one must ignore physicality and sexuality. Whatever Susan's faults, her punishment is extreme, for she is not merely excluded from Narnia but, we can infer, made to suffer a grave and terrible loss alone. Her entire family—Peter, Edmund, Lucy, and even her parents—have been killed in a train crash; she is the only Pevensie left alive.²⁰ Neither hero nor villain, Susan Pevensie is, in the end, a tragic figure, both recognizable and, despite Lewis' best efforts, woefully sympathetic.

5.5 Jill Pole

We first meet Jill Pole, the female protagonist of *The Silver Chair* (1953) and *The Last Battle* (1956), as she cries behind the gym of her school. She is crying because the people who run her school, a co-educational establishment aptly named "Experiment House,"²¹ "had the idea that boys and girls should be allowed to do what they liked" (549); unfortunately for Jill, what these unruly boys and girls like best is bullying her. Happily, Eustace Scrubb, fresh from his metamorphosis in *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*, stumbles across Jill, and the two are quickly whisked off to the safety of Narnia.

While Jill is at times an impressive character, likened immediately to "a tigress" (551) and often on even par with Eustace—whom she calls "Scrubb"—Lewis never lets

²⁰ Neil Gaiman, the contemporary British fantasist, ponders the fairness of Susan's fate and the lasting psychological ramifications of losing one's entire family in his short story, "The Problem of Susan."

²¹ We learn a lot about Experiment House throughout *The Silver Chair*, as it embodies the many ills of progressive education, according to Lewis. For starters, the school is a secular institution, the disapproving narrator informs us: "(When I was at school one would have said, 'I swear by the Bible.' But Bibles were not encouraged at Experiment House.)" (551). No one at the school has heard of Adam and Eve (567) and the female students are notably unrefined and unladylike, as "girls are not taught how to curtsy at Experiment House" (599). Lastly, the head of the school is unstable, and more importantly, a female, we learn when Aslan helps Jill and Eustace enact revenge at the end of the book: "And then the Head (who was, by the way, a woman) came running out to see what was happening. And when she saw the lion...she had hysterics" (663). By detailing the gender of the Head, Lewis insinuates that Experiment House is so poorly run and morally corrupt because its principal is female.

his audience forget her gender,²² which frequently proves an impediment to her mission. In *The Silver Chair*, that mission is entrusted to her by Aslan after she accidentally knocks Eustace off a cliff while showing off: “I lay on you this command, that you seek this lost prince until either you have found him and brought him to his father’s house, or else died in the attempt, or else gone back into your own world” (559). The lost prince is Prince Rilian, the future king of Narnia and son of the Pevensies’ old friend Caspian, and to find him, Jill must remember and follow four signs; her subsequent ineptitude provides much of the novel’s tension. First, she becomes distracted by the luxuries of Cair Paravel: “I say, Scrubb, isn’t it all simply too exciting and scrumptious for words? She had forgotten all about the signs and the lost Prince for the moment.” Eustace, on the other hand, remains unimpressed, replying, “Oh! That’s what you think, is it?” (568). Soon after, Jill and Eustace convene with a group of owls to discuss strategy; Jill, uninterested, falls asleep:

Ever since the owls’ parliament began she had been yawning terribly and now she had dropped off. She was not at all pleased at being waked again, and at finding herself lying on bare boards in a dusty belfry.... She was even less pleased when she heard that they had set off for somewhere else—and not, apparently, for bed—on the Owl’s back.

Eustace scolds her, saying, “Oh, come on, Pole, buck up... After all, it *is* an adventure,” to which Jill replies, “I’m sick of adventures” (578). Jill’s crankiness, caused by bodily discomfort, and lack of enthusiasm for adventure (though short-lived), are reminiscent of Susan, as is the following passage in which Jill once again botches the order of Aslan’s four signs:

²² Lewis’ use of “tigress,” instead of “tiger,” testifies to this.

As you see, she had got the order wrong. That was because she had given up saying the signs over every night. She still really knew them, if she troubled to think: but she was no longer so ‘pat’ in her lesson as to be sure of reeling them off in the right order at a moment’s notice and without thinking...deep down inside her, she was already annoyed with herself for not knowing the Lion’s lesson quite so well as she felt she ought to have known it. This annoyance, added to the misery of being very cold and tired, made her say, ‘Bother the signs.’ (596)

This passage parallels and in fact borrows exact wording from Susan’s regretful admission in *Caspian*: “‘I really believed it was [Aslan] tonight...I mean, deep down inside. Or I could have, if I’d let myself. But I just wanted to get out of the woods’” (386). Both girls show weakness when faced with physical obstacles (although Jill becomes more physically capable in *The Last Battle*), and have trouble remaining diligent in their spiritual endeavors, although unlike Susan, Jill eventually develops a steadfast love for Aslan and Narnia, as she claims in *Battle*, “‘I would rather be killed fighting in Narnia than grow old and stupid at home’” (720).²³

Like the other female protagonists, Jill is often the victim of Lewis’ sexist rhetoric and dualistic stereotypes. In *The Silver Chair*, on their journey to rescue the prince, Jill looks on jealously as Eustace and their male companion Puddlegum the Marsh-wiggle hunt for food: “‘They traveled across Ettinsmoor for many days, saving the bacon and living chiefly on the moor-fowl...which Eustace and the wiggle shot. Jill rather envied Eustace for being able to shoot; he had learned it on his voyage with King Caspian’” (587).

²³ Since Jill later delivers the famous condemnation of Susan—“‘She’s interested in nothing nowadays except nylons and lipstick and invitations. She always was a jolly sight too keen on being grown-up’” (741)—we can interpret this line as also referring to Susan, whom Jill certainly must believe will “grow old and stupid at home.”

Eustace does not think to teach Jill how to shoot and Jill does not think to ask; this is the natural way of things in Narnia: males hunt and fight while women gather and nurture.²⁴

As the three travel on, the journey grows more strenuous, but only Jill comes close to quitting: “It was a terrible climb, after the journey they had already had, and Jill nearly gave up. Scrubb and Puddlegum had to help her for the last hundred yards” (597). When they finally reach Prince Rilian, he, Puddlegum, and Eustace—or “the three conquerors” as the narrator calls them—battle the evil sorceress while Jill again watches from afar, for she “had very wisely sat down and was keeping quiet; she was saying to herself, ‘I do hope I don’t faint—or blub—or do anything idiotic’” (634).

While Jones argues that this scene illustrates Jill’s awareness “of a stereotype she must combat,” and that it “is as though she realizes she can be whatever her capabilities allow her to be and doesn’t want her behavior to deny these capabilities and confirm unjust stereotyping” (18), I interpret this passage as illustrating just the opposite. Rather, the narrator here indicates that Jill is “wise” to stay out of the fight and be silent—so as not to distract the males from their skirmish—thus suggesting to Lewis’ female readership that they too would be “wise” to recognize and accept their female limitations, to sit by while the boys and men “conquer” the world one battle at a time. And Jill’s internal monologue does indeed confirm “unjust stereotyping” as she associates emotion (e.g., fainting or “blubbing”) with weakness. Lewis’ narrator makes a similar association earlier when Jill, drenched with snow and overcome with fatigue, cries: “I hope you

²⁴ The Pevensie family exemplifies this gender dualism. In *Lion*, Peter fishes with Mr. Beaver while Susan and Lucy help Mrs. Beaver “fill the kettle and lay the table and cut the bread and put the plates in the oven to heat and draw a huge jug of beer for Mr. Beaver” (143). In *Caspian*, “the girls went out to pick some more apples and the boys built the fire” (323); and later, Trumpkin the dwarf rightly assumes that the boys know how to skin animals: “‘I dare say you two youngsters—Kings, I should say—know how to skin a bear?’ ‘Let’s go and sit down a fair way off,’ said Susan to Lucy. ‘I know what a horrid messy business *that* will be’” (371).

won't lose all interest in Jill for the rest of the book if I tell you that at this moment she began to cry" (601). With this interjection, the narrator signals to the reader that crying is childish, embarrassing, and has no place on the battlefield, a sentiment Lewis reaffirms in *The Last Battle* when King Tirian tells Jill, "If you must weep, sweetheart...turn your face aside and see you wet not your bow-string" (733).²⁵

Compared to her role in *The Silver Chair*, Jill participates more fully in *The Last Battle*, and is not so frequently relegated to the background or portrayed as a hindrance. Tirian admires Jill as a "young warrior" (718), is "surprised at the strength of both" her and Eustace (699), and even calls her "the bravest and most wood-wise" of all his subjects (704). Whereas Jill is incapable of navigating in *The Silver Chair*—the narrator informs us, "Eustace was quite right in saying that Jill (I don't know about girls in general) didn't think much about points of the compass" (561)—in *The Last Battle* she has developed, rather inexplicably, an extraordinary sense of direction; indeed "she knew her Narnian stars perfectly" and "was the best pathfinder" (700) among herself, Eustace and Tirian. Significantly, Jill is the only female protagonist in the series whom we see kill an enemy; while Lewis implies that Susan and Lucy shoot at and perhaps kill people, he explicitly, and graphically, portrays Jill in the act of slaying the enemy: "The Fox lay dead at [Eustace's] own feet, and he wondered if it was he who had killed it. The Bull also was down, shot through the eye by an arrow from Jill" (732). Soon after, "one of [Jill's] arrows hit a man, and another hit a Narnian wolf, who had, it seemed, joined the enemy" (734). While Jones uses these scenes to contribute to her argument that Jill is an

²⁵ Throughout *The Chronicles*, Lewis distinguishes between types of crying. Jill cries because she is frustrated, tired, and frightened; this kind of crying shows weakness and is not admirable. On the other hand is the beatific crying that results from an encounter with the divine. In *The Last Battle*, King Tirian sheds tears when Narnia (the physical realm as opposed to the heavenly version) ceases to exist: "The ladies do well to weep. See, I do myself. [...] What world but Narnia have I ever known? It were no virtue, but great discourtesy, if we did not mourn" (753).

empowered character who defies stereotype—“Jill emerges as a truly courageous character [...] No other Narnian heroine kills in battle” (18)—post-structural feminist theorists would consider Jill’s actions as belonging to the patriarchal tradition in which violence “is not seen as problematic in any way” if it is “directed at ‘the enemy’” (Hourihan 104). Indeed Margery Hourihan observes that in Narnia, the protagonists “bring the attitudes of children with them to these war games and this has the effect of presenting violence as both ordinary and enjoyable” (102). Certainly the children never face realistic psychological ramifications after they kill, since “violence is made compatible with virtue by [Lewis] demonizing the victims” (104), thus allowing Lewis to avoid any complicated moral implications. The act of killing does not make Jill a hero as Jones suggests, but instead perpetuates the aggressive tendencies of patriarchal tradition and relegates Jill to a mere mimic of the conventional male hero. As she goes from inept observer in *The Silver Chair* to violent actor in *The Last Battle*, Jill Pole accepts the hawkish, vengeful structure of a world in which, as a female, she will never be good enough.

5.6 Lucy Pevensie

If Aslan is the brains behind Narnia, Lucy, the youngest of the Pevensies, is this magical world’s heart. Characterized by her unshakable faith in the divine and her sweet temperament, Lucy anchors the series, and we see Narnia through her eyes more than through any other’s. Whether or not Lucy was Lewis’ favorite character, as many scholars attest, she is arguably the character Lewis hoped his readers would call *their* favorite. Her sister Susan’s foil, Lucy is the most empowered and autonomous female

protagonist of *The Chronicles*, a character whose spiritual tenacity girls and boys alike are supposed to admire and emulate.

As noted earlier, Lewis considered George MacDonald his “master,” and nowhere in the Narnia books is MacDonald’s influence so apparent as in the character of Lucy, the literary descendant of Princess Irene. Just as Irene’s curiosity overcomes her fear at the beginning of *The Princess and the Goblin*—“She was rather afraid, but her curiosity was stronger than her fear” (11)—so too does Lucy’s; discovering the world inside the wardrobe, “Lucy felt a little frightened, but she felt very inquisitive and excited as well” (113). Both girls are comfortable exploring by themselves, and their curious natures provide the impetus for their stories’ action. Just as Irene is a “real princess” who “cannot tell a lie” and cannot stand to be thought a liar, Lucy is “a very truthful girl,” and when her siblings initially question her tale of Narnia, she feels stricken (like Irene when Curdie does not believe that her great-great-grandmother exists): “For the next few days she was very miserable.... The others who thought she was telling a lie, and a silly lie too, made her very unhappy” (121). Both girls share a steadfast faith in the divine—their most heroic quality, according to MacDonald and Lewis—and though they suffer doubt in the beginning (by nearly convincing themselves that their initial adventures were merely dreams), they overcome their disbelief and embrace their convictions. These convictions empower Irene and Lucy and set them apart from their peers, who face frequent struggles with their faith. In *Goblin*, Irene guides Curdie out of the goblins’ caves by following the queen’s thread, which Curdie cannot see since he does not yet believe; similarly, in *Prince Caspian*, Lucy leads her family through the woods to safety by following Aslan, whom her siblings cannot see as their own faith falters. Both girls are capable leaders among females and males alike. Just as Irene commands Curdie and

her father's guards and servants in *Goblin*, Lucy proves "a good leader" (*Lion* 136) time and again, most notably in *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader* where she is the sole female on a ship of males. When a group of invisible, bewitched islanders—called the Dufflepuds—surround Lucy and her party and demand that she venture into a magician's lair and single-handedly lift their curse, Caspian and the other males protest:

‘In other words,’ said Caspian, ‘you are asking this lady to face some danger which you daren’t ask your own sisters and daughters to face!’...

‘Well, of all the outrageous—’ began Edmund, but Lucy interrupted. (491)

Lucy comfortably cuts Edmund off, asks her own questions, and decides for herself:

‘Would I have to go upstairs at night, or would it do in the daylight?’...

‘All right, then, I’ll do it,’ said Lucy. ‘No,’ she said, turning to the others, ‘don’t try to stop me.’ (491)

She rejects the role of martyr as she informs the entirely male group, “[I]t’s to save my own life as well as yours...I don’t want to be cut to bits with invisible swords any more than anyone else” (491). Lucy’s assertion that she wants to help herself as much as her male peers is a powerful affirmation of selfhood, one of the rare moments in which Lewis expresses such a modern (one might say feminist) view.

Unfortunately, just as MacDonald fails to maintain Irene’s impressive autonomy in the transition from *Goblin* to *The Princess and Curdie*, so too does Lewis fail as he consistently subverts his own characterization of Lucy as an empowered female.²⁶ Lucy is a character of strong will, a trait that typically serves her well, as when she remains steadfast in her insistence that the wardrobe leads to Narnia at the beginning of *Lion*, and again when she volunteers to help the Dufflepuds in *Voyage*. However, in one notable

²⁶ Much in the same way he undermines Polly Plummer in *The Magician’s Nephew*.

scene, Lewis demonstrates how easily Lucy's will can be defeated when confronted with patriarchal expectations.

In *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, Jadis' tyrannical reign has meant years of perpetual, Christmas-less winter for the oppressed citizens of Narnia. But after the Pevensie children enter the magical kingdom, the snow begins to melt, and Father Christmas returns. He comes bearing gifts for all: a "new and better sewing machine" for Mrs. Beaver; a repaired dam for Mr. Beaver; and a glorious sword and shield for Peter. Father Christmas' presents are blatantly gender-specific, and with his gifts to Susan and Lucy, he pronounces his, and Lewis', view of females' proper place. Upon Susan, he bestows a bow and a horn, telling her, "You must use the bow only in great need...for I do not mean you to fight in the battle...And when you put this horn to your lips and blow it, then, wherever you are, I think help of some kind will come to you" (160). In Narnia, if a female must fight, she has no choice but to do so from afar, for the only weapon available to her is the bow and arrow (with the rare exception of a dagger²⁷), signifying and perpetuating the patriarchal belief that females are too weak—whether physically or emotionally—to engage in battle. Susan's horn further establishes the assumption of female inferiority as its sole function is to summon help. To Lucy, Father Christmas gives a bottle of healing potion—representative of the patriarchal belief that females are inherent nurturers—and a small dagger, which comes with a cautionary lecture:

‘And the dagger is to defend yourself at great need. For you also are not to be in the battle.’

²⁷ In *The Silver Chair*, for example, the Marsh-wiggle, Puddlegum, and Scrubb "both had swords...but Jill had to be content with her knife" (584).

‘Why, sir?’ said Lucy. ‘I think—I don’t know—but I think I could be brave enough.’

‘That is not the point,’ he said. ‘But battles are ugly when women fight.’ (160)

Not only does Father Christmas dictate Susan and Lucy’s course of action and prohibit them from making their own choices when he declares, “‘I do not mean you to fight,’” but he summarily rejects Lucy’s expression of will. Though she believes herself capable of fighting and wishes to take part in the battle, Father Christmas dismisses Lucy’s desire, informing her that her gender precludes active involvement, that her femaleness defines her and limits her choices.

This incident in *Lion* is, unfortunately, only one of several examples of Lewis diminishing Lucy’s autonomy and accomplishments by conspicuously deriding her gender. In *The Horse and His Boy*, Shasta’s twin brother Prince Corin, a likable minor character, explains the difference between Susan and Lucy:

‘And where is the Queen Susan?’

‘At Cair Paravel,’ said Corin. ‘She’s not like Lucy, you know, who’s as good as a man, or at any rate as good as a boy. Queen Susan is more like an ordinary grown-up lady. She doesn’t ride to the wars, though she is an excellent archer.’ (290)

No one contradicts or protests Corin’s sexist remarks.²⁸ Similarly, in *Caspian*, the Pevensies and Trumpkin the Dwarf discuss directions as they make plans to reach the prince:

²⁸ Karla Faust Jones defends this passage, arguing that this “reference to an *ordinary* grown-up lady, which at first appears sexist, is perhaps a simple observation of fact. Although women were permitted to fight in battle, it was not common for ordinary (as opposed to noble) women to do so” (16). Jones here treats

‘I suppose your Majesties know the way all right?’ said the Dwarf...

‘I know,’ said Peter. ‘The one that joins the big river at the Fords of Beruna, or Beruna’s Bridge, as the DLF calls it.’...

‘I hope you’re right,’ said Susan. ‘I can’t remember all that at all.’

‘That’s the worst of girls,’ said Edmund to Peter and the Dwarf.

‘They never carry a map in their heads.’

‘That’s because our heads have something inside them,’ said Lucy.

(370)

While Lucy’s retort signals that we should not take Edmund seriously here, only a paragraph later, Lewis reaffirms this sexist generalization as he describes how the males of the group have no trouble navigating the labyrinthine forest: “The boys and the Dwarf, however, were used to the woods and were not taken in for more than a few seconds” (371). In *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*, Lewis compares the youngest Pevensie to the irritating Eustace Scrubb, “a puny little person who couldn’t have stood up even to Lucy” (425), thus contradicting his own characterization of Lucy as courageous and spirited as he uses her to signify weakness and underscore Eustace’s feebleness.

Lastly, while Lucy searches for the spell that will reverse the Dufflepuds’ invisibility, she becomes distracted by a page in the magician’s book: “Then she came to a page which was such a blaze of pictures that one hardly noticed the writing. Hardly—but she *did* notice the first words. They were, *An infallible spell to make beautiful her that uttereth it beyond the lot of mortals.*” As she stares at the book, the pictures transform until she sees herself depicted as a dazzling beauty who, like Helen of Troy,

Narnia like a real world, as if its history is our own; she apparently forgets that Lewis is the sole creator of this *fictional* world and that he alone chose to restrict his female characters’ involvement in battle.

inspires “all the Kings of the world” to fight each other “for her favour” (495). The picture changes again, and Lucy, “still beautiful beyond the lot of mortals, was back in England”:

And Susan (who had always been the beauty of the family) came home from America. The Susan in the picture looked exactly like the real Susan only plainer and with a nasty expression. And Susan was jealous of the dazzling beauty of Lucy, but that didn’t matter a bit because no one cared anything about Susan now.

‘I *will* say the spell,’ said Lucy. ‘I don’t care. I will.’ (496)

Never before have we seen Lucy obsess over beauty or appear jealous of her sister; this scene and her actions conflict with the character Lewis originally created, as he once again sacrificed consistency in order to dramatize what he saw as the dangers of female vanity. In the end, Lucy, the most autonomous of Narnia’s female protagonists, is, sadly, too often defeated by Lewis’ sexist ideology to achieve the empowerment necessary to become a true female hero.

5.7 Conclusion

Though the magic and charm of Narnia continue to enchant children and adults alike, Lewis’ depiction of his five female protagonists—Polly, Aravis, Susan, Jill, and Lucy—grows increasingly problematic as more and more readers recognize and contest the sexist vision at the root of Narnia. While each of Lewis’ five female protagonists participates in heroic acts and certainly thinks heroic thoughts, none of them ever fully realizes her heroic potential. While all five girls possess “vision, daring and power: to charm; move; break with the past; endure hardship and privation; journey into the

unknown; risk death and survive—at least in spirit” (Edwards 6), they are too often “eclipsed, upstaged, in darkness” (Edwards 6) to be female heroes. Lewis’ ideal hero is male; to him, heroism is a gendered and dualistic concept, and in Narnia, maleness will forever dominate.

CHAPTER SIX: PHILIP PULLMAN'S LYRA

6.1 Introduction

Where both George MacDonald and C.S. Lewis fail, Philip Pullman succeeds. His twelve-year-old female protagonist, Lyra Belacqua, is a true hero, a character who defies convention, embraces (and, just as importantly, maintains) her autonomy, revels in self-expression, and betters her world (or in this case, countless worlds). A critique of organized religion (specifically of the Catholic Church) *His Dark Materials* is essentially a fierce polemic against patriarchal structures and tradition. Accordingly, Pullman's child protagonists, Lyra and Will Parry, struggle throughout the series to overthrow their worlds' long-established oppressive regimes, thereby restoring freedom to humankind. While Pullman's depiction of Will deserves a study all its own,²⁹ it is his complex portrayal of Lyra which this chapter examines, specifically her role as trickster, and Pullman's feminist reinterpretation of the biblical fall of Eve.

6.2 Lyra as Trickster

A timeless and ubiquitous figure, the trickster appears in nearly every society's mythology and literature, from the Norse god Loki, to the prominent Native American character Coyote, to children's literature's own Peter Pan. According to Lori Landay, "trickster figures are representations of liminality, duality, subversion, and irony.... [T]hey use impersonation, disguise, theft, and deceit to expose hypocrisy and inequality,

²⁹ Will Parry is no traditional male hero. Although he is the knife-bearer, the weapon-wielder, Will consistently rebels against the patriarchal expectations that would impose the (dualistic) role as conqueror and warrior upon him. In *The Amber Spyglass*, Will speaks with his father (his *patriarch*), insisting that who he is and who he becomes depends on him, not on society's dictates: "You said I was a warrior. You told me that was my nature, and I shouldn't argue with it. Father, you were wrong. I fought because I had to. I can't choose my nature, but I can choose what I do. And I *will* choose, because now I'm free" (418).

to subvert existing social systems, and to widen their sphere of power” (2). Marilyn Jurich recognizes the kinship between “tricks and women,” arguing that “both have been traditionally suspect, regarded with a mixture of suspicion and awe, and both depend on cunning and indirection” (3). She similarly observes that “because women have been disempowered in so many places for so many centuries, they have had to resort to trickery in order to improve their lives or simply in order to survive” (18-19).

Occasionally, Jurich suggests, the female trickster’s

artifices shock us, motivated as they are by malice and self-interest. At other times, her caprices amuse; and we admire her ability to contrive her way out of confining, even life-threatening circumstances, respect her determination to seek social justice for others. (3)

In Philip Pullman’s epic trilogy, female trickery abounds, including the witches’ use of invisibility and Mary Malone’s craftiness, but particularly in the actions of Lyra and her formidable mother Mrs. Coulter. While Mrs. Coulter embodies the egomaniacal trickster motivated “by malice and self-interest,” Lyra represents the female trickster who employs deceit for the purposes of self-preservation and personal autonomy, as well as for the betterment of society. Pullman’s Lyra is that transformational trickster whose cunning and manipulations change the “social and political fabric and release individuals to new-found freedom” (Jurich 3).³⁰

Significantly, we first meet Lyra as she and her daemon Pantalaimon sneak through the halls of their Oxford home, Jordan College, a patriarchal institution that prides itself on its masculine heritage. As they make their way to the exclusively male

³⁰ Toward the end of *The Amber Spyglass*, Lyra literally “releases individuals to new-found freedom” when she and Will lead the dead out of the oppressive and stark underworld.

domain of the Retiring Room, Lyra and Pantalaimon pass by portraits “of former Masters hung high up in the gloom along the walls” (3), paintings that (literally) illustrate the male tradition upon which Oxford is founded. In her study of female tricksters, Jurich notes that, “[t]raditionally, women have not had access to or were denied entrance into spaces that men could easily traverse” (212), and at the beginning of *The Golden Compass*, Lyra “tricks” her way into one of these very spaces: “She had lived most of her life in the College, but had never seen the Retiring Room before: only Scholars and their guests were allowed in here, and never females” (4). After sneaking in and defying the patriarchal sanctity of the room, Lyra looks around, notices the masculine extravagance of the space—“It was a large room, with an oval table of polished rosewood on which stood various decanters and glasses, and a silver smoking stand with a rack of pipes”—and declares, ““They do themselves well, don’t they, Pan?”” Here Pullman suggests and Lyra astutely recognizes the male narcissism that pervades the Retiring Room; Lyra then wonders, ““What d’you think they talk about?”” (4), a simple question that suggests the absurdity of a male-only room: what could these men possibly discuss that would necessitate excluding females? Her epic journey begins with trickery as Lyra and Pantalaimon hide within a wardrobe,³¹ spy on a meeting of male scholars (including her powerful and intimidating father, Lord Asriel), and learn of the existence of Dust, that sublime particle that symbolizes knowledge and human consciousness.

Though Pullman first portrays Lyra employing trickery through spying, we quickly learn that Lyra’s preferred method of deception is lying, a practice at which she proudly excels—“I’m the best liar there ever was” (*The Subtle Knife* 103). Often, Lyra

³¹ While many critics have recognized Pullman’s allusion to Lewis’ famous wardrobe here, no one (to my knowledge) has pointed out the similarity between this group of male scholars and the real-life Oxford organization, The Inklings, to which Lewis belonged. For more, see Frederick and McBride’s *Women Among the Inklings*.

lies to protect herself. After running away from Mrs. Coulter's London flat, she stops to buy food from a street vendor; a strange man approaches and offers to pay:

‘What’s your name?’ said the man.

‘Alice.’

‘That’s a pretty name. Let me put a drop of this into your coffee...warm you up...’ He was unscrewing the top of a silver flask.

Lyra refuses and when the stranger asks why she is alone, she fabricates a story about her father, telling the man, “[My father’s] a murderer. It’s his profession. He’s doing a job tonight. I got his clean clothes in here, ‘cause he’s usually all covered in blood when he’s finished a job” (*Golden Compass* 100). Jurich asserts that female tricksters “frequently betray not the credulous, but the corrupt; the falsifications devised by these women often serve as protective strategies, means of fending off predatory males” (206), and indeed, Lyra habitually deceives when she feels threatened.³² After being kidnapped by the Oblation Board and taken to their base at Bolvangar, Lyra invents an entire persona. Calling herself “Lizzie Brooks,” she cleverly acts “slow and dim-witted and reluctant” (*Golden Compass* 237) in order to trick the adults into believing she is harmless and unobservant when in truth she is ever-alert. She continually adds to Lizzie’s character, at one point using her small stature to her advantage: “Lyra had been told that she was small for her age, whatever that meant. It had never affected her sense of her own importance, but she realized that she could use the fact now to make Lizzie shy and nervous and insignificant, and shrank a little as she went into the room” (238). She even thinks to make Pantalaimon change his own behavior, since “[t]hey were both conscious that he

³²Lyra does occasionally “betray the credulous”—most often fellow children whom she wishes to impress. Her ascent into maturity throughout the series greatly depends on learning when to lie and when to tell the truth.

mustn't be too lively, for the daemons of dull people were dull themselves" (239).³³ Her trickery succeeds, enabling her heroic quest as she eventually frees the captive, severed daemons of the Oblation Board's child victims without arousing suspicion.

Lyra is also exceptionally perceptive about what kind of lie will work best in a given situation. Jurich points out that the female trickster "can be both passive or powerful—as either trait serves *her* need" (230), and indeed, while Lyra manipulates the adults at Bolvangar by acting "slow and stupid" (237), she tricks Iofur Raknison, the false bear king, with flattery and by feigning authority. Captured and held prisoner in Iofur's palace, Lyra finds herself alone with a crazed scholar; feeding the man's ego, Lyra slyly manipulates him into revealing valuable information—"He *was* mad, and no wonder, poor old man; but he might have some scraps of information that Lyra could use"—which she later employs to deceive Iofur:

'I bet you know more about the bears than [Professor Trelawney] does, for a start.'

'Bears,' said the old man, 'ha! I could write a treatise on them! That's why they shut me away, you know.'...

'Yeah,' said Lyra. 'And I bet you'd be a wonderful teacher,' she went on. 'Being as you got so much knowledge and experience.'...

'Because your knowledge ought not to just vanish,' Lyra said encouragingly. 'It ought to be passed on so people remember you.' (329-30)

³³ Earlier, Lyra similarly uses Pantalaimon while trying to learn about Dust and the Oblation Board from the insidious Lord Boreal: "[Lord Boreal] was looking at her narrowly. She gazed back with all the innocence she had...Pantalaimon was cleverly in his most inexpressive shape, a moth, and couldn't betray her feelings; and she was sure she could keep her own face innocent" (94-5).

Having lived with “suspicious and cranky Scholars all her life,” Lyra knows that “bland admiration” will appease the man’s intellectual vanity.³⁴ Soon after, when a guard brings food, Lyra swiftly changes tactics by adopting an air of authority, demanding, ““Take me to Iofur Ragnison. You’ll be in trouble if you don’t. It’s very urgent”” (334). Having finally gained an audience with Iofur, Lyra sees that he is more man than bear, “a subtle politician used to power” (336); she exploits the bear-king’s desperate desire for a daemon, pretending that she is the daemon of Iorek Byrnison, and once again uses flattery to trick: ““I want to help you, that’s why I’ve come. Iorek Byrnison was the first bear to get a daemon, but it should have been you. I would much rather be your daemon than his, that’s why I came”” (338). Her smooth cajoling succeeds, Iorek defeats Iofur in hand-to-hand combat, and Lyra restores balance to the bear kingdom.³⁵

While deceiving Iofur, however, Lyra herself nearly succumbs to the dangerous lure of trickery. Having rendered the bear-king “helpless” with her cajoling, Lyra “found her power over him almost intoxicating, and if Pantalaimon hadn’t nipped her hand sharply to remind her of the danger they were all in, she might have lost all her sense of proportion” (343). Throughout the series, Pullman consistently juxtaposes Lyra’s benevolent trickery with the stratagems of her mother, Mrs. Coulter, the classic *femme fatale* trickster who has long since given in to the seductive, intoxicating power of deceit. Landay observes that traditionally, the “only way for women to survive, given their subordinate position and limited opportunities for exercising overt power, [was] to use

³⁴ With all the arrogant male Scholars in Pullman’s series, it is not difficult to guess the author’s opinion of Britain’s universities, particularly Oxford, where he received his Bachelor of Arts. Indeed, in *The Subtle Knife*, Pullman writes, “Wearily Lyra sighed; she had forgotten how roundabout Scholars could be. It was difficult to tell them the truth when a lie would have been so much easier for them to understand” (85).

³⁵ After the epic fight between the bears, Iorek bestows Lyra with her trickster name, “Lyra Silvertongue,” which she proudly goes by for the rest of the series.

the covert power of female trickery” (12); as Lyra’s father, Lord Asriel, explains, Mrs. Coulter fits this mold exactly:

‘You see, your mother’s always been ambitious for power. At first she tried to get it in the normal way, through marriage, but that didn’t work, as I think you’ve heard. So she had to turn to the Church. Naturally she couldn’t take the route a man could have taken—priesthood and so on—it had to be unorthodox; she had to set up her own order, her own channels of influence, and work through that.’ (374)

While Lyra deals in “good tricks, those that surprise us into worthwhile discoveries, transform us for the better, [and] remove us from danger and oppression,” Mrs. Coulter is a skilled practitioner of the malicious trick “calculated to bring harm or distress, the deceit motivated by cruelty or self-aggrandizement, especially when the victims of these bad tricks are well-intentioned and trusting people” (Jurich 3). What seemingly began as a ploy for personal autonomy, power, and influence, has transformed into a corrupt, depraved obsession as Mrs. Coulter victimizes the most trusting of all people: children.

We first meet Lyra’s mother as she lures unsuspecting children away from their homes with the promise of candy,³⁶ only to lead them to the inhuman experimentation underway at Bolvangar. Mrs. Coulter has a hypnotic effect on the children she kidnaps, for they “had never seen a lady like this; she was so gracious and sweet and kind that they felt they hardly deserved their good luck, and whatever she asked, they’d give it gladly so as to stay in her presence a little longer” (*Golden Compass* 43). With children, Mrs. Coulter uses her femininity and the guise of the magnanimous mother figure to ease their

³⁶ Naomi Wood astutely notes that both Pullman and C.S. Lewis’ series “feature beautiful, deadly women wearing furs who tempt and betray children through sweets” (239). Lewis’ fur-clad villain is, of course, the sorceress Jadis, who famously tempts Edmund Pevensie with Turkish Delight.

fears and entrap them; with men, however, she manipulates with her forceful sexual glamour. Significantly, Jurich maintains that “the tricks of women will be unlike the tricks of men”:

Women’s resources usually depend on their sexuality and their knowledge of sexuality—both men’s and women’s. For the most part, they cannot bargain with either money or position, cannot promise trade or political alliances....Often the woman’s negotiating power must depend on rousing fear or desire in the unwary ‘trader,’ the person to whom she must appeal in order to get freedom of action or be released from confinement. (19)

Before poisoning and killing Lord Boreal, for example, Mrs. Coulter uses her sexuality to soften him into revealing information about the powerful subtle knife:

‘Carlo,’ she whispered, ‘I can please you too, you know. Would you like me to please you even more?’

‘Marisa,’ he murmured, ‘it’s enough of a pleasure to be close to you....’

‘No, it isn’t, Carlo; you know it isn’t. You know I can please you more than this.’ (*Subtle Knife* 310)

Mrs. Coulter even initially bewitches Lyra, whom she takes under her wing and tries to train in the delicate art of manipulation.

Upon meeting Mrs. Coulter at a dinner party hosted by the Master of Jordan College, Lyra is immediately smitten, eagerly confiding in the glamorous woman: “Within five minutes Lyra had told her everything about her half-wild life” (*Golden Compass* 66). Lyra spends “the whole meal talking to Mrs. Coulter” (67), and when she discovers that the woman is not only beautiful and charming but an explorer of the North

as well, “[t]hat was it; nothing and no one else existed now for Lyra. She gazed at Mrs. Coulter with awe, and listened rapt and silent to her tales of igloo building, of seal hunting, of negotiating with the Lapland witches” (68). Lyra believes Mrs. Coulter to be “the most wonderful person” she has ever met, enthusiastically accepting the opportunity to move to the woman’s London home. To Lyra, Mrs. Coulter is a whole new species of female, “almost a new sex altogether, one with dangerous powers and qualities such as elegance, charm, and grace” (81). Accustomed only to domesticated female servants, “gyptian boat mothers” (81), and the rare but painfully dull female Scholars—who have “nothing so exciting to tell” (68)—Lyra sees Mrs. Coulter as representative of an alternative lifestyle, one in which beauty and adventure go hand in hand. Once in London, Mrs. Coulter introduces Lyra to the pleasures of shopping: “Everything on this extraordinary day was a new experience for Lyra, but shopping was the most dizzying. To go into a vast building full of beautiful clothes, where people let you try them on, where you looked at yourself in mirrors...And the clothes were so *pretty*” (77). For Mrs. Coulter, the alluring trickster, clothing herself in beautiful garments is part of the act of disguise and deceit; maintaining a remarkable physical appearance is her primary method of seduction, and by taking Lyra shopping, she hopes to educate the girl in the ways of the *femme fatale*. Indeed, Mrs. Coulter is a most clever mentor:

[T]here were other kinds of lessons so gently and subtly given that they didn’t feel like lessons at all. How to wash one’s own hair; how to judge which colors suited one; how to say no in such a charming way that no offense was given; how to put on lipstick, powder, scent. To be sure, Mrs. Coulter didn’t teach Lyra the latter arts directly, but she knew Lyra was watching when she made herself up, and she took care to let Lyra see

where she kept the cosmetics, and to allow her time on her own to explore and try them out for herself. (83)

Though Lyra is at first “too enchanted to question anything” (78), she soon grows restless, “feeling confined and cramped by this polite life” (85). Her frustration turns to fear, however, when she argues with Mrs. Coulter over Lyra’s favorite shoulder bag, in which she carries her treasured alethiometer:

‘But it won’t be in the way. And it’s the only thing I really like wearing. I think it really suit—’

She didn’t finish the sentence, because Mrs. Coulter’s daemon sprang off the sofa in a blur of golden fur and pinned Pantalaimon to the carpet before he could move...Not angrily, either, but with a cold curious force that was horrifying to see and even worse to feel. (86)

At last, Mrs. Coulter reveals the cruelty beneath the facade, and Lyra wastes no time in escaping. From this point forward, her fear of Mrs. Coulter only intensifies, especially after discovering they are mother and daughter. The next time Lyra sees her mother, she realizes “that all the fear in her nature was drawn to Mrs. Coulter as a compass needle is drawn to the Pole. All the other things she’d seen, and even the hideous cruelty of the intercision, she could cope with...but the thought of that sweet face and gentle voice... was enough to melt her stomach and make her pale and nauseated” (265-6). Lyra abhors Mrs. Coulter’s utter depravity, but perhaps more importantly, she is repelled by her mother’s malevolent use of trickery and how easily she herself was seduced by glamour, eventually wondering “how she had ever, ever, ever found this woman to be so fascinating and clever” (285). For Lyra, Mrs. Coulter comes to symbolize the potential evil of deception as well as the insidious disconnect between appearance and reality.

Throughout the rest of Pullman’s series, Lyra struggles to find the balance between truth and deception. The alethiometer, that unerring conduit of truth, often guides her to be honest—with Mary Malone, for example—and at these times, Lyra must overcome her natural trickster instincts. While she revels in the power lying brings her and holding her audience “under her sway” (*Golden Compass* 57), Lyra must learn when to tell the truth before she can truly become a champion of the oppressed.

In *The Amber Spyglass*, the last book of the series, Lyra, Will, and the diminutive Gallivespians, Tialys and Salmakia, journey into the world of the dead, where Lyra finally learns the vital importance of truth-telling. When Tialys accuses Lyra of being a “thoughtless, irresponsible, and lying child,” insisting that her “whole nature is riddled with dishonesty,” Lyra responds furiously:

Lyra felt a great sob of rage building up in her chest, and stamped her foot, unable to keep still.

‘You *don’t know*,’ she cried, ‘you just don’t know what I got in my head or my heart, do you?... You got no idea what’s in my heart, you proud, selfish creature.’ (265-66)

In light of Lyra’s profound fear of and disgust with Mrs. Coulter, whose whole nature is truly “riddled with dishonesty,” her passionate response to Tialys’ harsh words suggests that she dreads becoming like her mother, that base trickster characterized by “[c]ruelty and coldness” and “[p]ure, poisonous, toxic malice” (*Amber Spyglass* 398). Following her argument with the Gallivespian, Lyra cements her role as hero by recognizing that trickery “does not serve every cause” (Jurich 19). The captive ghosts of the underworld long to hear true tales of the living world above, of the joyous freedom they no longer have: “‘Please!’ they were whispering. ‘You’ve just come from the world! Tell us, tell us!

Tell us about the world!’” (313). Lyra tells the ghosts “about the world she knew” (314), captivating not only them, but the vicious guardians of the underworld, the harpies, as well. When asked why they ceased their incessant, violent shrieking to listen to Lyra, the harpy, No-Name, replies:

‘Because it was true....Because she spoke the truth. Because it was nourishing. Because it was feeding us. Because we couldn’t help it. Because it was true. Because we had no idea that there was anything but wickedness. Because it brought us news of the world and the sun and the wind and the rain. Because it was true.’ (317)

By sharing the true stories of her life, Lyra convinces the harpies to help lead the dead out of the underworld in exchange for more nourishment, more real tales of lives well lived. While deceit and trickery bring Lyra to the world of the dead, truth liberates both her—from the threat of becoming like her mother—and humankind, as she ensures that no man, woman, or child will ever again be held prisoner in that bleak, endless pit.

By turns artful and honest, Lyra is a true trickster hero. Having returned to Oxford at the end of *Spyglass*, Lyra perfectly explains her use of deceit and the essential need for both trickery and truth, insisting to her audience (the Master and Lyra’s new mentor, Dame Hannah; but more importantly, the reader),

‘You have to promise to believe me,’ Lyra said seriously. ‘I know I haven’t always told the truth, and I could only *survive* in some places by telling lies and making up stories. So I know that’s what I’ve been like, and I know you know it, but my true story’s too important for me to tell if you’re only going to believe half of it. So I promise to tell the truth, if you promise to believe it.’ (512-3)

6.3 Lyra as Eve, Eve as Hero

As much as *His Dark Materials* is about the defiance of tyrannical authority, it is also a classic coming-of-age tale. Whereas C.S. Lewis emphasizes the necessity of obedience in the process of maturation, Pullman suggests the opposite, instead celebrating *disobedience* and the many necessary revolutions that arise from the simple, yet brave, act of rebellion. Naomi Wood examines the role of obedience in the two authors' novels:

[Both Lewis and Pullman] pose obedience as a problem for children as each defines, explicitly and implicitly, legitimate authority and morality in his fiction. Each author's narrative choice uses his view of cosmic order to persuade readers that obedience should be understood as central to coming of age. At stake is the proper role of human agency in the world. Who, ultimately, writes the narrative that gives our lives meaning? Can children become narrators of their own lives—or are they fated simply to occupy narratives already written for them? (238)

For centuries, the narrative of the biblical fall, of Eve's disobedience, has defined Christian society, propagating the gender hierarchy and the subjugation of females; as Wood observes, "the orthodox often blamed Eve for the fall and pointed to women's submission as appropriate punishment" (239). In Pullman's series, Lyra is destined to reenact Eve's fall; but instead of portraying Eve as the disgraced mother of sin, Pullman hails her as a liberator and hero, as he and Lyra rewrite an age-old narrative.³⁷

³⁷ Pat Pinsent argues that in his depiction of Lyra as Eve, Pullman resembles the feminist theologians who have long regarded the Fall "not as an evil deed that demands a redemptive act, but rather as an opening up of the human race to knowledge" (203).

In the trilogy, the despotic religious faction, the Magisterium, sees Eve and her expulsion from the Garden of Eden as the root of human suffering, the “cause of all sin” (*Amber Spyglass* 67). When the Magisterium discovers that Lyra is the prophesied reincarnation of Eve, they conclude that “if the child gives in, then Dust and sin will triumph” (68), and desperately conceive multiple plans to destroy her. To the Magisterium, the mysterious particle Dust is the physical manifestation of sin, attracted as it is to people who have grown into and past adolescence, into sexual awareness; Mrs. Coulter tells Lyra, “Dust is something bad, something wrong, something evil and wicked” (*Golden Compass* 282). On the other hand, the rebelling forces, including Lord Asriel, the angels, and the witches, view sin as a patriarchal construct devised by the Church as a tool to control the masses; to them, Dust represents human knowledge and consciousness, and the Magisterium’s feverish mission to eradicate Dust symbolizes the patriarchy’s fear of losing control. The angel, Balthamos, tells Will the story of the Authority:

‘The Authority, God, the Creator, the Lord, Yahweh, El, Adonai, the King, the Father, the Almighty—those were names he gave himself. He was never the true creator. He was an angel like ourselves—the first angel, true, the most powerful, but he was formed of Dust as we are, and Dust is only a name for what happens when matter begins to understand itself. Matter loves matter. It seeks to know more about itself, and Dust is formed. The first angels condensed out of Dust, and the Authority was the first of all. He told those who came after him that he had created them, but it was a lie. One of those who came later was wiser than he was, and she found out the truth, so he banished her. We serve her still.’ (*Amber Spyglass* 31-2)

The angel wiser than the Authority is Eve, and rather than dreading her second coming, the rebellion celebrates her and rallies around Lyra to ensure that she *does* fall. Tortured and interrogated by Mrs. Coulter, the witch Lena Feldt reveals that Lyra will “‘be the mother—she will be life—mother—she will disobey,’” she will be “‘Eve! Mother of all! Eve, again!’” (*Subtle Knife* 314). To Pullman, Eve is the mother of life and freedom, not sin; to him, the Church has twisted her story into a tale of corruption that perpetuates shame and dissatisfaction with life.³⁸

If Lyra is Eve, her male counterpart, Will, is Adam, and the snake is Mary Malone, the Oxford physicist. In *The Subtle Knife*, Mary learns from the angels that she “‘must play the serpent” (250), and in *The Amber Spyglass*, “‘she functions...as sexual educator for Lyra and Will, the only adult who describes to them the world of sense pleasures” (Russell 217). By telling the story of her own sexual awakening, Mary illuminates Lyra and Will’s love for each other. Listening to Mary, Lyra “‘felt something strange happen to her body. She felt as if she had been handed the key to a great house she hadn’t known was there, a house that was somehow inside her, and as she turned the key, she felt other doors opening deep in the darkness, and the lights coming on” (444). When Lyra admits to Will that she loves him, he is similarly transformed: “‘The word *love* set his nerves ablaze. All his body thrilled with it, and he answered her in the same words, kissing her hot face over and over again, drinking in with adoration the scent of her body and her warm, honey-fragrant hair and her sweet, moist mouth” (466). Neither

³⁸ One of Pullman’s critiques of *The Chronicles of Narnia* is that Lewis uses the books to promote a “‘life-hating ideology” (“Dark Side”). In his article, “‘The Republic of Heaven”—also Lyra’s last words of the series—Pullman alludes to the timeless female hero Jane Eyre in illustrating his point: “‘Jane Eyre, as so often, got it right and gave the true republican answer when the pious Mr. Brocklehurst asks what she thinks she must do to avoid going to hell: ‘I must keep in good health, and not die,’ she says. *This* world is where the things are that matter. If the Narnia stories had been composed in that spirit, the children who have passed through all these adventures and presumably learned great truths from them would be free to live and grow up in the world, even at the price of engaging with the lipstick and the nylons, and *use* what they’d learned for the benefit of others” (661).

Lyra nor Will feels shame or guilt at their love (both physical and emotional) for each other because Pullman sees sexuality as an essential part of human life, a gift to be cherished, never feared. In fact, it is their love for each other that attracts Dust to them, and in the end, restores balance to the many worlds; Mary watches Will and Lyra after their revelations:

She nearly put the spyglass to her eye, but held back.... There was no need for the glass; she knew what she would see; they would seem to be made of living gold. They would seem the true image of what human beings always could be, once they came into their inheritance.

The Dust pouring down from the stars had found a living home again, and these children-no-longer-children, saturated with love, were the cause of it all. (470)

As Lyra falls in love, she “falls” as Eve—but in Pullman’s version, the Fall is a glorious moment, a celebration of consciousness and free will. Sadly, Lyra and Will soon learn that they must separate since all the windows connecting the many worlds must be closed for Dust to flourish, and to stay in the other’s world would mean an untimely death for one of them. This is another temptation, for they are allowed to leave one window open: either a window connecting their two worlds or the window that leads the dead out of the underworld. They choose the latter, sacrificing their love for humanity’s sake. In the end, Pullman and his hero Lyra overthrow an oppressive patriarchy, restore freedom to humankind, and begin the process of establishing an egalitarian society—all by rewriting the narrative of Eve.

6.4 Conclusion

As both trickster and the reincarnation of Eve, Lyra “seeks to expose and protest oppression and create social and political justice for both genders” (Jurich 230). While MacDonald and Lewis’ female protagonists are, in the end, mere heroines, Pullman’s Lyra transcends the traditional masculine structure of epic fantasy, and achieves true heroism. One of the most significant differences between the three authors’ series is that in *His Dark Materials*, the female protagonist is the driving force of the story. Lyra is the character who motivates and inspires others; it is for her sake that Will, Lee Scoresby, Iorek Byrnison, Roger, the gyptians, the witches, and even her parents (in the end), brave the wrath of the Authority’s forces; it is Lyra in whom they believe. She is “the reason” Lee Scoresby “set out to help the witches in the first place” (*Subtle Knife* 216), and for her, he proudly gives his life; after single-handedly defeating a small army of the Magisterium’s soldiers, Lee’s daemon comforts him as they die: ““We held ‘em off. We held out. We’re a-helping Lyra”” (*Subtle Knife* 305). The witches “serve Lyra” (*Subtle Knife* 274), Iorek Byrnison respects her above all other humans, and Roger knows she will rescue him from the underworld simply “[b]ecause [she’s] Lyra” (*Amber Spyglass* 78). In the underworld, the Gallivespian, Lady Salmakia, comforts the anxious ghosts by telling them that although “[t]he way is hard...Lyra can find it” (*Amber Spyglass* 357). To Will, Lyra is ““the most important thing”” (*Amber Spyglass* 34) and he loves ““her more than anyone has ever been loved”” (*Amber Spyglass* 509). Even the heartless Mrs. Coulter eventually comes to love and cherish Lyra, sacrificing herself at the end of the series so that Lyra may have ““time to live and grow up”” (*Amber Spyglass* 405). While Irene and all five of Lewis’ female protagonists are often part of the action and important

to the other characters, they are never *vital*. Lyra, on the other hand, is the very heart of Pullman's epic story.

CHAPTER SEVEN: CONCLUSION

Through my analysis of female child protagonists and heroism, I hope I have helped to expose the still problematic transmission of patriarchal ideologies and gender inequality through children's literature, past and present. How, we should ask ourselves, can children's authors revise the male-centered rhetoric of epic fantasy? Simply creating and portraying a female protagonist is not enough. Indeed, as my examination of *The Chronicles of Narnia* reveals, authors can all too easily use female characters as ideological tools to perpetuate sexist discourse. Rather, fantasists, male and female alike, must strive to depict heroic ideals that embrace gender equality, transcend antiquated dualisms, and celebrate and encourage compassion and the pursuit of knowledge as opposed to conquest and the glorification of violence—much as Philip Pullman does in *His Dark Materials*. But what then should we do with those classic works of children's literature that we now consider outdated and potentially harmful to a child's sense of self-worth? As educators, parents, and scholars, we must be wary of the stereotypes and damaging rhetoric (not only concerning gender, but of course race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and class as well) that reside in our beloved classics. And when our children read these stories, we must provide them (to the best of our abilities and understanding) with the context that will enable them to become discerning readers and active participants in the struggle against oppression.

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