

**“THE GODS NEVER MADE ANYONE – MAN OR WOMAN – WITH A
BETTER NATURAL GIFT FOR [FIGHTING]”: ORUAL AND THE CLASSICAL
WARRIOR WOMAN IN C.S. LEWIS’S TILL WE HAVE FACES
“OS DEUSES NUNCA FIZERAM ALGUÉM – HOMEM OU MULHER – COM UM MAIOR
DOM NATURAL [PARA A LUTA]”: ORUAL E A MULHER GUERREIRA CLÁSSICA EM TILL WE
HAVE FACES DE C. S. LEWIS**

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ABSTRACT: One of the most contentious debates in the current scholarship of the works of C.S. Lewis is concerned with his view of gender and sexual politics. While it is generally accepted that he believed in a gender hierarchy in which women were placed in a subordinate position to men, scholars disagree over the extent of this belief. Some scholars, like Adam Barkman, argue that Lewis believed that this hierarchy is a universal truth and should be applied indiscriminately. Other scholars, such as Corbin Scott Carnell and Mary Stewart Van Leeuwen, hypothesize that Lewis changed his view later in life and would support the ideals of feminism while still supporting this hierarchy in some situations. It is within the established framework of this second group that this essay is written. In his creation of the character of Orual, the main character of *Till We Have Faces*, Lewis challenges many of the gender norms of the era in which the novel is set, the Classical Age. Even though it runs counter to most of the extant literature in which mortal female warriors are generally barbaric and ineffective figures, Orual is presented as a great warrior. To support this presentation Lewis links Orual to a number of (positive) warrior goddesses, in addition to the mortal Amazons. In doing so Lewis not only redeems this figure but also aligns himself with the ideals of gender equality as he is celebrating a woman in a position that has been historically unavailable to her.

KEYWORDS: Myth. C. S. Lewis. *Till We Have Faces*. Women warriors.

In his essay “The Meaning of Masculine and Feminine in the Work of C.S. Lewis” Corbin Scott Carnell argues that Lewis calls for the retention of the traditional delineation of jobs based upon gender within the church in his work *God in the Dock*, but “would probably support most of the [] goals of [the woman’s] movement” (158). According to Carnell, Lewis believes that women should stay in the traditional positions that have been allotted to them by Biblical authority within the church, but not necessarily outside of the church. Expressions of this idea can be found when looking at some of his fictional works. While there are many different traditional roles challenged by Lewis in his imaginative works, this essay will focus on one particular role from which women have been

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traditionally banned – that of the warrior. Until the twentieth century women have been banned from being warriors for the most part, and there are still some rules that separate them from the male warriors. To do this exploration the character of Orual from Lewis's novel *Till We Have Faces*, will be the focus. Even though women traditionally have not been allowed to be warriors for the most part, Lewis presents Orual as a warrior queen who successfully governs her country for years. While female warriors have not been the norm, this does not mean that there have not been historical and literary manifestations of this category throughout the Western literary tradition. As the novel is a retelling of the Greco-Roman myth of Eros and Psyche, the presentations of women warriors within these mythologies will be looked at. By alluding to both classical presentations of mortal female warriors – the Amazons – and classical presentations of divine female warriors – Aphrodite, Ishtar, Artemis and Athena – Lewis's presentation of the female warrior Orual can be read as attempting to redeem many aspects of the female warrior, a figure which has traditionally been seen in a negative light.

Before looking at the specifics of Orual's warrior nature it is important to look at the fact that she is ugly and her use of the veil as both of these elements impact her presentation as a warrior. From an early age Orual is aware of the fact that she is not a vision of beauty. In her early life the best markers of this come from the words and actions of her father. The king, Trom, is constantly calling her names like "curd-face" (18) and "goblin daughter" (26). Not only does he call her names but he also makes comments such as "if you with that face can't frighten the men away, it's a wonder" (26), meaning that she will never get a husband. With this Trom indicates that she can never fulfill the proper role of women in the Classical world as "[f]or all women, their main role was as bearers of legitimate children" (King 1623); she can never be a proper woman because she is ugly. With this presumed lack of procreative potential, Orual lacks the power that women are usually afforded in this society – that of carrying on the human race. Because she is ugly, she is (supposedly) powerless.

Due to this supposed ugliness, which Candice Frederick and Sam McBride see as showing that "Lewis appears uncomfortable with the idea of a woman warrior" (151), he forces her to wear a veil on numerous occasion, such as when she is to meet her new stepmother since the king does not "want [his] queen frightened out of her senses" (11).

She continues to don the veil at random times for years until her influence causes Psyche to disobey her husband and Psyche is exiled. She then “determine[s] that [she will] go always veiled” (180), even disobeying her father when he commands her to “[t]ake off that frippery [her veil]” (181). From this point onward she does not remove her veil in the company of others, so that “there were fewer in the city (and none beyond it) who remembered [her] face” (228). The veil becomes her identity and it “in part epitomizes the outward decorum and properness for which she is known as queen” (Schakel 56). Since “all men knew the veiled queen” (278) when she removes it no one knows who she is; “[her] disguise now [is] to go bareface” (278). As Sammons emphasizes, this new disguise “give[s] Orual a strength, mystery, and boldness she never had before” (213). Her veil has hidden elements of her true nature that are then uncovered when the veil is removed. The veil is not the only way that her true identity is hidden, as to some extent the fact that she is ugly makes it so that she is not seen as a female. Orual points out that due to her ugliness “they d[o] not think of [her] as a woman” (228). Since she does not conform to the standards of feminine beauty, Lewis “transforms Orual into a man” (Frederick and McBride 151). This transformation, while it is her own choice, is somewhat forced on Orual as it is the only way that she will be able to be successful within her society since the traditional gender roles of Glome would not allow her to be a ruler as this belongs to the realm of men. Through both nature and dress Orual not only loses part of her femininity, but also takes on traits associated with men to some extent.

Her appearance is not the only way in which she becomes masculine as this is also done through her education in realms that are traditionally believed to be male only – Greek philosophy and military prowess. Although she is granted access to both of these areas she is often reminded that she should not have access to either of them. In preparation for the birth of his son, Orual’s father brings the slave Fox into the household to fill the role of tutor of Greek philosophy for said son. As a test for Fox’s abilities he first has him teach his daughters until his son is born since “if a man can teach a girl, he can teach anything” (7). And since women are not thought to have the same capacity to learn as men do, if Fox is able to teach Orual and her sisters it would show what a good teacher he is. While both of Orual’s sisters, Psyche and Redival, also receive this education, Orual is separated out by their father for special attention. He tells Fox to focus on Orual to “[s]ee if [he] can make

her wise; it's about all she'll ever be good for" (7), which is again a reference to her "ugliness." Since Orual would not be able to find a husband due to her less than beautiful appearance he wants her to have some other training and as a result "Orual [becomes] a scholar, at least by the standards of Glome" (Hannay 3). The fact that Orual is a good student and is able to understand most of what Fox says shows that the view of their father, that women are mentally inferior to men, is false. While Orual's love for, and excelling at, learning challenges the inherent sexism of Trom's, and therefore Glome's, attitude towards female education, this can also be seen as a commentary on the somewhat misogynistic nature of the "almost entirely male-centered education and academic life" (Van Leeuwen 407) that was typical of Lewis's age. Through Orual, Lewis shows that this traditional view is incorrect and that some women are just as capable as men when it comes to learning.

This notion of educational equality can also be seen in relation to Orual's education in military prowess, as she is shown to be an exceptional student in this training as well. As a way to relieve her stress and anger at Psyche's sacrifice to the God of the Grey Mountain, Bardia suggests that Orual learn how to fight since he does not "think there's any other cure" (90) for sorrow than fighting. Bardia is shocked by the skill that Orual possesses with a sword since "none of the recruits would do as well at a first attempt" (65). Not only is Orual good at this skill but she is better than the men, a fact that is mentioned many times throughout the novel. Even though Orual's training as a warrior is originally meant as a way to distract her from Psyche's sacrifice, Bardia continues to train Orual and "[she] ha[s] [a] lesson with [him] every day after that" (92). While Orual does not spend much time discussing this training, whenever she does it is always framed within the masculine world, such as when she is told that she has "a man's reach" (65). While this shows that Orual is allowed entry into the masculine world it also shows that the fact that she is female is not forgotten, especially when she is told that she has to dress like a man because "her dress hampers [her]" (91). While it cannot be denied that she is a good warrior, the people of Glome would still prefer it if she were a man.

While her training to be a warrior would probably not have been seen as negative due to the fact that it is done in private, her warrior nature is eventually thrust into the public eye. When the prince of Phars, Trunia, asks for help from Glome Orual decides that "a champion... [should fight] for Trunia... [in] single combat" (195) to end Phar's civil

war, reminiscent of the one-on-one battles present in many classical epics, and then chooses herself to be the champion. While it is obvious that many people believe that a woman as warrior is a novelty – “a fight of a woman with a man [is]... an oddity” (217) – Orual is allowed to fight in this battle. Even with this perceived disadvantage Orual defeats Argan when she “wheel[s] [her] sword round and cut[s] him deeply in the inner leg where no surgery will stop the bleeding” (219). In doing so she proves Bardia’s profession that she is the best warrior that Glome has and “wins the heart of her people” (Hannay 3). Although this is the only battle that is explained in any detail within the text there is a brief mention of “three wars that [she fights]” (227) and leads Glome into. And even though she claims that “[she] was never such a fool as to think [her]self a great captain” (227) it is due to her exceptional skills at battle that she is allowed to lead the army into battle even though she, as female, is not the typical warrior. As Bardia says “[t]he gods never made anyone – man or woman – with a better natural gift for [fighting]” (197), so it is only logical that she continues to be a warrior.

Due to her status as a warrior Orual is allowed access to the world of men that is traditionally hidden from women, thus furthering the defeminization that Lewis started with her veiling. After defeating Argan, a banquet is held at the palace to celebrate Orual’s victory. At this party she is “the only woman in the whole mob of them” (223). Orual learns many things about men that she never would have been able to if she were thought of as a feminine woman instead of a masculinized woman warrior. As a result of this exposure she becomes somewhat disillusioned in regards to men as she learns “[w]hat vile things men are” (223). Even so she does not try to leave this world, but instead limits her association with it. The reader learns that this is “the last banquet [she] ever s[its] through” (223). Nevertheless this is due to her warrior nature, and in her role as queen, Orual continues to live in the masculine world instead of the traditionally feminine world of the home.

This transference is best seen in the conversation that Orual has with Ansit when she goes to visit her after Bardia’s death. In comparing the role that both she and Orual played in Bardia’s life, Ansit says that due to Orual’s presence in the man’s world, “[Ansit] ha[s] what [Orual] left of [Bardia]” (262). Even though Ansit and Bardia are married Orual gets more time with Bardia, which Ansit believes places Orual in a privileged and special position. Orual has been allowed access to a world that no other woman really knows. She

has been allowed to have a unique relationship with her men, and if Ansit's reaction to it is indicative of that of other women, this relationship is one that provokes jealousy. However, while Orual is allowed into this man's world we cannot forget that the reader is constantly reminded that this warrior is still a woman. Her position as a warrior is tolerated but not completely accepted due to the fact that it runs counter to the traditions of Glome. Even though there is only partial legitimization of Orual's warrior nature within the text, by looking at the classical literary heritage which Lewis draws upon precedence for the female warrior can be found.

One way in which Orual's warrior nature is legitimized is through the association of her character with the goddess Ungit, due to the linking of the goddess to the Greek goddess Aphrodite and her Babylonian counterpart Ishtar. When Ungit is first introduced it is revealed that "she [is] the same whom the Greeks call Aphrodite" (4). Aphrodite is the beautiful goddess of love who "was worshiped above all for presiding over sexuality and reproduction" (Motte 120). This is quickly qualified, however, once Orual reaches the part of her story when Fox arrives and he reveals that "she is undoubtedly Aphrodite, though more like the Babylonian than the Greek" (8). While this goddess is never named outright it is "the Semitic goddess of love Ishtar/Astarte" (Blundell 35), and will be referred to simply as Ishtar. Unlike Aphrodite who did not really care for war, Ishtar, is a "goddess of love and war" (Dalley 323). Orual's linking to this goddess does not come until quite late within the narrative, when she suddenly realizes that "[she is] Ungit" (276). As she believes herself to be Ungit she would therefore take on the characteristics of the goddess. As Ishtar was a warrior, and was accepted by the Babylonian population for the most part, this linking of the two women is a way in which Orual's status as a warrior is granted acceptance. While there is no mention within the text of Ungit being a warrior, her direct association with Ishtar would seem to suggest that this is true.

While the trio of goddesses of Ungit, Aphrodite, and Ishtar are the only goddesses that Orual is aligned with explicitly within the text, they are not the only goddesses to which parallels can be drawn. One such goddess is Artemis, "the goddess of the wilderness, the hunt and wild animals, and fertility" (Leadbetter). One of the most important elements of her nature is the fact that she was a virgin, due to the fact that "at an early age...[she] asked her father... to grant her eternal virginity" (Leadbetter) and this can be found in

Orual as well. Even though she did have suitors who were interested in her, such as Prince Trunia of Phars (212), Orual stays a virgin her entire life (232). According to Martha C. Sammons this is due to the fact that “[s]he thinks that no man loves a woman unless she has a pretty face” (211), which would show that she has internalized her father’s views regarding her ugliness and the sexism that is inherent with the culture of Glome. Another item that could link her to Artemis is the vision that she experiences of seeing the two Psyches in the pool. During her journey through the underworld with Fox, Orual sees “[t]wo Psyches, the one clothed, the other naked... both beautiful... beyond all imagining” (307-308) and is told that “[she] also [is] Psyche” (308). This acquired beauty would parallel the beauty that Artemis was said to possess. In the end, Orual becomes a beautiful virginal warrior like Artemis. While Artemis is most well known for her status as a virginal warrior goddess, she is not the only warrior goddess who is also a virgin within the Greek pantheon of gods.

A third Greek goddess to whom parallels can be drawn is the goddess Athena, who is the goddess that Orual most resembles. While Athena was a warrior goddess, which can be seen by the fact that she “is most frequently represented as an armed warrior” (Blundell 26), this was not her main position within the pantheon of the gods and she had two jobs that define her more than this. The first, and according to Blundell best-known role (26), is as the patron goddess of the city of Athens. It is her other calling, however, that has the most importance when examining her in relation to Orual. This is her position as the goddess of wisdom, which Tuccinardi actually lists before her link to Athens and Blundell relates to her “fondness for schemes and contrivances” (Blundell 27). Like Athena, Orual is shown to be a wise woman throughout the novel. It starts when Fox commences her education. Throughout her time with Fox, Orual is shown to be an intelligent, eager and voracious student.

Her wisdom can also be seen when looking at her actions when she is ruling Glome as its queen. Orual is portrayed as a queen who has the best interests of her subjects in mind and uses her wisdom to ensure that this happens, such as when “[she] set the mines... on a better footing” (231), which Kathryn Lindskoog declares to be “[o]ne of Orual’s major accomplishments as queen of Glome” (120). The exact level of her wisdom during her reign might be called into question by some due to the way that it is presented. While Orual

is shown to be a wise queen, this is done in reference to the father who was monarch before her and “had never... thought of [the mines] save as a punishment” (231); Orual changes them from a form of punishment to an economic benefit. As a result, she is shown to be a better and wiser ruler than her father. It is possible that some could read this as Orual only being wise due to this relational presentation; she is only considered wise because her father is not. This reading is weakened, however, due to the fact that she is shown as wise during her studies before she becomes the queen. Overall, like Athena, Orual is a virgin who is celebrated for both her abilities as a warrior and her wisdom.

One thing that is important to note is at what part of her life this legitimization through association with the goddesses is made, since these associations come late in her life, after she has already been a warrior for a number of years. This is due to the fact that the Lewis frames Orual’s story as a first person narrative. She is telling her story as a case against the gods, hoping to prove that they have treated her poorly. Because of this it must be wondered if these legitimizations are accurate or if she is merely trying to rationalize the life that she has lived? Is it really acceptable that she has been a warrior or is she trying to make the reader, both the real audience and her hoped for audience of Greece, believe that it is all right? Another interesting point about the linking of Orual with these goddesses is that it does not actually happen in reality but within a series of events she calls “dream[s]” (280), “visions” (285), and “seeings” (308), which Corbin Scott Carnell, in his Jungian reading of the novel, believes are present to “facilitate self-understanding” (*Shadow* 115); the dreams are nothing more than an attempt by Orual’s subconscious to create her identity. The fact that these allusions occur within Orual’s mind calls their legitimacy into question.

Because she experiences these events “presumably in a dream” (Schakel 74), there is no proof that they are anything more than figments of her imagination. Are the gods, or the God, really showing that her life as a warrior has been a valid life choice or is it merely her own mind trying to legitimate her life just before it ends? While there is no way to know for sure if these visions are real or merely figments of Orual’s imagination, the text suggests that Lewis intends for his audience to take these visions as being legitimate, as the validity of these dreams is never questioned. Even if these are workings of her imagination, they can still be seen as being true by looking at the writings of George MacDonald, one of the most important influences on Lewis’s work. In his essay “The Imagination: Its Function

and Its Culture,” he states that “[e]verything of man must have been of God first[] and it will help much towards [the] understanding of the imagination and its function in man if [one] first succeed[s] in regarding aright the imagination of God, in which the imagination of man lives and moves and has its being” (3). Since everything comes from God, or in Orual’s case the gods, we may see these links between Orual and the goddesses as being a genuine affirmation of her warrior nature.

These (warrior) goddesses are not the only women warriors from classical mythology to which Orual can be linked as there are elements of her presentation that echo that of what are probably the most famous women warriors of the Western World – the Amazons. The Amazons are a “mythical race of female warriors... [who] live at the edge of the world” (Dowden 69-70) and shun the company of men. Due to the fact that they “took part in activities – hunting, farming and, above all, fighting – which among the Greeks were normally exclusive to males” (Blundell 58), they are seen as being masculine as well as being feminine. They actively pursue a masculine way of life and shun all of the traditional female roles, except to some extent childbirth. In this way they differ from Orual as every year they gather with the men “of the Gargarians... in promiscuous sexual relationships” (Blundell 59) in the hopes of becoming pregnant. This leads to another difference from Orual, as the Amazons keep their society completely female. “If the babies which were born as a result were female, they were kept by the Amazons; if they were male, they were handed over to the Gargarians” (Blundell 59). Unlike Orual who, as a masculine female, is granted access to the masculine world, the Amazons are masculine females who do everything in their power to remove themselves from the masculine world. This ensures that, like Orual, their status as females is never forgotten, even though it is always acknowledged that they are masculine. As Sue Blundell reveals, “[t]hese creatures who were so feminine in their physique were nevertheless masculine in their behaviour” (62). While it is never forgotten that the Amazons are women, it is also not forgotten that they are masculine women.

Another way in which the masculine nature of the Amazons is highlighted is the disfigurement they undergo so that they are able to fight. Traditionally Amazons “‘pinch[] out’ or ‘cauterize[]’ the right breast so as not to impede their javelin-throwing” (Dowden 69); they remove their breast to increase their abilities as warriors. While this act of partial

masculinization would aid in the use of the javelin, the fact that it is the removal of one of the key identifiers of being a woman cannot be ignored. Even though this is only a partial masculinization, this may be read as “a symbolic denial of the characteristic role of women [in the Classical world], motherhood” (Blundell 62). Like Orual, to be a proper warrior the Amazons have to give up part of their femininity.

This removal of the right breast can also be seen as a way in which the Amazons are made ugly. Once this disfigurement has taken place the Amazon would appear to be unnatural and therefore not something that most would consider beautiful. This thought is somewhat dangerous, however, due to the fact that a common treatment for breast cancer today is the removal of the afflicted breast. This calling the Amazons ugly should not be read as having any bearing whatsoever on the cancer patients who undergo this treatment. This is due to the fact that the skills, equipment and techniques have improved significantly since the time of the Amazons so the negative effects that the body is left with, such as scars, has diminished greatly. The reasons behind this act also need to be taken into consideration since the reason the Amazons remove their breasts will in no way save their lives, as is the hoped for result in the modern cancer patient. The Amazons remove their breasts for a trivial reason that is not necessary for their survival; as their reason for doing so is ugly, it makes them ugly. The self-inflicted unnecessary surgery leaves them scarred, ugly and more masculine than they were before the disfigurement. This is a significant difference from the ugliness of Orual. While the Amazons take on this marker of ugliness willingly, Orual’s ugliness is a natural condition; she was born this way. Even so, her less than beautiful appearance forms a more easily recognizable link with the Amazons.

Another easily identifiable way in which the Amazons can be linked to Orual is in the fact that they are all seen as barbaric. One of the commonly held beliefs concerning the Amazons was that they were barbarians, due to the fact that they “lived in an area which... was part of the Persian Empire” (Blundell 61). The Persians were the main enemies of the Greeks during the fifth century, when the majority of the extant literature was written, and were seen as being inferior to the Greeks. This link is best seen in art where “the women warriors are provided with Persian dress and weapons... as an example of the ‘defeated barbarian’ type” (Blundell 62). It is also important to note that the Persians would be the descendents of the Babylonians and therefore the association of Ungit to Ishtar would also

support this link. This hint of barbarism can also be found in Glome being seen as inferior to the Greeks. On numerous occasions Glome is referred to as being barbarous, one such place being when Orual is talking about the library that the Fox is compiling and relates that “[they] built up what was, for a barbarous land, a noble library – eighteen works in all” (232), all of which were Greek. They are barbaric due to their inferior level of thought. Like the Amazons, the residents of Glome are portrayed as being less than the Greeks.

Even though these links to the Amazons present a negative view of the classical woman warrior, they are not enough to overcome the positive associations that Lewis suggests with the allusions to the warrior goddesses. By aligning Orual with these goddesses Lewis redeems the woman warrior. What is interesting about this is that Lewis uses classical sources to redeem this classical figure of barbarism. This adds credibility to his creation, as it is not just Lewis forcing a modern view onto a previous era, but actually a reworking based on an existing model from this earlier era. He is manipulating the literature of the classical era to create a hybrid figure that is more in line with the sensibilities of the modern world. Not only does this present the reader with a critique of the classical vision of the woman warrior, but it also critiques the modern view of women. Since Orual excels in roles that are traditionally viewed as male, those of scholar, ruler, and warrior, Lewis shows that women are just as capable as men. Instead of banning women from roles, they should be allowed to take on any role that they wish, as long as they are skilled enough to do so. Through Orual, Lewis presents a vision of gender equality that some might be surprised to find in his works, due to his views of traditional gender roles and the society in which he grew up. By rewriting this myth, he hopes to rewrite the outdated view of women that his society held. In reality it might even be possible to see this novel as presenting a view of female superiority due to the fact that Orual is portrayed as being a better ruler than her father and a better warrior than most men. Even without this possible hint of female superiority, Lewis presents a positive portrayal of women that helps to eliminate some of the misogyny and misunderstandings of previous generations.

RESUMO: *Um dos mais acalorados debates na pesquisa atual sobre a obra de C. S. Lewis é o que se refere a sua visão de gênero e política sexual. Apesar de geralmente se aceitar que ele acreditava numa hierarquia genérica na qual a mulher estava posicionada como subordinada ao homem, os estudiosos discordam acerca da extensão dessa crença.*

Alguns, como Adam Barkman, defendem que Lewis acreditava que essa hierarquia é uma verdade universal que deveria ser aplicada indiscriminadamente. Outros, como Corbin Scott Carnell e Mary Stewart Van Leeuwen, levantam a hipótese de que Lewis modificou este ponto de vista nos últimos anos de sua vida e apoiaria os ideais do feminismo, apesar de ainda sustentar essa hierarquia em algumas situações. É associado ao segundo grupo de opiniões que este ensaio é escrito. Na sua criação de Orual, a principal personagem de Till We Have Faces, Lewis desafia muitas das normas genéricas da era em que o romance se situa, a época clássica. Apesar de diferir da maioria da literatura na qual mulheres guerreiras mortais são geralmente figuras bárbaras e incompetentes, Orual é apresentada como uma grande guerreira. Para apoiar essa apresentação, Lewis associa a personagem a algumas (positivas) deusas guerreiras e às mortais amazonas. Dessa forma, não apenas redime essa figura, mas também se associa aos ideais de igualdade genérica, uma vez que celebra uma mulher em posição que historicamente tem sido negada a ela.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Mito. C. S. Lewis. Till We Have Faces. Mulheres guerreiras.

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