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Gary L. Tandy

Introduction: Rhetoric and Character

In discussing John Milton's manipulation of the reader in *Paradise Lost*, C. S. Lewis comments generally on the art of rhetoric: "I do not think (and no great civilization has ever thought) that the art of the rhetorician is necessarily vile. It is in itself noble, though of course, like most arts, it can be wickedly used" (53). From comments in his letters and essays, we know that Lewis thought frequently about his own work as a Christian apologist, concerned that he pursue truth in his arguments rather than trying to win an argument at all costs. In fact, he went so far as to say, in a letter to his friend and fellow apologist Dorothy Sayers, that apologetic work is "so dangerous to one's own faith," noting "A doctrine never seems dimmer to me than when I have just successfully defended it" (Letter to Dorothy Sayers, August 2, 1946). Lewis's fears about the misuse of rhetoric extend to others as well. He seems particularly concerned about the tendency of powerful people to use language and rhetoric wickedly, and he portrays some of these as characters

[1]A version of this essay was presented at the 2019 Western Regional Conference of Christianity and Literature at Colorado Christian University.

in his own fiction. Consider, for example, Weston in *Perelandra,* Screwtape in *The Screwtape Letters,* and Shift in *The Last Battle.*

In fact, I would suggest that their use of rhetoric, language, and argument are primary ways Lewis draws, defines, and reveals characters in his fiction. While this technique of characterization is widespread in Lewis's fiction, this essay will analyze only one example: the seventh and last of the Narnian Chronicles, *The Last Battle*. Paul Ford has noted that the novel echoes a major theme of both *Prince Caspian* and *The Magician's Nephew*: the use and misuse of nature and people (232). I will argue that another prominent theme in *The Last Battle* is the use and misuse of language and rhetoric. My plan is to consider the major plot points of the novel, in more or less chronological order while also referring to some of Lewis's comments in his letters and essays about the connection between rhetoric and truth. This approach not only yields insights into Lewis's artistry as a writer of fiction but also into Lewis's views on rhetoric, language, and truth.

Questions of rhetoric and language arise in the opening scene of *The Last Battle* where we meet the ape Shift and the donkey Puzzle at Cauldron Pool beyond Lantern Waste. Shift has spied a partial lion skin in the water and makes an appeal to Puzzle to jump in and retrieve it. Once in possession of the lion skin, Shift plans to have the donkey masquerade as Aslan in order to fool the Narnians and advance the evil plot of the

Calormenes with whom he is in league. Of interest here are the variety of argumentative tactics employed by the ape. When Puzzle suggests that Shift should get it himself since he's the one who wants it, the ape makes an emotional appeal, suggesting tearfully that he will likely die if he goes in the water since apes have such weak chests.

Later, when Puzzle tries to argue that wearing a lion skin would be disrespectful to Aslan, Shift, rather than answering Puzzle's objection directly, attacks Puzzle: "Now don't stand arguing please," said Shift. "What does an ass like you know about things of that sort? You know you're no good at thinking, Puzzle, so why don't you let me do your thinking for you?" (8).

The ensuing dialogue highlights the fact that Puzzle has an ethical compass while Shift does not. When asked to imitate Aslan, Puzzle sensibly wonders what would happen if the real Aslan showed up, and Shift responds: "I expect he'd be very pleased. . . Probably he sent us the lion-skin on purpose, so that we could set things to right. Anyway, he never does turn up, you know. Not nowadays" (13). As Shift utters these words a great thunderclap and a shaking of the earth occurs, which Puzzle takes as a sign that they are considering doing something "dreadfully wicked." But once again, Shift turns the argument on its head, claiming that the natural events mean just the opposite. They are a sign of Aslan's approval of their plan and, after all, "what could a donkey know about signs?" (14). In this opening scene

of the novel, then, Lewis's primary method of characterizing Shift is through his arguments and appeals to Puzzle, arguments that reveal him to be uninterested in truth and willing to say anything to manipulate Puzzle to do his bidding and aid him in his quest for power. As Kath Filmer notes, "The ape also employs the same kind of evil modus operandi as Lewis's other villains: the domination of others" (50). I would add that Shift dominates Puzzle and other characters, not primarily through violence, but through language and rhetoric.

Perhaps Lewis, in creating Shift, had actual leaders in mind. For example, in a 1927 letter to his father, Lewis shared this anecdote:

> I dined the other night at an Italian Professor's, who is a Fellow of Magdalen, and sat next to a Frenchwoman who has met Mussolini.
>
> She says he is a rhetorician, and escapes from questions he doesn't want to answer into a cloud of eloquence. I asked if she thought him a charlatan. She said no: he quite believes all his own gas, like a school boy, and is carried away by it himself. It interested me very much as being true to type—Cicero must have been just that sort of man. She also claimed to have said to him, 'Yes, I have heard all the rhetoric, now I want the real answer,' which I took leave (silently) to disbelieve. (Letter to Albert Lewis, March 30, 1927)

"He's not a tame lion": Discerning Truth in Language

As we return to the events of the novel, the scene shifts to Roonwit, the Centaur, being offered wine by King Tirian; he drinks first to "Aslan and truth," highlighting the importance of truth, the very thing Shift lacks. It is also in this early scene where we see the first mention of the phrase "He is not a tame lion" in reference to Aslan. It is a motif Lewis will use throughout the novel, and the way different characters use and respond to this phrase is an important part of Lewis's technique and theme.

Here the unicorn Jewel uses the phrase as support for the idea that Aslan could come to Narnia even though the stars foretold otherwise (as Roonwit has indicated). This also continues the theme of the proper interpretation of signs begun in the debate between Puzzle and Shift. The second mention comes quickly when the water rat claims Aslan has given orders to have the trees of Lantern Waste felled and sold to the Calormenes (25). The third mention occurs shortly thereafter when Jewel and Tirian have killed two Calormenes who were abusing a Narnian talking horse (31). In this case, Tirian interprets the phrase to mean that the rat and horse were correct when they said the trees were being felled on Aslan's orders. The fourth mention is by Shift when we first see him at the stable. Shift interprets the phrase to mean that in the past Aslan has been far too "soft" on the

Narnians, that times have changed, and that Aslan's going to "lick you into shape this time" (36).

Thus, the varying and conflicting interpretations of the phrase "He's not a tame lion" underscore the importance of rhetoric and language in this tale. With the phrase, Lewis is raising questions about how we discern the truth of language claims, how interpretations and connotations of words can lead to good or bad behaviors, as well as how the meaning of words changes over time. See, for example, *The Screwtape Letters* where Screwtape notes that the negative connotation of words like "Puritanism" are one of the devil's best tools (56).

Shift and the Misuse of Rhetoric

The ape's misuse of rhetoric throughout the novel could serve as excellent examples for a short course on faulty argument and logical fallacy. Here are a few examples:

We see the Ape's rhetoric ignore logic when he uses a series of post hoc fallacies in defense of his claim to be a human, not an ape: "If I look like an Ape, that's because I'm so very old: hundreds and hundreds of years old. And it's because I'm so old that I'm so wise. And it's because I'm so wise that I'm the only one Aslan is ever going to speak to" (37).

At times the Ape adopts the rhetoric of the politician, making promises that the improvements brought about by Aslan's new plan, which includes forced labor, will be to "make Narnia a country worth living in."

"There'll be oranges and bananas pouring in—and roads and big cities and schools and offices and whips and muzzles and saddles and cages and kennels and prisons—Oh, everything" (38). When the Bear objects that the Narnians don't want any of those things; they just want to be free, the Ape responds with his own definition of freedom that echoes Orwell's *1984* (published seven years before *The Last Battle):*

> What do you know about freedom? You think freedom means doing what you like. Well, you're wrong. That isn't true freedom. True freedom means doing what I tell you (39).

It is also interesting that the Ape prefaces his response to the Bear with: "Now don't you start arguing, . . . for it's a thing I won't stand" (39). Perhaps Lewis is implying that not only do evil leaders distort rhetoric for their own ends; they seek to eliminate rhetoric, or argument, altogether. In a totalitarian state, the free exchange and discussion of ideas becomes too dangerous and cannot be allowed.

This talk of political leaders and their misuses of rhetoric recalls another passage from Lewis's letters. In a 1940 letter to his brother, Warnie, Lewis recounts an evening when he and his friend Dr. Havard listened to one of Hitler's speeches. Lewis comments:

> I don't know if I'm weaker than other people: but it is a positive revelation to me how *while the speech lasts* it is impossible not to waver just a little. I should be useless as a schoolmaster or a

> or a policeman. Statements which I know to be untrue all but convince me, at any rate for the moment, if only the man says them unflinchingly. (Letter to Warren Lewis, July 20, 1940)

It is hard to imagine that Lewis did not have Hitler and Mussolini in mind as he created his portraits of Shift and Rishda Tarkan, powerful figures who wield effective rhetoric for evil ends.

Lewis gives another variation of distorted rhetoric when the Ape responds to the lamb's question:

> 'Please,' said the Lamb, 'I can't understand. What have we to do with The Calormenes? We belong to Aslan. They belong to Tash. They have a god called Tash. They say he has four arms and the head of a vulture. They kill men on his altar. I don't believe there's any such person as Tash. But if there was, how could Aslan be friends with him?' (40)

The Ape begins his response with an ad hominem attack, one of his favorite rhetorical techniques: "Baby!" he hissed. "Silly little bleater! Go home to your mother and drink milk. What do you understand of such things?" (40) Having dismissed the questioner, the Ape, who is not only a false rhetorician but a false prophet, uses a different rhetorical tactic for the rest of his audience:

> Tash is only another name for Aslan. All that old idea of us being right and the Calormenes wrong is silly. We know better now. The Calormenes use

> different words but we all mean the same thing-Tash and Aslan are only two different names for you know Who (40).

Here the Ape combines two fallacies that Lewis addressed in his nonfiction. The first is what he called chronological snobbery, which he defined as the tendency to dismiss older thinkers and ideas on the assumption that the latest thinkers and ideas are de facto superior to the old. The second is a fallacy of definition, but here the religious implications are interesting to ponder. We might at first think that Lewis is addressing the question of whether various religions, say Islam and Christianity, are using different language but worshipping the same God. This is certainly possible, and in *Mere Christianity* Lewis notes that while Christians do not need to believe that other religions are totally false, where they contradict each other, Christianity is right and the other religions are wrong (Book II, Chapter 1). Perhaps a better place in *Mere Christianity* to seek a parallel for the Lamb's question and the Ape's response is in Lewis's discussion of dualism where he rejects the idea that good and evil are simply different aspects of the same overarching power (Book II, Chapter 2). Shift is conflating good and evil in his rhetoric here.

Failures of Rhetoric and a Suspicious Audience

Another part of the novel where rhetoric is crucial to the plot is Chapter 7, titled "Mainly About Dwarfs." The action of this chapter comes immediately after Jill

has freed Puzzle from the stable. Tirian and Jewel assume now that they have the false Aslan, the Ape and the Tirsroc's lies will be exposed, so when they come across a group of 30 dwarfs being forced to march to Calormen, they welcome the opportunity to share the good news. The dwarfs, however, turn out to be a skeptical audience, anticipating the rock group The Who by saying, in effect, we've been fooled once but won't be fooled again. When Tirian reveals the false Aslan, one of the dwarfs asks to see the real Aslan and Tirian responds: "Do you think I keep him in my wallet, fools? . . . Who am I that I could make Aslan appear at my bidding! He's not a tame lion" (90). As the narrator comments, Tirian makes a fatal rhetorical error by invoking this phrase. The dwarfs quickly turn the phrase into a jeering chant, noting "That's what the other lot kept telling us" (91). We can contrast this scene with the earlier one at stable hill. In the first, Shift's false rhetoric carries the day. Here, Tirian, who has the truth, fails to convince his audience of that truth because of his ineffective word choice. Shift's rhetoric is effective though the content of his message is false. Throughout the novel, Tirian, who has truth on his side, fails in his attempts to rally the Narnians through speech. He either says the wrong thing, as is the case here, or he is silenced by the opposing forces.

A final rhetorical failure occurs in Chapter 13, titled "How the Dwarfs Refused to be Taken in." While the previous rhetorical events in the novel have focused

on the speaker and the content of the speaker's message, this event focuses almost entirely on the audience. The dwarfs, who earlier in the novel had rejected Tirian's message about Aslan by adopting a skeptical stance and refusing to believe in any reality beyond themselves, now find themselves on the other side of the stable door in Aslan's country. The dwarfs sit in a circle, convinced they are in total darkness, in spite of the fact that the other inhabitants of the stable see blue skies and light. When Lucy attempts to awaken the dwarfs from their blindness by picking some wild violets and putting them near Diggle's nose, the dwarf objects, calling them filthy stable litter. Tirian takes a more forceful approach, grabbing Diggle by the belt and snatching him out of the circle in an attempt to open his eyes to the surrounding beauty, but Diggle complains that Tirian has smashed his nose against a nonexistent wall. Even Aslan is unable to do anything to open the eyes of the dwarfs. When the lion creates a glorious feast and rich red wine for the dwarfs, they eat and drink but believe they are eating hay and raw cabbage and drinking dirty water. Aslan notes, "They have chosen cunning instead of belief. Their prison is only in their own minds, yet they are in that prison; and so afraid of being taken in that they cannot be taken out" (185-86).

Another helpful way to think about the use of rhetoric and language in the novel comes from Colin Manlove's insights into the image patterns and setting. Manlove notes how disguise plays an important role as

does the imagery of clothing, and that, more than any other book in the Chronicles, action takes place at night. Manlove goes on to note that the book is concerned with those who are trying and failing to find out the truth and others who are concealing the truth in order to gain or maintain power (107). If we think of the use of rhetoric and language as clothing meaning, or of the way truth is associated with light and deception with darkness, the novel's tapestry grows even richer.

After reviewing *The Last Battle* through a rhetorical lens, it is not an overstatement to say that every significant plot point in the novel is somehow connected with the use or misuse of rhetoric and language. C. S. Lewis was acutely aware of the power of words and language. Like his fellow Christian, fantasy writer, and friend, J. R. R. Tolkien, Lewis knew the tradition of spells, that words could both curse and bless and that words could be used to speak whole worlds into existence. Yet in *The Last Battle,* Lewis seems keen to show the limitations of words, language, and rhetoric. In this darkest of the Chronicles, he wants to warn his readers that rhetoric without truth is both powerful and dangerous, that sometimes the worst people are the best rhetoricians, and that some audiences are so afraid of being taken in that they cannot be taken out. To paraphrase a Yeats poem, in the last days of Narnia, the best lack the power to persuade, while the worst are full of passionate intensity and convincing rhetoric.

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