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“You Cannot Want Wrong Things Any More, Now That You Have Died”: Problems of Purity, Temptation, and Redemption in *The Chronicles of Narnia*

JILLIAN BOGER

The primary preoccupation of my childhood literary experience was fantasy; not just *Harry Potter*, though it figured largely into what I was reading, as I think it did for most of the other kids I went to school with, but also *The*

Chronicles of Narnia and Arthurian legends, rather in a kind of inherited disposition: my father would read *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* to me and my siblings as a bedtime story when he wasn't making up his own. It makes sense that if what my father was reading was fantasy and science fiction, then what I was reading was also fantasy and science fiction, even if it wasn't always necessarily meant for children. *The Hobbit* itself, for example, is not actually children's literature, but it is often marketed to children, and, likewise, *The Once and Future King*, which is also not necessarily meant for children was still adapted by Disney into their 1963 cartoon, *The Sword in the Stone*. And in stories such as *The Hobbit* and any version of the Grail Cycle, there exists, to use Joseph Campbell's language, a Test which the hero will have to encounter once they have entered the world outside of their hometown—or perhaps the world outside of the familiar domestic space.

It feels reductive to explain the Test that protagonists of the fantasy-adventure genre face as being a kind of temptation—that's a loaded term to use at all, but fits well for what I want to describe—but given that so much of the fantasy genre has its roots in those Grail stories (mystical objects which are meant for the worthy, knights-or-similar agents, the quest itself), they are. It is important to view them through this lens of temptation given the often-religious subtext of early works in the genre.

Given that the characters in *The Hobbit* and Arthurian legends are presumably adults—with the exception, sometimes, of Galahad, who Tennyson's Percivale refers to as the “boy-knight” in the fourteenth stanza of “The Holy Grail”—there is less of an ethical or moral issue in referring to the test as a temptation. When presented with the problem of a temptation, an adult makes the decision as to fall to it or refuse it. As Agamben mentions in *The Adventure*, the adventure or quest itself is “something external—and therefore eccentric and bizarre” (47), and while the occasion of the adventure is “accidental,” the decisions made during it have a profound effect on the characters within the adventure.

What complicates matters is when the characters who are undergoing the adventure are children, which is the case in C.S. Lewis's *The Chronicles of Narnia*. It is an accident that the Pevensies find Narnia—but their experience of it is both internal because of what the series has to say about faith and salvation, and external in the way Agamben describes adventure, as there are different forces outside the children that influence their behavior and what happens to them. When quoting early in *Prince Caspian*, Frank Riga articulates this more clearly by referencing how the children are brought to Narnia the same way, as Lucy puts it, a Jinn is pulled from a lamp: they do not have the choice but to engage in the adventure.

When characters who are growing up face

a temptation, it becomes an issue of a loss of an implied childhood innocence, or the corruption of a child's soul; to put the idea of lost innocence in the context of how Tennyson writes Percivale, for instance, this makes sense. He is uncorrupted even as an adult knight—called “The Pure” by Arthur and the other knights (line 3)—and this can be read as an argument for his “innocence,” which I will define according to its connotation in the poems as meaning naivety and lack of corruption, and which also becomes lost along the way of the Grail quest. The context of Percival's implied innocence has to do with where he comes from; his father was a king, which allows a natural access to divinity via the Great Chain of Being that his fellow knights may not have, and he comes to Camelot unspoiled, having been raised by his mother in the woods, away from the rest of man. He falls in love and abandons knighthood until Galahad comes to retrieve him, but by that point, Percivale is aware that the Quest is not his anymore. His purity has been compromised, and he, along with the older knights who witness the Grail in some form but are unable to obtain it, have a fractured experience of this religious object. Galahad, who is able to fulfil the needs of the Grail quest because his narratives (which come later in the Grail cycle) don't have a history of romantic pursuits attached (Weston, 309), is the only one in Tennyson who wins the Grail. This take on the character of Percival/Perceval/Parzival

is different from earlier takes in which he—and not Galahad, as Galahad hadn't been introduced to the canon yet—is not only the one who obtains the Grail, but is also able to maintain a romantic relationship while still having a “pure” heart; however, it is echoed in the versions of the Grail Cycle following Tennyson's *Idylls of the King* that are produced as children's literature, such as Howard Pyle's *The Story of King Arthur and His Knights* in 1903, and in the language used by some of the early fantasy genre-fiction, including *The Chronicles of Narnia*. That said, to use Vallone's resistance model of the differentiated child, or child-as-other, it is impossible for children to have the same response to a temptation as an adult, and so placing the child—or even a child character, as in the case of the Pevensie children—in a position of “temptation” is to rely on an adventure model that is incompatible with childhood; Edmund Pevensie is unable to make the same kind of choices as Percivale and Galahad because he does not have the same rational faculties that those adult characters do.

While the Pevensies of Narnia have a large degree of agency within their ability to operate within Narnia (and even the Professor's home, despite being sent away from their own home in the city for their safety during the Blitz), a problem presents itself because of the way Lucy describes not having a choice but to go to Narnia at all—the problem

being that without the option to make the choice, any test they face says more about the children's situation than it does about their morality. They are not the ones making the decision to go, and while it turns out fine in the end, it bears to keep in mind that they're still children when they're made sovereigns of Narnia. They're put in danger because they're the chosen ones to do so, and even if they had the opportunity to, again referring to Campbell, refuse the call the first time (which they don't have the opportunity to), the quest is still destined for them. While the designation of the Pevensies as the Kings and Queens of Narnia is a subversion of the lack of political agency that children have in particular with regards to creating policy which can protect them (Kallio), the matter still remains that they didn't ask to be brought to Narnia in the first place. And, unlike Percival or Galahad, they don't come to Narnia pre-equipped to fight a war, which is exactly what they have to do upon arrival.

The Chronicles of Narnia are, at their core, about redemption. Aslan still sacrifices himself in exchange for Edmund's life, and the True Narnia that appears at the end of the series, after Peter and Lucy and their parents have literally died in a train accident, is a promise of heaven and eternal salvation. Susan is conspicuously absent, which indicates that she is not yet ready to be received into Narnia/Heaven—Susan, who has started wearing makeup and entered the world of adult womanhood

in a way that is being criticized by the morals of the narrative by her exclusion, and which has been addressed in a short prose work by Neil Gaiman. With the exception of Susan—who was even present at Aslan’s death—there is the possibility of redemption.

But while there’s the obvious feminist issue of what to do with Susan, there’s also the problem of Edmund, and the problem of framing tests that heroes must face as they enter into the magical world as a temptation. In the case of child characters, there’s an issue with identifying what counts as a temptation for children, and what is beyond the scope of temptation for them—what would be a temptation for an adult character such as Percival would not necessarily be a temptation for a child character such as Edmund.

Edmund’s trials in *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* are manifested through the White Witch; she is the one who “tempts” him into leaving his family, and she is the one who must be stopped by the end of the story in order for the heroes to win. The implication is that Edmund had a choice in the actions presented to him as he went to Narnia, and in some ways, I agree with that: Edmund did not have to follow Lucy into the wardrobe, which he did with the intent of bullying her. It becomes much more complicated after he’s in Narnia, though, and it can’t be dismissed as him consistently choosing evil - represented by the White Witch - over his

family, because I would argue that Edmund, after that initial meeting with the White Witch, doesn’t have a lot of control over what he’s doing in the same way any child who has been coaxed by an adult into action (whether appropriate or inappropriate behavior) doesn’t have as much agency over whether or not they act.

During Edmund’s first encounter with the White Witch, his discomfort is immediately noted: “He did not like the way she looked at him.” A Christian reading of this might suggest that of course Edmund doesn’t feel comfortable with her; she’s evil, and representative of Lilith (*The Magician’s Nephew*). However, there’s also the very commonplace and not magical fact that the White Witch is a stranger to Edmund and doing the equivalent of a person leaning out of their car to yell at a child on the sidewalk. This unsettledness with the Witch continues when she invites him into her sleigh:

“My poor child,” she said in quite a different voice, “how cold you look! Come and sit with me here on the sledge and I will put my mantle around you and we will talk.”

Edmund did not like this arrangement at all but he dared not disobey; he stepped on to the sledge and sat at her feet, and she put a fold of her fur mantle around him and tucked it well in.

“Perhaps something hot to drink?” said the Queen. “Should you like that?”

“Yes please, your Majesty,” said Edmund, whose teeth were chattering.

This initial interaction tells us two things: that Edmund is aware of the power imbalance between him and the White Witch, even if he doesn't know that she's a witch yet, but thinks her a queen, and that he is not so much being tempted into the sledge but is in a position where it would be (as far as he knows) more dangerous not to do what she says to. Comparatively, a character like Percivale in “The Holy Grail” is “disarmed / By maidens each as fair as any flower” and led away from the test while the princess of the castle he goes to “set[s] / a banquet richer than the day before / By me; for all her longing and her will / Was toward me as of old” (stanza 47) while Galahad, who does succeed in his quest, says “So keep I fair thro' faith and prayer / A virgin heart in work and will” (“Sir Galahad,” stanza 2). The issue of retaining purity it would appear then is a rejection of the desires of the body, at least in the fantasy tradition which *The Chronicles of Narnia* are working within.

The Turkish Delights seem to be the actual cinching point of Edmund's “temptation” by the Witch into wickedness—for one thing, they're the chapter title, and for another, as Susan Honeyman argues in “Gingerbread Wishes and Candy(land) Dreams: The Lure of Food in Cautionary Tales of Consumption,” the greed that drives children is hunger, or gluttony. Hansel and Gretel are main

examples in Honeyman's argument, and they are punished not only for wasting food, but for not knowing how to fend off their hunger. And while Agamben brings up the point that as in the case of Parzival/Percivale, a significant number of adventure stories draw a “connection between amorous experience and adventure” (52), that's not an adventure experience that can readily be provided to child characters because of the fact that they're children, and clearly not developmentally ready for the same kind of sexual-romantic experience any of Arthur's knights would be. Interesting too, is the fact that Galahad's lack of romantic partnerships is actually presented as a dehumanizing element to him in *The Once and Future King*, which is more contemporary to Narnia than Tennyson's poems: while Tennyson allows it to be the source of his strength, White does, too, but at the cost of something necessarily human. That all considered, the food then is a parallel to the bodily temptations faced by these older characters, and if Edmund (or Hansel and Gretel, or any other child characters tempted by sweets in a time of famine) were like his adult peers, he would have had a more developed ability to resist its draw—which, as a child, he does not.

Yet I still have problems with the argument that the narrative of *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* is presenting about Edmund. The language that the White Witch uses with Edmund is

language that child predators sometimes use with their victims: she tells him, “And, by the way... you needn’t tell them about me. It would be fun to keep it a secret between us two, wouldn’t it?” (36). During the time he spends eating the Turkish Delights, Edmund tells the Witch about his siblings, about their entire lives, and she has earned his trust. Of course, Edmund is being used; the Witch knows that he and his siblings will defeat her and take their place as rulers of Narnia. Edmund, however, knows nothing about what a threat he could pose to her. For all of his brattiness, he’s still a child.

When Edmund leaves his family and joins the Witch, he learns quickly that she had tricked him and he becomes a prisoner. The suggested take away, given that Aslan must offer himself in exchange for Edmund’s life, is that Edmund had done this to himself—that this was his punishment, and that, for betraying his family to go to the Witch (with hopes of becoming a prince, or even king of Narnia), he in some way was deserving of the abuse which she deals him. When the temptation is given into in these quest stories, there is a consequence for the action; Percivale at the start of “The Holy Grail” is found after the action of the poem and relates it shortly before his death, after months of prayer and fasting—though Galahad retrieved him (and someone else must always save the sinner, even in much later works like *Star Wars*, in which Luke Skywalker saves his father), he still

dies. Edmund, too, is supposed to die, but doesn’t. This speaks to the book’s message of redemption and of the Christian allegory throughout in which Aslan is Christ (Bell), and in its own way offers a message of hope that the sinner may be redeemed.

The problem of posing it this way, however, is that the interactions between Edmund and the White Witch can be read as child abuse, as grooming specifically. What the White Witch does in targeting Edmund is consistent with what Daniel Pollack and Andrea MacIver identify as key elements in (particularly sexual) grooming. They list the following elements: “targeting the victim; securing access to and isolating the victim; gaining the victim’s trust; and controlling and concealing the relationship” (161). Further, all of the White Witch’s actions serve the same purposes which Pollack and MacIver describe grooming to function in service of “manipulate the child into becoming a co-operating participant” and “reduce the likelihood of the child being believed if they do disclose” (162). Edmund is the unhappiest among his family members to be sent to the Professor’s house; he thinks Susan is acting too much like their mother (2), is young enough to still get bad-tempered when he’s tired but pretending not to be, is old enough to be impatient when Lucy is afraid of an owl (3), and is positioned very early on to be predisposed to melancholy and frustration at his situation in a way that his siblings simply are not (4). Being forced into the country is

an especially unpleasant experience for Edmund, and while the 2005 live-action adaptation does a much stronger job at contextualizing why Edmund is so miserable, part of it is also the requirement the story has for someone who would commit a betrayal in the first place. However, Edmund is also in a position where he's especially vulnerable; Susan and Peter, as the oldest, take on those surrogate-parent-sibling roles, while Lucy is allowed, in some sense, to be free. And while there are so many clichés about middle child syndrome, I personally find myself empathizing with Edmund because what else can you do? The morality of *The Chronicles of Narnia* encourages the judgment passed on him and then gives him the title of Edmund the Just, which emphasizes the role that judgment and justice have played in his character arc. It doesn't sit well with our current understanding of child victimization; Onora O'Neill says it best in an article about children's rights when plainly putting it that "Children easily become victims" (445). Reading *Narnia* today becomes informed by repeated knowledge of how abuse functions: both Onora and Donna Gill, in an article on identifying child abuse, point out the ways in which abusers justify their actions against those they abuse and the difficulties which arise in identifying that abuse. Onora in particular notes that problems arise in children's ability to speak for themselves, while Gill discusses the shared responsibility of all adults who take

care of children to prevent child abuse. Edmund is far from home and encountering an adult who calls herself a queen. If he is tempted at all (and it is difficult to use that word, while the narrative finds it fitting, it does not seem appropriate to describe what is actually happening), it's because he is in a position where he has to trust adults to do what is best for him. He had to trust the adults who sent him away from home in the first place, who led him to the Professor's home instead, and he has to rely on the adults at the Professor's home to protect him from danger. Because the human adults in *Narnia* are often absent, the protection of the children falls to animals (who rely on the children to save them) and the children themselves.

I think it important, too, to consider a dichotomy Lewis's narrative presents between Lucy's experience entering Narnia and Edmund's. Lucy is not presented as having been necessarily tempted, though I think that she lucks out. She meets Mr. Tumnus, a faun, who is described as more traditionally devilish than the depiction of the White Witch:

From the waist upwards he was like a man, but his legs were shaped like a goat's (the hair on them was glossy black) and instead of feet he had goat's hoofs. He also had a tail, but Lucy did not notice this at first because it was neatly caught up over the arm that held the umbrella... He had a red woolen muffler round his neck and

his skin was rather reddish too. He had a strange, but pleasant little face with a short ported beard and curly hair, and out of the hair there stuck two horns, one on each side of his forehead. (8)

There's also the mythology surrounding fauns, and their association with satyrs and inherent lasciviousness, and the threat that they could pose to a girl isn't lost on me as an adult reader. And Tumnus too entices Lucy with food—"toast—and sardines—and cake" (11) to encourage her to come to his home for tea. He does so with the intention of giving her up to the White Witch, though she's able to make him change his mind by reminding him that he doesn't need to, and that she forgives him and that he doesn't have to do it again (16-17). This speaks to an implied inherent goodness in little girls that little boys lack, and a gendering of the ability to remain uncorrupted that is seen earlier when Tennyson's Galahad refers to himself as a "maiden knight" (stanza 6); an attitude that Lucy is capable of forgiveness in a way that Edmund is not, and that she (despite being the youngest) is able of showing the kind of truthfulness and forgiveness in her treatment of sinners that makes her Aslan's favorite (and, given that the book is dedicated to a real Lucy, Lewis's favorite, too). Edmund should be able to provide the same ability to subvert danger that his younger sister does, but can't—and yet this is troubling, as the narrative is unconvincing in the argument that Lucy would have somehow been

better prepared for dealing with the White Witch than Edmund.

That Edmund is positioned then as having been tempted, and having sinned, is problematic because of what it implies about victims in general, particularly children who are reading the book. This is not to say that we always internalize everything we read as children (or as adults, for that matter), but literature does help contextualize the world and reading is one way that children are encouraged to learn how to operate within the world around them. If we want to claim that reading fiction, as Sarah Kaplan does in a 2016 article for *The Washington Post*, makes us better people, then we are admitting that some part of the reading experience does change us (the adventure of reading, then, is as much an external act as one that becomes internalized, to return to that image). And the message that gets presented in a text like *The Chronicles of Narnia* is that, even though you can be forgiven for your sins, the position of being abused possibly codes you yourself as a sinner.

When Caspian X dies, in *The Silver Chair*, he tells Aslan that he has always wanted a glimpse of their world, meaning the world in which the Pevensies and Jill Pole and Eustace Scrubb exist first, and then asks, "Is that wrong?" (214). Aslan replies, "You cannot want wrong things any more, now that you have died, my son." Caspian is then allowed five minutes in the other world, after

having been restored to a youthful self and is allowed to run around with Jill and Eustace and Aslan in order to protect his friends from bullies.

At this point in the series, Edmund is no longer in play, and will not be until he, too, dies, in *The Last Battle* but the question brings up the issue of wanting, and what is a right want versus what is categorized as a “wrong” want. Companionship, it seems, when it is not sought in the appropriate places, between both Percivale and Edmund’s situation (despite being drastically different) causes suffering; and the Edmund who appears at the start of *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* strikes me as a significantly lonely child. If we are going to continue to see the instance of Edmund’s test as a temptation—and in this case, then, an unfair and inappropriate one—then the context of it places it within the desire of the body. The food and drink the Witch offer him—in the same way the fairy tales which both Tolkien and Lewis would have read allow food to function (Berman)—are a trap, conjured by her, and, like fairy food, put Edmund into a position where he is more vulnerable to the magic creature which has provided it. The food is what gives him permission to trust the Witch in the first place and then what binds him to her when he goes and begs for more Turkish Delights. Of course, when Caspian is dead, he cannot want wrong things—the body is not there to betray him. Edmund would not want Turkish Delights in

heaven; the sweets are associated with temptation of the flesh.

In thinking about the way morals and morality come into play in *The Chronicles of Narnia*, I find myself at Marilyn Edelstein’s “Ethics and Contemporary American Literature; Revisiting the Controversy over John Gardner’s *On Moral Fiction*.” Edelstein does find Gardner’s argument that art (and literature in particular) needs to come with a moral argument is in some ways compelling even today, and it’s especially nascent with regards to thinking about children’s literature (particularly, as *The Chronicles of Narnia* is, religious children’s literature) and what its purpose is. The main issue that Edelstein approaches with regard to Gardner’s work is that he went after so many of his contemporaries (which is what she also states didn’t help its popularity)—but what we should keep in mind is his “concern with ethics” as being something still necessary, and Edelstein does ground the assumption that literature should be moral with historical contexts in which that was an argument for literature in the first place.

Edmund becomes instrumental in defeating the White Witch after all, because, as Peter mentions, “when he reached her he had the sense to bring his sword smashing down on her wand instead of trying to go for her directly and simply getting made a statue himself for his pains” (176). In whichever way the text is read, if Edmund has

been tempted or has been abused (or both), this is a kind of agency that he has in defeating not only the thing that tempted him, but the thing that he saw hurt others, and which placed him as a child in a position of fear and anxiety. Edmund sees the animals become statues after joining the Witch and, at one point, begs her not to do it. There's still a major problem here, too—that the Pevensies, who have been brought to the country side specifically for their safety from the London Blitz, are now in a position where they have to confront the violence of war in a very personal way, but it's mitigated by the fact that they do choose to fight. They could leave Narnia through the wardrobe at any time, as Lucy does at the beginning, but they're provided the agency to fight in a way that they cannot confront the actual horrors that lay in the world outside of Narnia. There's a moral justification for fighting—that there are just and unjust wars, such as that against the Witch—and therefore an occasion where violence is welcome.

At the same time that I can acknowledge the need for children to be given tools to confront real world horrors within imaginary ones—such as the Pevensies fighting for Narnia in a way that they cannot fight for Britain—I also end *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* thinking about the child reader of the book. It's fine to take a look at the book and what it does from an adult perspective, but when I was reading the books as a child myself,

I missed the correlation between Aslan as Jesus and I was young enough not to yet have been taught about the way children in London were made to leave their homes as refugees to the country side. It is impossible to access what I thought of Edmund, even though now I find myself frustrated by the assumption that he would know—or that he would think—to reject the offers the White Witch gives him. I think about the relative powerlessness of childhood, and while Narnia does offer power to its child characters by making them kings and queens, they begin in that position where they are unable to control where it is they're being sent for their own safety, they're unable to control the fact that their home is being bombed, and they're unable to control whether or not they can have the treats that we take for granted in times of peace which become scarce or entirely absent during war. When you're powerless, I think it is probably a natural inclination to want power, and I don't think it necessarily fair of a narrative to punish children for wanting control when they don't know, like Edmund doesn't, that they're the rulers of the land they wander into.

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