

## C.S. Lewis and Shakespeare: A Romance Made in the Heavens

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By comparison to *The Chronicles of Narnia* (1950–56) and his well-known non-fiction, C.S. Lewis's science fiction sits oddly in its relative obscurity. This neglect can be attributed to the reputation his sf has gained as 'theological science fiction' (Honda 1997: 39) and the suspicion that the lack of hard science content betrays a thinly disguised moral didacticism. Yet, as Lewis himself remarked to Arthur Greeves in 1916, 'in proper romance the meaning is carefully hidden' (Lewis 2000a: 216). Consequently, without denying their Christian content, this article seeks to reassess the first two volumes of Lewis's *Cosmic Trilogy*, *Out of the Silent Planet* (1938) and, to a lesser extent, *Perelandra* (1943), in terms of their relationship to early modern romance, especially to William Shakespeare's *The Tempest* (1611).

Lewis wrote his sf in response to such writers as David Lindsay, Jules Verne and H.G. Wells, as well as from a deep interest in 'the idea of other planets', such that he could describe his writing of 'planetary romances' as 'not so much the gratification of that fierce curiosity as its exorcism': of the erotic and other unsavoury elements Lewis found in the sf he had previously devoured (Lewis 2012: 38–9). In 1956, writing to I.O. Evans, he commented that he had grown 'sick of modern science-fiction':

Before leaving home I saw the film of *The Forbidden Planet*, a post-civilisation version of the *Tempest* with a Robot for Caliban, a bitch for Miranda, and all sympathy for Alonso against Prospero. The contrast between the magnificent technical power and the deplorable level of ethics and imagination in the story was what struck me most. (Lewis 2004: 783).

While we may rightly criticize the terms in which Lewis makes his critique, what is equally important is that Lewis not only perceives the Shakespearean origins of the story (something that Alan Brien had done in his 1956 *Evening Standard* review of the film), he also contrasts the loss of romantic values with the 'magnificent' but showy spectacle of 'technical power'. In *Perelandra* (1943), Lewis had already equated scientific technique with an imperialistic ambition that he found within 'works of "scientification", in little Interplanetary Societies and Rocketry Clubs, and between the covers of monstrous magazines, ignored or mocked by the intellectuals, but ready, if ever the power is put into its hands, to open a new chapter of misery for the universe' (Lewis 1989b: 216). By contrast, Lewis's own sf encourages his readers to marvel at the wonders of space travel via his application of a romantic ethos that he felt had been

rendered instrumental within the secular and technocratic visions of pulp sf.

By bridging sf with romance, Lewis shares a position similar to that of Kathryn Hume. In associating sf 'with the quest romance', Hume adopts a monomythic approach to sf narrative, arguing that the genre typically features an 'initial equilibrium'; a 'call to adventure' for the hero; entry 'into a special world'; conflict 'with various adversaries and problems'; and finally, a return 'to the normal world, more mature and more firmly integrated into his or her society' (Hume 2004: 488). Although Hume notes exceptions to this rule, she also points out similar exceptions within medieval quest romance so that, as she suggests, they 'have clear structural affinities' (488). She cites, however, Lewis's dismissal of space opera in his talk, 'On Science Fiction' (1955), only to emphasize that in his own sf Lewis fails to include the 'differences proffered by science': the religious beliefs he shares with Edmund Spenser keep 'him from getting beyond the medieval and Renaissance quest romance' (498). For Hume, despite the similarities between sf and romance, the emphasis upon intellect rather than soul results in a radical decentring of the concerns that preoccupied earlier romance narratives. Lewis, therefore, offers a very different conception of sf from the one popularized within the US pulps – but it is one that can be understood better through how he uses the inspiration of Renaissance writers such as Shakespeare.

### **Lewis's Shakespeare**

Several critics have indicated the intertextual relations to the work of Shakespeare and Spenser in Lewis's sf. For example, Sanford Schwartz writes of *That Hideous Strength* (1945):

Given the network of allusions that has been gathering force over the last few chapters, the finale is steeped in romance tradition, recalling [...] the various kin and lovers of Spenserian and Shakespearean romance who have been separated by malevolence, chance, or their own folly. (Schwartz 2009: 137)

Such responses have, however, tended to underestimate the importance of Shakespeare for the *Cosmic Trilogy* as a whole. In *Out of the Silent Planet* for example, as Elwin Ransom looks at Earth through a Martian telescope, he pictures Shakespeare amidst a series of other global landmarks: 'it was Earth he was seeing [...] It was all there in that little disc – London, Athens, Jerusalem, Shakespeare' (Lewis 1989a: 85). Not only is Shakespeare the only human figure in this list, by bracketing the classical and Judeo-Christian cultures of Athens and Jerusalem with London, Shakespeare also signifies the importance for Ransom of British imperial culture. This attitude is dramatized in *Perelandra*

when Ransom likens the political ambition and ‘theatricality’ of the Green Lady to ‘Lady Macbeth’ (Lewis 1989b: 263). For Ransom, Shakespeare is not only a standard-bearer of Terran culture, his plays also offer a means by which to anthropomorphize the actions of the aliens he encounters. Almost like a colonial missionary, he attempts to use Shakespeare’s characters as a moral allegory to instruct the Green Lady in right and wrong:

He tried to tell her that he’d seen this kind of ‘unselfishness’ in action: to tell her of women making themselves sick with hunger rather than begin the meal before the man of the house returned, though they knew perfectly well that there was nothing that he disliked more [...] of Agrippina and Lady Macbeth. (263)

Ransom’s failure, however, to dissuade the Green Lady from her actions points to the limits of both his comprehension and Shakespeare’s iconic status. For the inhabitants of Malacandra (Mars) and Perelandra (Venus), Shakespeare means little or nothing at all. Consequently, whilst in one sense Lewis shares with Ransom a veneration for Shakespeare and the Elizabethan culture that his work embodies, in another sense, Lewis is only too aware of the alienness of the cultures that Ransom encounters, for whom Shakespeare signifies nothing. Although Ransom’s solitary life as an academic, and his increasingly prophetic status, contrast with the vulgar materialism of the antagonists, the astrophysicist Weston and the businessman Devine, Lewis nevertheless satirizes through him the extent to which British colonialism has idealized Shakespeare as a universal symbol of culture. Instead, to understand Lewis’s Shakespeare (and, thereby, the philosophy that lies behind the *Cosmic Trilogy*), we need to dig deeper than mere allusion to Shakespeare’s work in Lewis’s sf.

### **Romancing the Heavens**

In ‘On Science Fiction’, Lewis proposes that the ‘subspecies’ his sf belongs to is driven by ‘an imaginative impulse as old as the human race working under the special conditions of our time’ (Lewis 1982: 63). In his earlier essay, ‘Dogma and the Universe’ (1943), Lewis elaborates that this ‘impulse’ is one of myth, and that it is myth which enthuses science, moving it from the theoretical to the world of imagined reality: ‘light years and billions of centuries are mere arithmetic until the shadow of man, the poet, the maker of myth, falls on them’ (Lewis 2000b: 121). We see this vividly enacted in the gradual scepticism Ransom shows towards the term ‘space’ as he casts his shadow further into the cosmos on the journey to Malacandra:

He had read of ‘Space’: at the back of his thinking for years had lurked

the dismal fancy of the black, cold vacuity, the utter deadness, which was supposed to separate the worlds. He had not known how much it affected him till now – now that the very name ‘Space’ seemed a blasphemous libel [...] No: Space was the wrong name. Older thinkers had been wiser when they named it simply the heavens. (Lewis 1989a: 26)

Space, stripped of its imaginative potential for romance, is what Lewis takes particular issue with here. Lewis was less concerned with scientific accuracy than he was with his contemporaries’ preoccupation with discovering, defining and even conquering space. This is evident in his response to J.B.S. Haldane’s critique of his trilogy: ‘My science is usually wrong. Why, yes. [...] There is a great deal of scientific falsehood in my stories: some of it known to be false even by me’ (Lewis 1982: 70). Lewis’s writing is situated in a cosmos where beyond Earth lie the heavens (with all their mythic and religious connotations) and space: ‘the pathless, the waste infinity’ (Lewis 1990: 255). His sf is both nostalgic for a medieval conception of the universe and redemptive of the power of myth within the secular present. Instead, Lewis seeks to rewrite what he calls ‘the nightmare’ caused by ‘the mythology that follows in the wake of science’ (Lewis 1989a: 26) by filling the void with wondrous worlds and an emphasis upon the local as opposed to the infinite.

In this respect, Lewis accords with James Blish’s assessment of the opportunities sf gave to its writers and readers: ‘that sense that interplanetary space was not only there to be looked at, it was to be travelled in’, the very thing ‘which the scientists themselves were busily denying that we would ever be able to do’ (Atheling, Jr. 1964: 128). Furthermore, in conversation with Brian Aldiss and Kingsley Amis in 1962, Lewis proposed that it is ‘only the first journey to a new planet that is of any interest to imaginative people’ (Lewis 1982: 145). When Mars grows familiar then we need to strike out further into the heavens, ‘as the area of knowledge spreads, you need to go further afield’ (63), in order to find the romance yet to be colonized by science.

As Virginia and Alden Vaughan have argued, the ‘uncharted and largely unexplored’ island which forms the central location of *The Tempest* ‘is akin to a trip to a distant planet, where we find a world dramatically unlike our own’ (Vaughan and Vaughan 2011: 5). Following the release of *Forbidden Planet*, Robert Morsberger proposed that ‘a moment’s thought brings the idea that *The Tempest* was science-fiction or at least fantasy-fiction for its seventeenth-century audience, to whom the far Bermoothes were the outer realms of space’ (Morsberger 1960: 161). In both *The Tempest* and Lewis’s sf we have the physical and spiritual ‘trope of the fantastic voyage’ (Caroti 2004: 3) that takes both characters and audiences ‘to otherworldly realms of the imagination’ (6–7).

Ransom can therefore postulate on whether mythology describes the reality of another planet we have yet to experience: the romance that lies within and beyond the bounds of our world.

### **Head and Heart Knowledge**

In Lewis's sf, despite the presence of old and new, the knowledge of 'the heavens' is privileged over the destructive, scientific, 'earthly' knowledge represented by the characters Weston and Devine. The moral virtue and spiritual value of knowledge is determined by how it is employed, and the impact it has on Malacandra and Perelandra and their inhabitants, as well as the producers of knowledge. In *Out of the Silent Planet*, knowledge is depicted in two ways: linguistic and cultural history on the part of Ransom, and technological and material acquisition on the parts of Weston and Devine. In anticipation of the 'two cultures' debate between F.R. Leavis and C.P. Snow, Lewis critiques the supposed hierarchy between these two types of knowledge: while Weston has the technical prowess to travel to other worlds, and Devine has the material resources to exploit what they find there, their knowledge is presented as inert for it lacks the spiritual vitality of Ransom's classical education. Instead, on Malacandra no such hierarchy of knowledge appears to exist. Ransom struggles to conceive of how the intellectual hierarchy, which governs the pursuit of knowledge on Earth, would map onto the culture of Malacandra:

It would be a strange but not inconceivable world; heroism and poetry at the bottom, cold scientific intellect above it, and overtopping all, some dark superstition which scientific intellect, helpless against the revenge of the emotional depths it had ignored, had neither will nor power to remove. (Lewis 1989a: 75)

Ransom, though, dismisses this attempt to turn Malacandran culture into a Terran-like hierarchy as 'mumbo-jumbo' (75–6) since he also knows that 'hrossa' (poets), 'seroni' (scholars or scientists) and 'pfiltriggi' (sculptors) share equal status on Malacandra but with different types of expertise. The respective tribes are each craftsman in their own right; and their creations carry equal, objective weight. It is only through engagement with the Hrossa in particular, and the inhabitants of Malacandra more broadly, that Ransom learns of the theological hierarchies that govern the planet: the angelic Eldril, such as the radiant Oyarsa, and the omnipotent Maledil who rules the whole universe.

Ransom's spirituality and Weston's secularism therefore embody what George Slusser has termed the 'unstable compound' of art and science that underwrites sf (Slusser 2005: 28). However, in tracing this unstable relationship back to the religious and intellectual divides of the Renaissance, Slusser also

lends credence to regarding *The Tempest* as the literary template for Lewis's sf. For Shakespearean romances also pivot on the use and abuse of knowledge: the political powerplay of Antonio and Sebastian is mirrored by the putative coup against Prospero by Caliban, Stephano and Trinculo, which is in turn mirrored by Prospero's use of magic to wreak revenge upon Antonio, Sebastian and Alonso. These murderous uses of knowledge are offset by the spiritual love of Ferdinand and Miranda. Their pure desire for one another, equivalent to Ransom's metaphysical vision versus Weston's dead scientism, redeems Prospero: he relinquishes magic through his promise to 'break [his] staff' and 'drown [his] book' (*The Tempest* 5.1.54 and 57).

Just as Prospero ultimately acknowledges Caliban as his own, so Ransom actively embraces all that is Malacandrian. This reversal, where the Otherness of the alien is accommodated by Ransom's growing sense of humility, counterpoints the real threat in the novel: that of Weston and Devine. Their abuse, first of Harry, a young man with learning difficulties, and then of Ransom, suggests the ruthlessness not only of Antonio and Sebastian but also of Prospero in terms of how he enslaves both Ariel and Caliban as part of his ultimate goal to regain the dukedom of Milan. By contrast, Ransom's realization that he is nothing but a pawn in the plans of Weston and Devine is the impetus to abandon his reclusive self and to immerse himself in the alien Otherness of Malacandra.

When he first encounters the inhabitants of Malacandra, though, Ransom's initial thought is that they appear to be 'a very presentable animal, an animal which man could probably tame' (Lewis 1989a: 44). Prospero, too, can criticize the behaviour of others, for example his condemnation of Sycorax's treatment of Ariel (*The Tempest* 1.2.250–93), while at the same time considering the selfish merits of such a scheme. Ransom struggles, though, to define the Hrossa in human or non-human terms (Lewis 1989a: 50), and it is this conflict that ultimately opens him up to the Otherness of the aliens. For example, whereas Stephano deliberately loosens Caliban's tongue by plying him with alcohol, 'Here is that which will give language to you, cat' (*The Tempest* 2.2.81–2), Ransom does not force English upon any of the inhabitants of Malacandra. He does, however, initially consider 'the dazzling project of making a Malacandrian grammar':

*An Introduction to the Malacandrian Language – The Lunar Verb – A Concise Martian-English Dictionary* – the titles flitted through his mind. And what might one not discover from the speech of a non-human race? The very form of language itself, the principle behind all possible languages, might fall into his hands. (Lewis 1989a: 47)

Ransom's desire to unlock a universal grammar is not unlike that of Prospero's

enchantment of Ariel and Caliban: by forcing his language upon them, his purpose is not only to be able to communicate but to also disseminate the knowledge he has harvested, if he is able to return. The moral peril, then, is that ‘the love of knowledge is a kind of madness’ (47) and that, like Prospero, Ransom has to be saved from himself by the indigenous inhabitants: Ariel for Prospero, and the Hrossa, particularly Hyci and ultimately Maledil, for Ransom).

As in *The Tempest*, language, music and environment are all closely linked in *Out of the Silent Planet*. The Hrossa give daily musical and poetical recitals so that, when trying to characterize his homesickness for Malacandra, Ransom notes that it is the ‘great hollow hound-like music’ (139) of the planet that haunts him, suggesting that this world too is an ‘isle [...] full of noises [...] that give delight and hurt not’ (*The Tempest* 3.2.135–6). However, whereas Stephano seeks to profit from his rebellion against Prospero, Ransom comes to want no such mercenary gain. There is a beauty associated with the language of the Malacandrians and a musicality to the planet which echoes Caliban’s own sense of musicality (despite his apparently savage appearance). Furthermore, just as this music cannot be heard by either Trinculo or Stephano, so the music of the Malacandrians cannot be heard by Weston or Devine. Lewis is not only alluding here to the ‘music of the spheres’ (Ward 2008: 21) but also to an indigenous language that can only be heard by outsiders, such as Ransom, who reject their instrumental needs to embrace what lies beyond a utilitarian logic of control, power and self-gratification.

### **Devine Knowledge**

Whereas Ransom’s pursuit of knowledge is ultimately ambiguous, due to his encounter with the Other, there is no moral question mark surrounding the approach to language and knowledge adopted by Weston and Devine. Their ambitions are corrupt and dangerous throughout. Devine is characterized by material greed, exemplified by his intention to strip Malacandra of its gold, but Weston’s motivations are both grander and nastier. Although he seeks fame, power and glory, Weston most of all embodies the imperialistic desire to ‘seed itself over a larger area’: ‘the wild dream that planet after planet, system after system, in the end galaxy after galaxy’ can be subjugated to the needs of mankind (Lewis 1989b: 216).

Both Devine and Weston can be aligned with Antonio and Sebastian who, in the heady magical atmosphere of the island, plot murder for power and prestige (*The Tempest* 5.1.126–9). Their approach to the inhabitants of Malacandra is one of fear driven by a desire to manipulate. Their justification is not unlike that of Prospero, in that just as Prospero seeks redemption and a reversal of fortune through revenge, so Weston and Devine believe they are



## Hast thou not dropped from space?

In closing, I want to briefly consider the representation of the inhabitants and the invaders in *Out of the Silent Planet* and *Perelandra* alongside their representation in *The Tempest*. Lewis wrote that early sf began from the premise that ‘the human race, are in the right, and everything else is ogres. I may have done a little towards altering that, but the new point of view has come very much in. We’ve lost our confidence’ (Lewis 1982: 147). In Lewis’s sf, in part indebted to the nuanced portrait of invaders as seen in *The Tempest*, the true aliens are the humans, Ransom included. This can be seen in the unexpected rationality of the Malacandrians and the uncorrupted nature of the Venusians in *Perelandra* whereas the humans are often irrational and corrupt. We also see this reversal of expectations in how the exchange of knowledge is reciprocal, for ‘naturally [Ransom’s] conversations with the *hrossa* did not all turn on Malacandra. He had to repay them with information about earth’ (Lewis 1989a: 41). In this way, the dominant principle of colonizing, educating and exploiting is reversed, as the aliens learn from the humans, and vice versa. Indeed, as Lewis remarked in his own marginalia to *The Tempest*, ‘the enchanted islands appear differently to the different people according to their character’,<sup>1</sup> and this is the vision clearly presented in *Out of the Silent Planet* and *Perelandra*. The more the humans attempt to assert their knowledge, the shadier the beauty and nuance of Malacandra grow, whereas on *Perelandra*, the more knowledge is garnered by the Green Lady, the darker and smaller the world grows.

Lewis’s planets are both like and unlike Earth: they depend on this tension between the closeness of the cosmic heavens and the distance of scientifically abstracted space. In this mixing of both a medieval, vitalistic view of the cosmos and a modern, empty perspective, Lewis both expands and contracts the universe. Similarly, Stephano’s spurious claim that he was the ‘man i’t’h moon when time was’ (*The Tempest* 2.1.136) might refer to a narrative trope, since at least the time of Lucian, of journeying between Earth and Moon as well as a direct reference to the taverns which bore this name in Elizabethan London. While this article has shown that Lewis’s characters and stories might appear to be ‘Out o’t’h’ moon’ (*The Tempest* 2.1.135), in the tradition of H.G. Wells, so also does Lewis engage deeply with thematic re-readings and re-writings of *The Tempest*. More than just source material, his critical engagement through imaginative retellings shows that Lewis’s sf works are alike with Shakespeare’s romances in more than just a generic name or a hidden meaning. *Out of the Silent Planet* is not just a scientific romance, it is a scientific Shakespearean romance.

## Endnote

<sup>1</sup> C.S. Lewis, marginalia on p. 49 of *The Tempest*, ed. Morton Luce, 3rd edn (London: Methuen, 1926), held in the Old Library, Magdalene College, Cambridge.

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