

GENDER AND THE IMAGO DEI: TOGETHER WE REFLECT THE IMAGE OF GOD

Annie Crawford on Marriage's Divine
Purpose

In his Ransom Trilogy, C.S. Lewis ironically harnesses the futuristic genre of science fiction to retrieve something very old: what it means to be human. Lewis had warned, in his 1943 lecture series *The Abolition of Man*, that if the old view is correct and man is fundamentally an incarnated being with a given form and purpose, then any reduction of “our own species to the level of mere Nature” will ruin us.¹ Throughout the Ransom Trilogy, Lewis’s fictional counterpart to *The Abolition of Man*, Lewis challenges modern materialism by depicting space not as a cold, dead vacuity but as an “empyrean ocean of radiance,” full of spiritual, transcendent

¹ C.S. Lewis, *The Abolition of Man* (New York: HarperCollins, 2001), 71.

life.² This setting in the heavenly “field of Arbol” opens up imaginative space for a renewed understanding of the cosmos and human nature.³ Lewis asks us to imagine, what if modern materialists are wrong? What if our universe is crammed with meaning and every planet afire with the glory of God? And what if scientific inquiry is the very thing that leads us to re-discover an enchanted cosmos full of meaningful forms and divine purpose?

As the trilogy unfolds, Lewis surprises his readers by making his sci-fi space adventure into a story about gender. As the philologist hero, Ransom, rediscovers the spiritual life that fills the cosmos, he finds the dynamic between male and female ordering everything. Accordingly, the polarity of gender provides the narrative framework for the whole trilogy. In the first book, *Out of the Silent Planet*, Lewis sends Ransom to the masculine planet of Mars, which he calls Malacandra; in the second he travels to Venus, the feminine planet, which Lewis names Perelandra; and in the final installment, Ransom returns to Earth where Lewis portrays the

² C.S. Lewis, *Out of the Silent Planet* (New York: HarperCollins, 2001), 34.

³ C.S. Lewis, *Perelandra* (New York: HarperCollins, 2001), 182.

reconciliation of genders through the restoration of the Studdocks' marriage. By wedding modern science fiction with baptized imagery of the mythological Mars and Venus, Lewis proposes a redeemed understanding of human nature through a cosmic vision of gender.

In other words, Lewis's ultimate answer to the problems of modernity is to affirm the Biblical doctrine of gender and marriage. How do we respond to the dehumanizing crisis of modernity? "Let marriage be held in honor among all, and let the marriage bed be undefiled."⁴ Because the reality of gender originates in the relational nature of the Holy Trinity, which is reflected in the spiritual relationship between God and Man, Lewis knew that a sanctified understanding of masculine and feminine realities would be essential to the restoration of our full humanity. It is in the union of male and female together that we reflect the *imago Dei* and our essential human nature. When Genesis tells us that "God created mankind in his own image," the author takes care to emphasize that "in the image of God he created *them*."⁵ Genesis 2 further develops this doctrine of the inherently

⁴ Hebrews 13:4a, ESV.

⁵ Gen. 1:27, emphasis mine.

relational *imago Dei* by showing us that it is “not good for man to be alone.”⁶ The man alone does not reflect the nature of the intrinsically relational Godhead. God considers his *imago Dei* creation complete and “very good”⁷ only when both male and female have been created and joined together.⁸

In the Genesis account, man was created first because the masculine gender analogically reflects the Father who is the creator of all things. The very words *man* and *woman* express this generative and temporal ordering — the word *woman* is formed from the root word *man* as the woman was taken out of the man, flesh of his flesh.⁹ Reflecting this order, Lewis makes Mars/Malacandra older than Venus/Perelandra, as Adam was older than Eve. The Queen of Perelandra, Tenedril, echoes this ontology when she explains to Weston, “the King is always older than I, and about all things.”¹⁰ For the King to be the younger than the Queen would be “like a tree

⁶ Gen. 2:18, emphasis mine.

⁷ Gen. 1:31.

⁸ Gen. 2:24.

⁹ The English forms of *man* and *woman* parallel the Hebrew forms used in Genesis 2:22: man is *ish* or *ish* and woman, or the “out of man”, is *meish* or *meish*.

¹⁰ Lewis, *Perelandra*, 90.

with no fruit” or “a fruit with no taste.”¹¹ It is a logical impossibility. How can the Creator be younger than the created? Therefore, the man who symbolically embodies the initiating Creator must also come first and be created before the woman who embodies the beloved creation. We must not think reductionistically here — it is not that man is literally the creator of woman, but that the order of their genesis analogically reflects the relationship between God and creation.

This temporal ordering also reflects the atemporal hierarchy present in the Godhead itself. Although there has never been a time when the Father existed without the Son, still an ontological hierarchy exists within the Trinity. The Son is begotten of the Father and the Holy Spirit exists as the third, unifying resolution of this divine binary. In the polarity of gender, the masculine nature comes first, ordained by God to embody the originating Father. However, divine hierarchy does not logically entail an inequality of persons. Trinitarian theology establishes the equality of hierarchically-ordered genders. As the Son is begotten of the Father yet co-equal in eternal being and glory, so the feminine is created in response to

¹¹ Lewis, *Perelandra*, 90.

the masculine yet is also co-equal and co-existent with it. As the Godhead exists in an ordered yet co-equal unity of being, so the masculine and the feminine form an ordered yet co-equal unity.¹² And as in the Godhead, the Holy Spirit reconciles the binary of genders into a greater unity that is manifested both in the sacrament of marriage and in the union of Christ with His Bride.

Since man was created first, Ransom begins his mission to deliver earth from the destructive forces of modernity by traveling to the archaic, masculine world of Malacandra. To embody the masculine spirit of Mars/Malacandra, everything on the planet is shaped by a leitmotif of perpendicularity; the whole world is ordered vertically to express the firm, upright physiology of the male body. In *Planet Narnia*, Michael Ward observes that throughout the world of this Martial planet, “we encounter things that are described as high, narrow, steep, pointed, elongated, ‘needling.’ We find soaring columns,

¹² At the end of *That Hideous Strength*, Lewis makes a small allusion to the possibility of more than two genders. However, this is a moment where I believe Lewis let his imagination run away with him. Lewis’s proposal here is a highly speculative idea that seems driven merely by his love of the Medieval cosmos and desire to retrofit theology into his imaginative cosmology. Further, if any such thing as extra-binary gender could exist, it would be irrelevant to the nature of human gender; we would, as Lewis says, “have no clue to them.” C.S. Lewis, *That Hideous Strength* (New York: HarperCollins, 2001), 322.

pinnacle, pillars.”¹³ The mountains are a “riot of rock, leaping and surging skyward like solid jets from some rock-fountain,”¹⁴ and the waves of water shoot up “far too high for their length, too narrow at the base, too steep in the sides.”¹⁵

To understand Lewis, we must not perceive this imagery as “simply sexual.”¹⁶ Gender is not a projection of or an abstraction *from* biological sex; it is a transcendent, spiritual reality that is manifested in distinct ways within male and female creatures. Lewis explicitly states that the meaning of gender cannot be reduced to “an imaginative extension of sex.”¹⁷ Gender is “a more fundamental reality than sex. Sex is, in fact, merely the adaptation to organic life of a fundamental polarity which divides all created beings.”¹⁸ The word *gender* originates from the Greek root *gen* which means *birth* or *that which produces*. It is the root word for *genus*, *genesis*, *generate*, and *genital*, and it refers to the manner in

¹³ Michael Ward, *Planet Narnia: The Seven Heavens in the Imagination of C.S. Lewis*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 81.

¹⁴ Lewis, *Silent Planet*, 87.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 44.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ Lewis, *Perelandra*, 171.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 172.

which life is produced or generated. The character of the masculine gender is rooted in the being of God who generates all other being and gives it form. All created being exists as the feminine reception of this divine generative action. Only a bent mind, as the Malacandrian *hrossa* would say, insists on reducing gendered imagery to mere sexual meanings; the Christian imagination perceives these material images as portals into deeper realities. The Christian cosmos is sacramental — meaning, the material realm is an embodied manifestation of the spiritual realm. The realities of this world teach us about the realities of heaven; trees teach us about righteousness, water about forgiveness, fire about judgment, and shepherding about God's care. Likewise, sex teaches us about a gendered polarity woven into the fabric of creation itself. Thus, the perpendicularity of the Malacandrian landscape should not engender a fixation on sex but rather a meditation on the self-giving virility and moral courage that is more truly at the center of the masculine identity.

As Ransom sojourns in Malacandra, he is transformed by the masculine spirit that presides over the entire planet. The Malacandrian people - the *hrossa*, *sorns*, and *pfifltriggi*, as well as the *eldils* and the *Oyarsa* - all live in stratified harmony under the

righteous, generative rule of Maleldil, Lewis's fictional name for God. Because God the Creator is necessarily greater than His creatures, hierarchy is inherent to the fabric of the cosmos and a sense of duty is essential to masculine virtue.¹⁹ As a Christian, Lewis also knows that Jesus Christ has shown the true masculine spirit to be characterized by deep love and self-sacrifice. Therefore, the masculine virtues of Malacandra are those which enable God's creatures to express His sacrificial love for the sake of others: obedience, moral integrity, courage, and fortitude. As Ransom learns from the *hrossa* and the Malacandrian ways, the martial spirit of the planet begins "to work a change in him."²⁰ Ransom grows in the masculine characteristics of a virtuous knight committed to his King; his courage, resolve, vigilance, and rectitude are developed and tested. On his first day in Malacandra, Lewis describes Ransom as full of "whimpering, unanalyzed, self-nourishing, self-consuming

¹⁹ While all creatures — both men and women — have duties, the firm and unwavering nature of obedience is more clearly manifested in the straightness and rigidity of the male form. Men and women both possess all the masculine and feminine virtues — women are to be courageous and men are to be nurturing — but in different proportions and capacities. Men will never suckle a baby and as Lewis puts it, war is ugly when women fight.

²⁰ Lewis, *Silent Planet*, 79.

dismay.”²¹ But after Hyoui’s death, Ransom finally learns to fully submit to the cosmic hierarchy which reigns over Malacandra. In his proper obedience to the Oyarsa, “in the clear light of accepted duty, he felt fear indeed, but with it a sober sense of confidence in himself and in the world, and even an element of pleasure.”²² Ransom has become courageous and resolute, prepared in his “new-found manhood” to complete hard duties for the sake of others and face death directly rather than compromise his moral integrity.²³

Now a sanctified vessel of holy masculinity, Ransom journeys to the womb-like paradise of Perelandra, the feminine planet. Unlike the cold, archaic, and vertical landscape of Malacandra, Perelandra is warm and young and verdant. Through this sensuous vision of Venus, Lewis dares to celebrate something the modern imagination detests: the beauty of feminine submission. Because the masculine gender reflects the generative activity of the Creator God and the feminine gender reflects the receptivity of created being, masculine virtue is expressed as obedient action and feminine virtue is

²¹ Lewis, *Silent Planet*, 87.

²² *Ibid.*, 87.

²³ *Ibid.*, 81.

expressed as trusting responsiveness. This is why in ancient mythologies, the heavens are seen as masculine (Chronos) and the earth is seen as feminine (Gaia). Matter is essentially feminine in character because it receives the form which the Father gives it. Thus, receptivity is at the very center of cosmic femininity; it is the means by which new life and relationship are created.

While Ransom's climactic battle with the Un-man proves a distinctly masculine duty, to enter Perelandra, he must first align himself with her receptive character. Although he does not understand everything it means or how it will be accomplished, Ransom responds to the *eldil's* call to come to Perelandra with the trusting spirit of Mary; "Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word."²⁴ As he sojourns in Perelandra, Ransom grows in this feminine posture of Marian receptivity. Whenever he is tempted to assert his independence or resist Maleldil's presence, "the very air seem[s] too crowded to breathe."²⁵ Ransom learns that "when you gave in to the thing, gave yourself up to it," the submission itself became "a medium, a sort of splendor as of eatable,

²⁴ Luke 1:38.

²⁵ Lewis, *Perelandra*, 62.

drinkable, breathable gold, which fed and carried you and not only poured into you but out from you as well.”²⁶

Yet this place of feminine submission is not oppressive; it is paradise. Everything in Perelandra is soft, fluid, scented, and curved — saturated with jewel-toned color and sensuous pleasure. Ransom's experience on Perelandra is full of pleasures. While he is still bobbing about the ocean after just arriving, he drinks the water. “It was almost like meeting Pleasure itself for the first time. He buried his flushed face in the green translucence.”²⁷ The yellow balloon fruit of the Perelandran trees gave Ransom a sensation which seemed like a “totally new genus of pleasure.”²⁸ By weaving together the sensuous imagery of Venus with the holy spirit of the Virgin Mary, Lewis challenges our debased inclination to imagine the submissive character of femininity as a prim prudery or misogynist construct. Wherever the masculine presence is one of rightly ordered, self-sacrificing love, the vulnerability of feminine submission brings intimate communion and deepest joy.

²⁶ Lewis, *Perelandra*, 62.

²⁷ *Ibid.* 32.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 37.

Through Ransom's victory over the Un-man, Lewis develops a distinctly Christological meaning to the union of masculine and feminine realities. On the cross, Christ our warrior poured out His life for the sake of His Bride; He defeated the darkness that had condemned her to death, and in this victory, He seeded the birth of a new redeemed humanity. He made the one flesh union of Adam and Eve an image not only of life-generating, Trinitarian communion, but also of redemption. Marriage has become the embodied promise of the union between Christ and His Church.²⁹ Ransom's battle with the invading evil partakes in Christ's redemptive and generative sacrifice. Ransom's self-sacrificial battle with Weston is an imitation of Calvary. As he struggles on the island garden of Perelandra to submit his will to the terror of his task, Ransom endures his own Gethsemane. When Ransom attacks the Un-man, the demon controlling Weston's body predicts that Ransom will suffer as one "nailed on to crosses."³⁰ Following the pattern of Christ's descent into Hell, Ransom nearly drowns as the demon pulls him down into the dark, cavernous bowels of Perelandra. And like the triumphant sacrifice of Christ,

²⁹ Eph. 5:31-32.

³⁰ Lewis, *Perelandra*, 130.

Ransom's metaphorical death for the sake of Perelandra sows the seed of new life for her people.

The consummation of Ransom's masculine self-sacrifice and Perelandra's feminine reception is achieved in a scene of sacred bliss. After defeating the Un-Man, Ransom ascends from the underworld of Perelandra until he reaches the most high and holy place on the planet. Ransom lies on sweet-scented slopes and climbs through parting mists; he comes before a pass between two rose-red peaks where he catches a glimpse of something soft and flushed, a garden "clothed in flowers."³¹ He has come to Venus and offered himself up utterly to her, pouring out his life for her redemption. He is the embodiment of the true Bridegroom come in self-sacrificing love for His Bride. He is worthy "to enter that secret place," and this redemptive union generates new life.³² As Mary was overshadowed by the Holy Spirit to bring forth the New Adam, so a bright, supernatural light overshadows this sacred garden where Ransom receives the reunited Tor and Tinidril. At this sacred moment, the ransomed King and Queen rise over the edge of this holy mountain, a radiant image of Christ and His Bride, so full of

³¹ Lewis, *Perelandra*, 165

³² *Ibid.*

beauty and glory and such a “masterpiece of self-portraiture”³³ that Ransom falls at their feet and confesses, “I have never before seen a man or a woman. I have lived all my life among shadows.”³⁴ Through this wedding of Martial courage, self-sacrifice, vigilance, and rectitude with Venereal sweetness, pleasure, submission, and beauty, Lewis offers his readers a holy and glorious vision of God’s sacramental design for the nuptial embrace.

In the final book of the Ransom Trilogy, *That Hideous Strength*, Lewis returns his story to Earth where gendered realities and the sacrament of marriage are distorted and decaying. After illuminating the transcendent, ideal reality of gender through his baptized vision of Mars and Venus, Lewis lastly reveals how the disorder on Earth can be healed through the restoration of marriage. The word “Matrimony” begins this final book of the trilogy and the renewed marital embrace of Jane and Mark concludes it. While appearing to be a dystopian adventure examining the dangers of scientism — something moderns like — Lewis is really writing a defense of traditional marriage — something moderns struggle to like. Lewis is here at

³³ Lewis, *Perelandra*, 177.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 176.

work, as in all his fiction, seeking to sneak sacred truths past the watchful dragons of modern resistance.

Alone in her kitchen, Jane Studdock bitterly recites a few words from the Anglican marriage ceremony: “Matrimony was ordained, thirdly ... for the mutual society, help, and comfort.”³⁵ At the beginning of *That Hideous Strength*, the Studdock marriage is not one of intimacy and comfort. The couple sees little of each other, and when they are together, there is little communion between them. Mark is preoccupied with his career and desires only “to cut a good figure in the eyes of his wife” as he seeks to feed his own ego while Jane is resentful of his self-centered claims on her affection and resists being vulnerable in any way.³⁶

Mark later realizes that their modern, objectified approach to all reality had made them look on marriage as a contractual, self-centered arrangement. Their “laboratory outlook upon love, . . . had forestalled in Jane the humility of a wife [and] equally forestalled in him . . . the humility of a lover.”³⁷ Jane wished to love Mark not as a

³⁵ Lewis, *Hideous Strength*, 11.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 87.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 378.

responsive, vulnerable counterpart but as an independent person, a spousal colleague of sorts. She resents her prophetic dreams because they intrude on “the bright, narrow little life which she had proposed to live.”³⁸ Moderns see nature not as something with an inherent meaning or purpose which we must honor and obey, but as raw material onto which we can impose our will. Likewise, Mark and Jane saw their relationship as raw material they could arrange and bend to suit their selfish will. Mark does not want to see in his marriage some sacred order to which his career must bend; likewise, Jane does not “want to get drawn in” to either true union with Mark or with the numinous and unknown will of God.³⁹ She wants “something civilized, or modern . . . which did not want to possess her . . . something without hands that gripped and without demands upon her.”⁴⁰ As the Director tells her later, she is “offended by the masculine itself, the gold lion, the bearded bull – which breaks through hedges and scatters the little kingdom of your primness.”⁴¹ Jane is offended by

³⁸ Lewis, *Hideous Strength*, 81.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 313.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 312-313.

God — analogically reflected in the masculine — who would dare give her life a sacred form she must receive and obey. Moderns exist to make themselves, not to submit to what God has made them.

Perhaps we can forgive Jane for her resistance to the Divine Bridegroom, for her husband, Mark, is an insipid male who is unaware of his wife's inner conflicts and emotionally absent from the marriage. He is one of Lewis's "Men without Chests," a "mere trousered ape," whose modern education has atrophied his moral imagination and manly rectitude.⁴²⁴³ His mind is full of abstractions and his body full of unsanctified desires. The "things that he read and wrote [were] more real to him than things he saw. Statistics about agricultural labourers were the substance; any real ditcher, ploughman, or farmer's boy, was the shadow."⁴⁴ Mark's life has become, not a masculine imitation of Maleldil, but a compulsive effort to satisfy his own egocentric needs.

Yet the Studdock marriage begins to heal as both Mark and Jane learn submission to the love of Maleldil. Jane begins to change first after she visits

⁴² Lewis, *Abolition*, 25.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 9.

⁴⁴ Lewis, *Hideous Strength*, 85.

St. Anne's and is stunned by the Director's presence. "For the first time in all those years she tasted the word *King* itself with all linked associations of battle, marriage, priesthood, mercy, and power."⁴⁵ As she experiences sanctified, self-sacrificing masculinity through Ransom, Jane begins to accept the receptive, responsive nature of femininity. She discovers that her prim and independent world is an impossibility, that "what is above and beyond all things is so masculine that we are all feminine in relation to it."⁴⁶ The "gold lion" is the very presence of God in relation to His creatures. The world is saturated with the masculine presence of God; there is no neutral ground on which to stand safely apart from this cosmic dance. Jane realizes that we must first give ourselves to the love of God before we can then give ourselves in love to others. It is through the obedient ordering of all things beneath the good and perfect will of God that we can then have joyful communion with Him and all He has created. She and Mark had "lost love because [they] never attempted obedience" to God.⁴⁷ Alone in the quiet

⁴⁵ Lewis, *Hideous Strength*, 140.

⁴⁶*Ibid.*, 313.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 145.

garden, Jane's defenses are laid aside and she becomes His.

More slowly, in the hellish halls of the N.I.C.E., Mark Studdock also begins to learn obedience to God. When his Jane's life is clearly threatened, he begins to wake from his eunuched stupor; the latent masculinity of this martial son is finally awakened by godly love for his wife. Swearing that "nothing but physical impossibility would stop him from going to Edgestow and warning Jane,"⁴⁸ Mark finally demonstrates masculine rectitude and courageous resolve. When faced with death, Mark awakes to see the world as it really is, not as a confusion of objects and circumstances to manipulate for the inflation of his own ego, but as a cosmos full of wonders and realities never dreamed of in his reductionist philosophy. He realizes how his perverse objectification of Jane had turned him into "the coarse, male boor . . . blundering, sauntering, stumping in where great lovers, knights and poets would have feared to tread."⁴⁹ Mark has discovered his own creaturely, feminine submission to God, and in this humble obedience to the King, he is now

⁴⁸ Lewis, *Hideous Strength*, 210.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 379.

ready to be a vessel of masculine, self-giving love to Jane.

After Mark and Jane are sanctified in their gendered roles, Venus descends on St. Anne's to consummate their reconciliation. She has come "to make Earth sane."⁵⁰ The brokenness of the Studdocks' modern marriage is healed by a restored acceptance of gender and what it teaches them about the right ordering of reality. Their feminine submission to God's creative initiative restores them to right relationship with God and each other. The air grows sweet and warm, and the couples begin to pair off as the animals gather to join the free, gendered dance in all its joy and romp. For one night on Earth, all is well ordered beneath the deeply good will of Maleldil. The masculine and the feminine are not in their self-consumed and distrusting, vulgar and resentful war with one another. All is humility and self-offering and obedience before the created order. In this unshadowed communion of sweet, overflowing life, in the warm union of open souls, there is holy ecstasy.

⁵⁰ Lewis, *Hideous Strength*, 376.

As Ransom explained to Jane, “obedience – humility – is an erotic necessity.”⁵¹ All men and women are made in the image of God and therefore equally good and valuable, yet, if we insist upon equality as the deepest reality in our relationships, the greatest thing we have, then the great dance simply ceases. In this frozen truce, where the commerce between souls must be equally calculated and economically measured, there is no joy, no gift of self, no charity. It is no union at all. Eros is our longing to be joined with something higher than ourselves. So the Apostle Paul tells us that to “be devoted to one another in love” you must “honor one another above yourselves.” The deepest cosmic reality is not a static equality but the “Great Dance” of eros and charity that originates in the overflowing, generative love of the Triune God.⁵²

If we have received Lewis’s vision of gendered union aright, we, like Merlin, will feel “the inconsolable wound with which man is born.”⁵³ The human soul was made for ecstasy, *to be taken out of oneself* into a higher reality. Yet like Jane, we moderns are especially “offended by the masculine

⁵¹ Lewis, *Hideous Strength*, 146.

⁵² Lewis, *Perelandra*, 183.

⁵³ Lewis, *Hideous Strength*, 320.

itself: . . . the gold lion, the bearded bull – which breaks through hedges and scatters the little kingdom of [our] primness.”⁵⁴ We do not want to walk in the feminine humility of creatures, so in our rebellion against God we deconstruct, deny, and distort the gendered reality of the cosmos. Rather than honor women rightly, through interventions like contraceptives, abortion, and daycare we try to liberate them from all that is actually feminine. The brokenness of the modern world can only be healed by a restored acceptance of gender and what it teaches us about right ordering of reality.

It will be by our feminine submission to God’s creative, redeeming initiative that we are restored to right relationship with God and one another. We resist the transcendent reality of gender, but our very bodies stubbornly testify against us. Our gendered bodies are telling us the Gospel; Christ our Bridegroom has offered Himself to us if we will only receive him with humility in return. It will be by our feminine submission to God’s creative, redeeming initiative that we are restored to right relationship with God and one another.

⁵⁴ Lewis, *Hideous Strength*, 312-313.

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