

# “A CRITIC WHO MAKES NO CLAIM”: DISRUPTING LEWIS’S (IN)EXPERT RHETORICAL FLOURISHES

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## Abstract

This article shows us how C. S. Lewis offers an alternative way of framing expertise as he speaks and writes about his period(s) and text(s). This essay establishes that Lewis’s humility is, to some degree, a deliberately cultivated and rhetorically shrewd one. The self-characterization of childlike inexperience and humility is a traditional medieval rhetorical move of which Lewis is a master. Moreover, the irony of this humility has washed over commentators who believe Lewis’s claim to be no true Shakespearean scholar and who have all too readily sought to rescue Lewis from his reticence. This paper sets the record straight by resituating Lewis as an academic exploring medieval and renaissance texts from the inside out. It takes Lewis’s reticent remark at the beginning of his Shakespeare Lecture to the British Academy (1942) as a case in point.

**Keywords:** *C. S. Lewis, humility topos, Shakespeare, Hamlet.*

## “A CRITIC WHO MAKES NO CLAIM”: DISRUPTING LEWIS’S (IN)EXPERT RHETORICAL FLOURISHES

This article began its life as a response to a call for papers for a conference which, like this special issue, focused on “C. S. Lewis: The Re-Enchanted Academic.” And when I first saw that call and its emphasis I was very excited because it was to be an academic Lewis conference with a double emphasis on the academic. I had

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been working on Lewis, by then, for just under ten years, and for just about all of those years, I had been arguing that we need to pay more attention to his day-job: his work in the academia. But as the call for papers for the original conference made clear, this has not, historically, been an emphasis in perceptions of or about Lewis. Except of course when it is connected to those writings for which he is more famous. It is framed in opposition to his work as an apologist—with the regularly trotted out reason that his eternal work impeded professional progression at Oxford, or instead as something of a strange oddity that an academic with no children might write for children (forgetting of course Lewis's emphasis on writing for and from the perspective of the childlike).<sup>1</sup> But whether seen as an inconvenience to his "true" work or simply bypassed, both of course miss the point: scholarship was a significant part of his life's work and he embraced it as his vocation.

When I first laid out my argument that I wanted to emphasize the importance of Lewis as an academic and how this can be seen across his canon, my supervisor, laughing, said: "But Sarah, academics aren't famous for being academics". Of course, we can think of some good exceptions to that rule. Stephen Hawking for instance, whose doctoral thesis crashed the repository website at the University of Cambridge with 60,000 attempts to download it on the first day alone.<sup>2</sup> But actually my supervisor meant something a little more specific. He meant English Literature academics are not famous for being academics. Moreover, as my paper will show, Lewis has contributed to the reason we do not see him first and foremost as an academic or as a literary expert, or, more specifically, as a Shakespeare expert. Or at least maybe he has. It all depends on how you respond to the evidence I lay before you.

I wonder, though, if perhaps part of the reason "we've had enough of experts"—as Member of Parliament Michel Gove declared in the midst of Brexit debates (June 2016)—is that we have developed a lethargy towards nuanced, clarified, contextualized responses, and so we have replaced that precision and

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<sup>1</sup> See George MacDonald's discussion of the value of the childlike, especially in "The Fantastic Imagination" (1893) and "The Imagination: its Functions and Its Culture" (1867).

<sup>2</sup> n. a. "Stephen Hawking PhD readers crash Cambridge University website." BBC News. 23 Oct 2017 <<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-cambridgeshire-41721585>> [accessed 15.2.24].

nuance with a tendency for the easily digestible.<sup>3</sup> However, with nuance comes deeper understanding and response, and also, importantly, knowledge which affects. Which makes us think, which enchants, and which might, as Lewis points towards in his lecture on *Hamlet* (1942), even come back to haunt us later.

“Affecting” is really important both because literature *does* make us feel, but also, especially in this context, it is important because that emphasis is at the heart of Lewis’s critical approach. For all of his deep historicist (in the literary and critical theory sense) scholarship, there is at least an equal (if not a greater) emphasis on feeling, on affective and affected responses. He writes in *Experiment in Criticism* (1961), for instance, “One of the things we feel after reading a great work is ‘I have got out’. Or from another point of view, ‘I have got in’; pierced the shell of some other monad and discovered what it is like inside” (138).

But affect does more than just make us feel something or sympathize or empathize with someone. Affect, as Anna Gibbs argues, has the capacity to “impel” our body to “action” (188). It is not just that it makes us feel, it makes us feelingly engage. It perhaps invites and even encourages us to act responsively, relationally, to feel for the other(s) and to act on those feelings. This is something we see Lewis directly address as an important factor in affecting his audience in his apologetic works. In “God in the Dock” he talks about the importance of “the simple emotional appeal” (101) acknowledging that his “own work has suffered very much from the incurable intellectualism of [his] approach” (100-101) and recognizing that intellectualism can convince the brain but cannot necessarily enchant or reorient the heart if divorced from emotional appeal. In other words, “intellectualism” (101) might not necessarily impel us to action. Moreover, in the context of evangelism in “The Decline of Religion” he argues there is a distinct need for “the preacher in the full sense . . . the man who infects” (182) noting that “unless he comes we mere Christian intellectuals will not effect very much” (182), and, we might conclude, perhaps mere Christian intellectuals will struggle to *effect* much because mere intellectual arguments alone do not necessarily *affect*.

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<sup>3</sup> Henry Mance. “Britain has had enough of experts, says Gove.” *Financial Times*. 3 June 2016 <<https://www.ft.com/content/3be49734-29cb-11e6-83e4-abc22d5d108c>> [accessed 15.2.24]. Gove was, in that discussion, advocating “inexpert” – by which he meant *accessible* – vocabulary, ironically sacrificing clarity for the sake of “clarity”.

This urgent need for responses to the text which are affected and affective is something we see with more literary and critical implications (as well as with other worldly implications) in Lewis's discussion of *Hamlet*. Lewis's lecture on *Hamlet*, "Hamlet: The Prince or the Poem" (1942) given as the Annual Shakespeare Lecture for the British Academy, offers us an excellent example of Lewis's deliberate and rhetorically loaded humility (which is perhaps one of the reasons why we have been historically less inclined to focus on his work as an academic). It also shows his critical approach and its emphasis on affective responses to texts.

This essay addresses Lewis's rhetoric and his employment of the humility topos in his *Hamlet* lecture. In so doing, it will contend that Lewis offers an alternative way of framing expertise as he speaks and writes about his period(s) and text(s). It is not simply the case of "hackney humility" (Connolly 45) or an instance of a "topical expression of (usually false) modesty" (Dagenais 24); he does show a degree of humility and we should, as Julius Schwiertering cautions against in his discussion of the medieval humility formula, "be on our guard against calling an expression of humility affected because it is formularized" (1285). Therefore, it is not necessarily wrong to conclude, as Lewis's student Paul Piehler did, that "beneath the boom [of his lectures], it seemed, lay a genuine personal humility" (123). However, it is also true that Lewis's humility can be and has been misread and misconceived as evidence of ignorance or limited knowledge. In fact, at least sometimes, his humility is deliberately cultivated and rhetorically shrewd.

## **HUMILITY TOPOS AND LEWIS'S RHETORIC: THE CONVERSATION IN LEWIS STUDIES SO FAR**

Schwiertering makes clear that the rhetorical trope of "prayer-like expressions" (1280) is especially potent and prominent in the medieval "confession of poetic incapacity" which is "rooted in the basic liturgical feeling of reverence" (1279). As Heather Blatt notes, this device "flourishes in Middle English during the fifteenth century" (27).<sup>4</sup> It might be expected that this would be considered in

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<sup>4</sup> Though, as she also notes, it originated before the fifteenth century in other literatures since "it has its roots in fourteenth-century French of England and was common in Latin hagiographies before that" (27).

detail by medievalists such as Jason Baxter, given the title of his recent volume *The Medieval Mind of C. S. Lewis* (2022).<sup>5</sup> We would look, however, for discussion of Lewis's use of the humility topos in vain.<sup>6</sup> Nor does Helen Cooper's "C. S. Lewis as Medievalist" (2014) address this, though it does consider Lewis as lecturer and, by implication, deals with his rhetoric when she notes that his learning as seen in his writing "is designed to enlighten at first *hearing*" (48).<sup>7</sup> Stephen Prickett, who himself experienced Lewis's lectures, draws attention to Lewis's humility, but rather as a contrast from others less humble in the University of Cambridge faculty. Noting of Lewis's lectures, "nor, unlike many lecturers, were they remotely self-indulgent" (186). It was, therefore "a complete shock when one day . . . he said something extraordinary. 'I want to say something about myself'" (186).

Curiously, this topos also goes unnoticed, or at least unmentioned, in studies of Lewis's rhetoric, despite the fact that significant attention has been paid to the way he engages with his audience in his writing. Nevil Coghill noted Lewis's "seemingly conciliatory structures of argument" (60) and other critics point out Lewis's ability to secure an audience's attention. Steve Beebe calls this part of his "audience centered" (244) and "verbally immediate approach" (245), and both Gary Tandy (70) and Beebe (245) highlight Lewis's use of direct second-person address and "personal pronouns" which, for Tandy, increases "identification between speaker and reader and reinforce[s] Lewis's view that considerations of audience are central to the communicative process" (70). For Beebe, this direct address demonstrates Lewis's tendency to "seemingly [be] talking with, rather than at, an audience" (245), yet neither discusses his use of

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<sup>5</sup> Given the work being done on Lewis and medievalism, especially under the sponsored series "C. S. Lewis and the Middle Ages" at the International Congress of Medieval Studies, Western Michigan University, some of which, over the course of its history, have later emerged as publications, I am hopeful that this topic will soon also be addressed by other critics.

<sup>6</sup> Lewis does discuss the "tradition of humility" (215) in *The Allegory of Love*, but not with reference to the humility topos, as such. See, for instance, his discussion of Gower where, repurposing Ben Jonson's lines about Shakespeare, he declares that Gower's "humility, perhaps, smacks more of that age, and less of all time" (215). Later in *The Allegory of Love* closer connections to this topos may be found in his discussion of humility and mock-humility and the association with these of "rhetoric", "exaggeration" and "protestations" (217), but this is in a discussion of medieval love poetry not rhetorical prose.

<sup>7</sup> Italics for emphasis, mine.

the humility topos as part of this rhetorical strategy. Both Gervase Matthew and John Fleming also underline Lewis's appeal to audiences, with Matthew suggesting that "always he forged a personal link with those who heard him" (97), while Fleming argues that "Lewis's prose is probably most confident and also most magnificent when he is addressing an audience most like himself: an audience admiring of and widely read in the earlier periods of English literature" (27). James Como also notes the "familiar and knowing almost intimate yet never hortatory" (159) quality of Lewis's rhetorical voice as he connects with his audience using "argument followed by analogy" (158).

Tandy, however, does emphasize how the "*ethos* projected" (65) in Lewis's approach in his apologetics contrasts with his literary criticism, arguing that in the latter Lewis speaks "as an authority", "as a member of a profession to a well-defined and knowledgeable audience" (65). In Lewis's introduction to his lecture on *Hamlet*, however, we see something different. What Tandy says, though, about Lewis's "Modern Theology and Biblical Criticism", does apply here. He points out that in that essay Lewis "adopts the *ethos* of an outsider" but "as the paper progresses . . . Lewis projects more and more his image as a literary expert" (65). And so, "through careful manipulation of *ethos*," Lewis "turns an apparent deficiency into an asset" (65). Lewis likewise emphasizes his knowledge of the play *and* the state of criticism as his lecture on *Hamlet* progresses. Greg Anderson's comment that Lewis's "focus was not so much on classical as on medieval and even modern rhetoricians" (196) perhaps helps clarify Lewis's employment of the humility formula or topos in his rhetoric when he "makes no claim to be a true Shakespearian scholar" (88)

## HUMILITY TOPOS: THE MEDIEVAL CONTEXT

Lewis's rhetorical approach is indebted therefore not just to being "audience centered" (Beebe 244) but also to his literary field of expertise (medieval literature) and the medieval humility topos. As Schwiertering notes, "Paul, who boasts of his weakness (*infirmetas*), was to the Middle Ages a model of deepest humility" (1282), which is itself "a gesture toward God even when it is the audience that is addressed" (1283). So, Lewis's statement is not mere bashfulness or a disclaimer to stop too much backlash if one makes a wrong claim about a

text or reveals one's ignorance through a bumpy generalization. This is more (or less?) than raw modesty.

As Christina Van Dyke has noted, the use of the humility topoi by both male and female writers in the medieval period was not simply to express genuine lack of knowledge or education, but in order to establish themselves as authorities within philosophical discussions. She notes that the "hallmarks of the medieval humility topos" were "confession of unworthiness, lack of relative value in comparison to others who could undertake the task, disavowal of knowledge, and an appeal to God for grace and illumination" (5). Such authors were, to some degree, playing a role. Expressions of "I am not worthy" are common in Christian liturgical practices. One assumes those saying such things did not always necessarily feel unworthy.

Part of playing the expert was of course being respectful and deferential to the imagined, perceived, or known audience of one's writing. Especially so if one knew one's audience. In the case of Lewis's lecture to the British Academy, he certainly knew them as key experts in this field—indeed they had been elected fellows in recognition of this. More immediately, he first said the words of that lecture "A critic who makes no claim to be a true Shakespearean scholar and who has been honoured by an invitation to speak about Shakespeare to such an audience as this" (88) literally in front of the crowd of official experts. Deference perhaps is even more important in the spoken format with no print to hide behind.

Furthermore, the "humility formulae" also allowed writers to "provide an explanation of the text's larger purpose and a defense of [their] claim to write it" (Van Dyke 1). We see Lewis follow this same formula. Here is what others have said, here is what I want to say, here is my ever so (apparently) humble, fumbling inexpert lack of qualifications. Except . . . just a moment, may I present my in-depth knowledge of the field, of others writing in the field, and thus my claim to be able to add just a little slither of a something to the dialogue. That slippage and transition is an important move in a rhetorical performance. To acknowledge the vast knowledge of others (while in so doing concurrently showing your knowledge of theirs and of the field as well) asserts your expertise in an at least formally humble fashion.

This is likewise in keeping with what Blatt, in her discussion of the medieval humility topos, calls the "emendation invitation" or "corrective



reading" (27). In this tradition, "a writer draws attention to the spectre of his or his work's flaws in order to elicit a kinder reception by readers" (27). It is a well-known rhetorical stratagem to preempt objections to your right to speak about something, and, in the case of medieval writers using the humility topoi, one way of justifying this was "to explicitly address those objections in the voice of the only universally recognized medieval authority: God" (Van Dyke 3). So the humility topos was not just to make the speaker appear humble or deferential, it was also (being part of a rhetorical strategy, after all) designed to disarm the reader or listener.

As criticism and academic discussion has moved further and further away from the ultimate authority of God, and the belief that all knowledge and the pursuit of knowledge are indebted to him, this humility has slipped easily into being misunderstood. It is too often taken at face value, stripped of its formal deference by literal rather than literary interpretation. After all, too many scholars appear to have been trained in a tearing down rather than building up kind of school. "Attack attack attack" is rather contrary to a topos which is built on knowledge, on responding to existing knowledge, and on respectfully adding one's voice to the conversation (while also acknowledging one's expertise).

As Alexander Alexakis puts it in his description of the topos of modesty as used by Byzantine authors in the "opening lines of their literary works" (521) it usually served two purposes: one, an expression of "genuine, or, perhaps, feigned concern about their ability to deal adequately with their subject both in terms of form and substance" (521) and second to "preemptively thwart any possible criticism on the part of the audience for any shortcomings in their work" (521) since they enveloped it with humility. In the medieval context, as Schwierterer notes, "since piety is more binding than courtly custom . . . the degree of relationship with the formula of humility is demonstrated to be a criterion for deciding on the genuineness of what the poets tell of themselves" (1289) or, in Lewis's case, what he tells of his response to *Hamlet*, the prince, the poem, and the criticism.

Given that the writers with whom Lewis was so closely and clearly engaging were from a world in which authors, especially from a religious perspective, declared their expertise in a rhetorically charged humility, it is not wholly surprising that he might also adopt this approach in his own scholarship. The problem is, Lewis scholars, themselves rarely of the same specific



disciplinary background of medieval or renaissance scholarship, have taken Lewis rather too literally. They have missed the rhetoric and assumed that he is honestly expressing his lack of expertise. This is especially true in the reception of his use of this topos in his *Hamlet* lecture. Moreover, the rhetoric of his stance, and the (sometime) irony of his humility has washed over critics who believe Lewis's claim to be no real Shakespearean scholar and who have all too readily sought to rescue Lewis from his reticence. But he does not need rescuing. He does, however, need contextualizing.

Lewis was not alone in employing this approach, even amongst his contemporaries. So common is it, that it can easily pass us by. We see J. R. R. Tolkien using it in "On Fairy-Stories" (1945) when he cautiously enters the words of fairyland: "I am aware that this is a rash adventure . . . for the overbold. And overbold I may be accounted, for though I have been a lover of fairy-stories ever since I learned to read . . . I have not studied them professionally. I have been hardly more than a wandering explorer (or trespasser) in the land, full of wonder, but not of information" (109). As Marjorie Garber has noted, the topos of humility is an example of a tradition where scholars make "overt and determined protestations of amateurism" (43). Lewis was not the only academic to subscribe to such a tradition. Indeed, in front of the British Academy audience for the Annual Shakespeare Lecture in 1914 Gilbert Murray said, "I am no Shakespearean scholar" acknowledging that he had "ventured, at the invitation of the Academy, to accept the perilous honor of delivering its Annual Shakespeare Lecture in succession to lecturers, and in the presence of listeners, whose authority is far greater than" his own (3).

### **(NOT A) "TRUE SHAKESPEARIAN SCHOLAR"?**

Was Lewis, though, being both humble and accurate? In the absence, previously, of little evidence of and little scholarly attention to Lewis's work on Shakespeare, we find remarks which suggest Lewis's lack of expertise on Shakespeare with statements such as "when it came to Shakespeare he ceded the ground to those with more expertise" (Heck 317). Indeed, critics such as Joel Heck have therefore concluded that "Lewis's limitations with Shakespeare led him to exclude Shakespeare's drama" (38) from his published academic writings. Heck seems to imply that this is "indicated in the title of one of his major works, *English*

*Literature in the Sixteenth Century Excluding Drama*" (38). In fact, however, it was not Lewis who excluded drama in general, nor Shakespeare in particular, from his assigned volume of the Oxford History of English Literature. As the blurb in the inside of the cover of the first edition of Lewis's volume makes clear, this was a deliberate manoeuvre on the part of the editors: "the exclusion of drama (reserved for treatment elsewhere) enables the author of this volume to present a fuller picture of literary development in the Sixteenth Century than would otherwise have been possible" (np).

On September 23, 1935, one of the general editors of the series, F. P. Wilson, wrote to Lewis to ask if he would author the sixteenth century volume (*Collected Letters* II: 168). After admonishing Wilson for his choice of authors for the Old English and "XVIth century" (168) volumes and urging an about turn "for heavens sake, if it is still possible" (168), Lewis responds to his direct invitation, "either check me out or give me the XVth" (168). He does not therefore initially agree to the sixteenth century volume at all. By the time the outline of the series was drawn up in 1937,<sup>8</sup> Lewis's volume on the sixteenth century "From c. 1500 to c. 1600 including Spenser, Shakespeare and Marlowe (as poets) and omitting Donne" was clearly delineated from the following volume (written, finally, by G. K. Hunter) on "The Elizabethan Drama" (Hooper *Companion* 476).<sup>9</sup> In his personal copy of Douglas Bush's *English Literature in the Earlier Seventeenth Century 1600-1660* (1945), Lewis's annotations reveal further delineations between the volumes. In the endpapers in his own supplementary index, Lewis notes, adjacent to his page number for Donne, "partly for me", and, similarly, adjacent to the page number for the pastoral anthology *England's Helicon*, "for my vol".<sup>10</sup> The point here, therefore, is that it was the editors not Lewis who decided that Shakespeare

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<sup>8</sup> Hooper includes an early "complete plan" which outlines the series but without full reference. According to Hooper, this outline is dated 11 September 1937 (*Companion* 475). He then also includes a "Final Scheme" list of the series (also dated 1937) (475-76).

<sup>9</sup> Hunter's volume was finally titled *English Drama 1586-1642: The Age of Shakespeare* and was the last of the series to be completed (Clarendon Press, 1997). He notes the difficulty of completing the volume in both the preface and in the introduction: "the belatedness in fact only reinforces what would always have been the case, given the nature of the evidence; for it would always have been difficult to treat Elizabethan drama by the methods of the two contiguous volumes in the series, by Professors Bush (1945) and Lewis (1954)" (2).

<sup>10</sup> See Douglas Bush, *English Literature in the Earlier Seventeenth Century 1600-1660* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1945), Lewis Library, Marion E. Wade Center, CSL Lib. PR431. B87 1945.

should be excluded, nor did they do so because of his limitations in Shakespeare so much as his expertise in the sixteenth century (especially Spenser) as would be evidenced in his then forthcoming 1936 volume *The Allegory of Love*.

Prior to the publication of *The Allegory of Love*, Lewis's only extant scholarly publications were a handful of book reviews, an essay on Chaucer and his source material "What Chaucer Really Did to *Il Filostrato*" (*Essays and Studies* XIX, 1932), one on Milton's *Comus* "A Note on *Comus*" (*Review of English Studies* VIII.30, 1932), and one on "Alliterative Metre" (*Lysistrata* II, 1935). One way he had made something of a critical name for himself, however, was in his discussions on Shakespeare and the "Genuine Text" where, in the pages of the *Times Literary Supplement*, he sparked, and subsequently entered into dialogue with key Shakespeare scholars of his period like W. W. Gregg, F. W. Bateson, and W. J. Lawrence in response, primarily, to John Dover Wilson's *Manuscript of Hamlet* (1934).<sup>11</sup> Therefore, in spite of these apparent "limitations" Lewis was showing his scholarly colours as a textual scholar of Shakespeare before he even had, in a more substantial manner, announced himself as a medieval scholar.

Furthermore, if the above were not evidence enough of critical misunderstandings of the . . . *Excluding Drama* book title as suggesting Lewis's lack of Shakespeare knowledge, we can simply return to Lewis's letter to Wilson. As a postscript, and continuing in the exclamatory tone with which the letter begins ("Really! Really!"), Lewis writes "No answer, forsooth! Marry, come up!" (168). Here, Lewis argues with Wilson's hasty decision. This is an especially bold manoeuvre on Lewis's part when we remember that Wilson was his tutor before becoming his colleague.<sup>12</sup> However, there is more here. Lewis is repurposing words which were not first his own. Best of all, he is repurposing lines from Shakespeare. In spite of his "limitations with Shakespeare" (Heck 38), here we see Lewis not excluding but, without invitation, pulling Shakespeare into the dialogue.

In this postscript, Lewis is playing with a line from Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, originally spoken by the Nurse, who admonishes Juliet's impatience.

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<sup>11</sup> See Lewis, "The Genuine Text", *The Times Literary Supplement* (23 May 1935), p. 33. See Joe Ricke's forthcoming article on "The Genuine-Text Controversy" for more detail on this dialogue. Lewis returned to this debate with Wilson later in life; see also Ricke, "'Text Corruptions' Corruption: Restoring C. S. Lewis's Critical Satire".

<sup>12</sup> Lewis F. P. Wilson was Lewis's undergraduate tutor at University College, Oxford (1925).

The tonal connection is clear, since Lewis in this letter is also admonishing Wilson for his haste in appointing authors to the *Oxford History of English Literature* series—himself, and Wilson’s vain attempts to persuade him to take on the sixteenth century volume, included. Specifically, Lewis repurposes the Nurse’s impatient “are you so hot” (2.5.62) with the more direct and pointed “no answer”. He follows this with a mock-Shakespearean flourish “forsooth!” before completing the phrase by continuing with the original line: “Marry, come up!” (2.5.62). Shakespeare critic R. W. Dent glosses the Nurse’s final three words as “a proverbial expression of indignant or amused surprise” (M699.2). Lewis uses them likewise to indicate both indignation and amused, or mock, surprise. The “Marry, come up!” in Lewis’s use of it seems also to be an order, as though he is demanding that Wilson “come up” with the good scholars and the good volume for Lewis. He further indicates his indignancy and amused surprise with his addition of the exclamation point. But there is one further dimension to the mocking tone here, as T. J. B. Spencer’s gloss on the Nurse’s line makes clear: “expressions of impatience or wounded dignity [are] affected here” (223). Lewis affects both.

As the misreading of the exclusion of drama from Lewis’s volume, and his tongue-in-cheek Shakespeare reference in correspondence concerning that same series have suggested, such critical generalizations or assumptions which conclude that “Shakespeare was not one of Lewis’s strengths” (Heck 38) need reassessing. But most misleading of all are too-literal responses to Lewis’s claim to be “no true Shakespearian scholar” (88). There is, therefore, a need for a reassessment of Lewis’s rhetoric, and an unpacking as to whether this lack of Shakespeare expertise claim (by Lewis and his critics alike) is a fair assessment.

### **“LET THE LITTLE CHILDREN COME”: LEWIS’S HUMILITY STANCE AND HAMLET**

Lewis begins his *Hamlet* lecture by stating that “a critic who makes no claim to be a true Shakespearian scholar and who has been honoured by an invitation to speak about Shakespeare to such an audience as this, feels rather like a child brought in at dessert to recite his piece before the grown-ups” (88). To start with, he distances himself from the “critic” he describes. This is “a critic” (88) not *the* critic. The distance between the third person and the first person (himself) is

swiftly contracted, such that in the second sentence he can draw on the childlike innocence of his (apparent) ignorance and declaring: “I have a temptation to furbish up all my meagre Shakespearian scholarship and to plunge into some textual or chronological problem in the hope of seeming, for this one hour, more of an expert than I am. But it really wouldn’t do. I should not deceive you: I should not even deceive myself. I have therefore decided to bestow all my childishness upon you” (88).<sup>13</sup> Perhaps we have been tempted by the equivalent in our field. The more obscure the “problem” (88) the better. But note also that he says “more of an expert than I am” (88). Lewis is not denying *all* expertise. Rather he is denying or stopping himself from being framed as *more* of an expert than he is. The phrase is predicated on his having *some* expertise.

This begs the question then, what is actually going on with Lewis’s emphasis on being “like a child” (88)? Lewis is engaging with the innocent child of the rhetorical topos. Innocence is framed not just as imperfection or deficiency but rather as a positive. As Philip Reynolds puts it “children provide a lesson in humility not because they themselves are humble . . . The little child’s example teaches a lesson of honesty” (171) not because the child possesses this virtue “rather his mind and body are not yet sufficiently developed for the corresponding vice” (171). The rhetoric depends on this emphasis. We see this directly in the writings of the medieval mystic Julian of Norwich and her emphasis on the childlike.

She shows the transformative meekness that comes from a childlike perspective and one which, as Grace Hamman has put it, “rejoices in the littleness” (n. p.) or rather our littleness. This of course also recalls Jesus’s emphasis on being like a child in Matthew 18:2-5 and the eternal value (and necessity) of being humbled to the point of becoming like a child again “for the Kingdom of God belongs to such as these” (Luke 18:16). Lewis then is drawing on the humbling and childlike emphasis of the humility topos but also showing the interpretive literary value of entering the world of *Hamlet* like a child.

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<sup>13</sup> Even better, this is a reference by and to the wise fool, Dogberry, in Shakespeare’s *Much Ado About Nothing*, who threatens to “bestow” (3.5.20) all his tediousness on Leonato. There is, therefore, an extra layer to this deliberately Shakespearean joke. (Thanks to Shakespeare scholar Dr. Joe Ricke for pointing this out to me, upon hearing the original paper at the “C. S. Lewis: The Re-Enchanted Academic” conference).

This emphasis on the things "a child . . . notices" (104) is something Lewis returns to at the close of his lecture, where, as Colin Manlove has suggested, we see Lewis's "untutored excitement" (129). However, Lewis's apparently "untutored" style does not suggest a lack of control but rather a rhetorical approach, since it leads Lewis's description of his own childlike response to *Hamlet*. As he gives us his wonder-full response to *Hamlet* he also points beyond the play to the believer's wonder (which Shakespeare's *Hamlet* gestures towards) of being able to wonder at death and the world beyond. Experientially, through his prose, Lewis reminds us what it is to feel and to be affected by a text. He pulls us away from arid character criticism and back to that childlike response, making good on his promise of "bestowing all of his childishness" (104) on us.

Although we may agree with Kevin Vanhoozer that "employing a 'true hermeneutic humility'" allows us "to receive something from the other, from the text, and from other interpreters," (159) this is not only all that Lewis is about here. He wants us to receive from the text first, and respond to other interpreters second. And one of the reasons for this emphasis on play, on responding to the text removed from the rough beat of the critical "meddlers", is the value of a personal response. As he says overtly in his own lecture:

What has attached me to this way of thinking is the fact that it explains my own experience. When I tried to read Shakespeare in my teens the character criticism of the nineteenth century stood between me and my enjoyment. There were all sorts of things in the plays which I could have enjoyed; but I had got it into my head that the only proper and grown-up way of appreciating Shakespeare was to be very interested [in the things these critics emphasized,]: in the truth and subtlety of his character drawing. A play opened with thunder and lightning and witches on a heath. This was very much in my line: but oh the disenchantment when I was told—or thought I was told—that what really ought to concern me was the effect of these witches on Macbeth's character! (94).

If criticism had disenchanting Shakespeare for him, then Lewis wanted, in his lecture, to reenchant or refocus his audience's vision on that enchanting capacity of the plays. Lewis emphasizes that "Left to myself I would simply have drunk it in and been thankful" (94) but in doing battle with the badgering critic at his elbow, this response was taken from him and "Shakespeare became a closed book. Read him in that way I could not; and it was some time before I had the

courage to read him in any other” (94). However, what bolsters his view (and his reframing of this rhetorically as a humble childlike response) is, surprisingly, more reading. As he continues: “Only much later, reinforced with a wider knowledge of literature, and able now to rate at its true value the humble little outfit of prudential maxims which really underlay much of the talk about Shakespeare’s characters, did I return and read him with enjoyment” (95). And his emphasis in his criticism is, as he models in this lecture, the “first thing”, childlike immediacy—“to surrender oneself to the poetry and the situation” (95).

One of the reasons we can be confident about Lewis’s humility rhetoric here (aside from the fact that he uses it elsewhere across his canon) is the way he describes Shakespeare scholars and, more specifically, the audience he is addressing, in private after the lecture. The extent to which his humility is a rhetorical stance emerges with a humorous flourish when read in conjunction with Lewis’s correspondence describing the lecture (and his audience) to his good friend Sister Penelope. In the days just before the lecture (20-22 April 1942) Lewis had gone to visit Sister Penelope and lecture to the convent of the Anglican community of St. Mary the Virgin in Wantage. In a follow-up letter, Lewis writes to Sister Penelope (11 May 1942), that his British Academy audience was “v. stupid” when “compared with [her] young ladies” (Lewis *Letters II* 520). He paints his audience as those who carefully cultivate their own image of their elite status: “all the sort of people whom one often sees getting out of taxis and going into some big doorway and wonders who on earth they are—all those beards and double chins and fur collars and lorgnettes. Now I know” (520). This commentary lends a rather more critical tone to his lecture description of “such an audience as this” (*Hamlet* 88).<sup>14</sup> When Lewis says he is not a Shakespeare scholar at least in part one meaning he may suggest is: *I am not the kind of scholar the rest of you have in mind when you think of Shakespeare scholars* (especially in his divergence from character criticism). He was being deferential, but he was also setting himself apart; peeling away at the layers of those who made up the fellows of the British academy and disenchanting their eliteness in this letter, while all the while seeking to pull them towards a more direct and more childlike response to the play.

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<sup>14</sup> Italics for emphasis, mine.



He returns directly to this emphasis at the close of the lecture which is made up of something like a litany of images from *Hamlet*.

I am trying to recall attention from the things an intellectual adult notices to the things a child or a peasant notices—night, ghosts, a castle, a lobby where a man can walk four hours together, a willow-fringed brook and a sad lady drowned, a graveyard and a terrible cliff above the sea, and amidst all these a pale man in black clothes (would that our producers would ever let him appear!) with his stockings coming down, a disheveled man whose words make us at once think of loneliness and doubt and dread, of waste and dust and emptiness, and from whose hands, or from our own, we feel the richness of heaven and earth and the comfort of human affection slipping away. In a sense I have kept my promise of bestowing all my childishness upon you. A child is always thinking about those details in a story which a grown-up regards as indifferent (104).

Throughout the lecture, Lewis highlights the tendency of some criticism to move us away from those details, those images, those pictures which enchant, or at least carry the capacity to enchant if we will let them. Criticism, as Lewis aptly demonstrates here, also has the capacity to re-enchant. It is not always disenchanting, though it can be, and sometimes that is necessary. Spells need to be broken too, whether the spells which bind are those of criticism which restricts our view, or something else. Criticism, after all, which pulls us away from the enchanting affecting potential of a text can occlude that to which stories might point us, our story and even *the* story.

Manlove has noted of Lewis that "the whole of his Christian life is founded on a totally new approach to God by way of a 'dialectic of desire', by tracing the powerful emotions awakened by certain images to what was for him their divine source" (*Literary Achievement* 215). But what is also true is that he used the stories of others, especially Shakespeare, to point to the greater story<sup>15</sup> and even to gesture or move us toward the divine. For Lewis, this was not just a theoretical possibility, something that books could do, but something that he had felt and had feelingly responded to himself.

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<sup>15</sup> See Lewis's use of secular stories in his apologetics such as *King Lear* in *The Four Loves*. See Sarah R. A. Waters, "Lewis, Lear, and The Four Loves".

Such a reading of Shakespeare, in fact, was a major part of the cluster of images and events which lead to his conversion.<sup>16</sup> His lecture for the British Academy was not the first time that Lewis articulated these ideas. There is an even earlier version of his reading of *Hamlet* with this emphasis on powerful images and surrender in a 1931 letter (22 September 1931) to Greeves where he writes:

I have been studying Hamlet very intensely, and never enjoyed it more. I have been reading all the innumerable theories about him, and don't despise that sort of thing in the least: but each time I turn back to the play itself I am more delighted than ever with the mere atmosphere of it—an atmosphere hard to describe and made up equally of the prevalent sense of death, solitude, & horror and of the extraordinary graciousness and loveableness of H. himself. Have you read it at all lately? If not, do: and just surrender yourself to the magic, regarding it as a poem or romance". Surrender yourself to the magic. To the enchantment. (Lewis *Letters* 1971)

"Surrender yourself to the magic" Lewis says, "to the enchantment" (971). His imperatives are bold and demanding as he urges Greeves to be reenchanted by Hamlet the character and the play. And in a similar letter just days earlier, also concerning a Shakespeare play, Lewis wrote about the value of plays (specifically *The Winter's Tale*) as pointing towards and expressing the great myths (968). So, stories of course can enchant, and Lewis knew this from the inside out. Lewis shows in his responses to *Hamlet* (and elsewhere) how, for him, Shakespeare's plays can not only enchant us in this world, but can also point us towards a deeper enchantment, which is not just a rhetorical flourish or trickery, but enchantment which points towards the author of our ultimate story. His emphasis on being "like a child" (88) is both part of the humility topos and his rhetorical "no claim" (88), but also points towards a deeper entering into another world by being childlike.

Disrupting the rhetorical flourish of one who protests he is "no . . . Shakespearian scholar" (88), I argue that Lewis attempted to destabilize the world of scholarly debate which demotes so-called *childish* responses to texts.

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<sup>16</sup> For further discussion of Lewis's use of Shakespeare in his correspondence with Greeves in these pivotal days, see Waters, "Shakespeare in (and on) the Margins."

Lewis's critical approach to Shakespeare both disenchants (the enchanting snares of criticism) and reenchants (by reveling in the images and "enchantment" (971) of *Hamlet*). His humility topos and emphasis on the "things a child notices" both shrouds his expertise and reframes expertise as the child-like imagination's willingness to enter into world(s) beyond this world.

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