

Boenig, Robert. *C. S. Lewis and the Middle Ages*. Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 2012. Pp. 181. ISBN: 9781606351147. Hardback. \$55.00

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When I was an undergraduate student in the 1990s, my favorite author was C. S. Lewis, and I viewed him largely, if not completely, through the lens of evangelical Christianity. As an undergraduate, I read most of the “staples” (pun intended) of Lewis’s work, such as *Mere Christianity*, *The Screwtape Letters*, *The Four Loves* (the only one of Lewis’s books he narrated in audio form), *A Grief Observed*, *Miracles*, and *Letters to Malcolm: Chiefly on Prayer*. I cannot honestly comment on all of Lewis’s works as I have not read *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* or any of the science-fiction *Ransom* trilogy. I have only limited understanding of his non-fiction books focusing on the Middle Ages. Still, the 1990s fostered an interest in Lewis when Anthony Hopkins played Lewis in the 1993 film of Lewis’ “Shadowlands,” as a follow-up performance to his role as Dr. “Hannibal the Cannibal” Lecter. Lewis’ centennial birth was in 1998.

One of the appeals of his writing was his ability to say anything, no matter how complex or seemingly simple, with the utmost clarity. It was as if I had found someone whose every word was absolute, pure gold. He also made academic life look virtually effortless. By the time I graduated from college, I felt I knew everything about Lewis that I need to know. In the years that followed, I never disliked Lewis, but that initial appeal cooled. After an initial reading of Boenig’s new book, an immediate thought is that the core of Boenig’s thinking would be cyclical reasoning: Lewis’s knowledge of the Middle Ages informed his Christianity, and Lewis’s Christianity informed his knowledge of the Middle Ages.

One word of caution: this is not a straightforward biography, nor is it pure

literary criticism. It is a mixture of both. That is, this book tracks the influence and impact of the Middle Ages on Lewis's life. In his introduction, Robert Boenig presents Lewis, born near the end of the Victorian era, as a man who was incompatible with his environment. Boenig begins his book with a brief sketch of medieval historicism, the uses and abuses critics made of the Middle Ages through the Victorian period. Just prior to Lewis's birth, the prevailing thought, one that Lewis rejected, held that in order to understand a medieval text, one had to strictly study the life and historical context of the medieval author. A reading of the actual medieval text was secondary, if necessary at all. Lewis believed just the opposite. For Lewis, in order to understand *The Canterbury Tales*, the best thing to do was to actually read *The Canterbury Tales*. This approach, called New Criticism, gained traction in the 1930s, the same time that Lewis made his mark in academia. For Lewis, readings of medieval literature to be augmented by biography was acceptable; but he never subscribed to this idea and was never considered a full member of this school of thought. He also disliked *The Canterbury Tales*, which was considered sacrilege in academic life and was therefore seen as an anomaly at the height of New Criticism. Toward the end of Lewis's life, critical thinking shifted, and the Middle Ages were viewed as being increasingly irrelevant to life in the late twentieth century. Lewis never developed a firm foothold in this camp either, emphasizing instead the common humanity between people in the Middle Ages and people in the modern age. Simply put, Lewis's approach to the Middle Ages was that this period had to be accepted on its own terms and any effort to graft a modern agenda onto (or extracted from) medieval texts was doomed to failure. To fully understand and appreciate the Middle Ages, one could not, so to speak, "twist the facts to fit the theory." C. S. Lewis, in other

words, was an academic vagabond, and it is not for nothing that upon accepting Cambridge University's chair of Medieval and Renaissance Literature in 1954, he referred to himself in his inaugural address as a dinosaur.

If lovers of the Middle Ages can be equated to dinosaurs, they can take solace in knowing not only that there was a time when dinosaurs not only lived but thrived. Specifically, Boenig's book unfolds as follows: Chapter one examines in depth Lewis's scholarly views on the predominant values of the Middle Ages, as explored in his books *Literature of the Sixteenth Century Excluding Drama*, *The Discarded Image* (the medieval view of the cosmos, as well as how the human body was seen as its own "cosmos"), and *The Allegory of Love*. In discussing Lewis's overarching view of how medieval people saw the world, Boenig cites a key criticism of Lewis. He could lapse into over-generalizing medieval influence and uniformity. While there may have been some or even many similarities in how people thought within a certain timeframe, say from the year 500 to the year 1000 one would think, some significant differences also existed. No, says Lewis. Indeed, Lewis's tendency was to "twist the facts to fit the theory" his own way and to see examples of medieval thinking well after the Middle Ages had ended. To Lewis's mind, this was evidence of how central the Middle Ages were to a complete understanding of history and evidence, further, of humanity's common nature. More specifically still, what humanity needs, Lewis would say, is God; and it is the simultaneous search for, and rejection of, God that most determines history beyond the Middle Ages.

That was the overarching view of Lewis the professional scholar. In chapter two, Boenig turns to tracking Lewis's interaction with the Middle Ages through his personal

correspondence. This chapter is particularly insightful in that it takes the reader from Lewis's earliest encounter with Medieval society during his childhood through his atheism as a young man to his acceptance of Christianity in the early 1930s and the solidifying of his ideas about the Middle Ages during his career as an author. Not only did the Middle Ages enrich Lewis throughout his life, but Lewis found himself time and again returning to the man who first intrigued him about all things medieval, the socialist William Morris. Whereas George MacDonald and G. K. Chesterton laid the foundations for Lewis's spiritual life as a Christian, William Morris guided Lewis' overall historical views. Additionally, Lewis's letters reveal that well into his career, the breadth and depth of the medieval reading he had already done by that time notwithstanding, he was willing to take his interest in the Middle Ages in unexplored directions. It was not until the early days of World War II that Lewis began reading the medieval mystics, Julian of Norwich being a particular favorite. Julian's line "All shall be well" was so succinct in its simplicity that Lewis struggled to understand how all can be well in a world that was trying desperately to tear itself apart; yet by the 1950s he incorporated the line into letters to people who were seeking his spiritual advice. As readers can see from his correspondence, Lewis believed that change is not only inevitable as we get older; but it should be expected and even embraced.

In the final two chapters, Boenig examines selections from Lewis's fiction, particularly a sampling of the *Narnia* books and the *Ransom* series, to advance an idea that Lewis began early in his academic career with an article explicating a minor piece by Chaucer. Basically, Lewis believed that fiction could be viewed like the construction of a medieval cathedral. Whereas stones could be laid on top of other stones to build a

structure, authors could engage one another in a conversation and iron out points of disagreement. Two examples should suffice. To begin, the first *Ransom* book is Lewis's response to the views of H. G. Wells. Lewis enjoyed reading Wells from childhood but disagreed with Wells' working assumption that the world should be engaged with fear and suspicion, symbolized by ugly, aggressive aliens living within the hollowness of the moon. Given a choice to stay or flee, Wells' characters flee. For Lewis, invoking the idea of courtly love (which he believed was medieval code for the proper conduct expected in the presence of royalty), encounters between alien species, be it people and animals, men and women, or humanity and God, result initially in suspicion but give way to curiosity, and, at best, this can lead to acceptance and love. When two stories have strong similarities but lead to different conclusions, the differences the second author incorporates in order to make the story his own (or as we might say, the way the story was "tweaked") are what Lewis describe as what the second author "really did" with the source material.

In Lewis's eyes, what T. H. White "really did" to the character of Merlin in *The Once and Future King* (the basis for the animated Disney film "The Sword in the Stone"), though Lewis admired White as a writer, was nothing short of sheer treason. Merlin (spelled Merlyn) is a comic figure who not only can travel through time but drops anachronistic nuggets such as mentioning Albert Einstein while tutoring the boy who will become King Arthur. Lewis set his rehabilitation of Merlin into motion in the *Ransom* installment *That Hideous Strength* by employing what he believed were the "soft borders" of medieval literature. This meant, alluding to the construction of a cathedral again, both figures and plotlines in literary works could be resuscitated by later authors,

especially where decisive authorship with the medieval source was in question or where medieval authors had based their work on a previous text (the Arthurian legend being a prime example). For Lewis, Merlin begins where Thomas Malory left him: in an underground prison which was capped off by a large rock. Lewis introduces Merlin to the other characters in the book by means of a distinctive medieval literary device, a riddle game, a device that Lewis's friend and fellow critic J.R.R. Tolkien employs between Bilbo Baggins and Gollum in *The Hobbit*. The main character in *That Hideous Strength* wins the game, thereby confirming to Merlin that he is a descendant of Arthur and is the next in the line of the Pendragons. In other words, Lewis engaged the Middle Ages by adding a chapter all his own to the King Arthur story. Lewis also fulfilled part of the function he wished to accomplish as an author of children's fiction: igniting in younger generations the pleasures he had found in medieval literature from childhood forward.

Only a couple of other points need to be mentioned. First, though Boenig does not delve into it, the date of Lewis's conversion to Christianity seems a bit murky. Boenig does not discuss Lewis's conversion until 67 pages in and gives the date as 1930. According to Joseph Pearce's *C. S. Lewis and the Catholic Church*, Lewis's conversion happened in 1929 after a discussion with Tolkien about the meaning of mythology that lasted until 4:00 in the morning—though Pearce also suggests that the foundations of Lewis's atheism were beginning to quake in 1918 during his service in World War I. I have also seen the date given, in a PBS documentary contrasting the thought of Lewis against the thinking of Sigmund Freud, as 1931. Suffice it to say that by the early 1930s, Lewis began identifying himself as a Christian (and this also alludes to a continuous,

lifelong call to live the Christian life).

Finally, some mention needs to be made of what I feel is the weakest part of the book. It is the last segment of chapter four in which Lewis uses Aslan the lion in *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* as a means of synthesizing three competing views of the atonement of Christ's death on the cross. These views are: One, Christ as a ransom paying the debt for Man's sins; Two, the view of Christ as perfection personified; and Three, the view of Christ as "the trickster" (meaning that the devil is lulled into a false sense of confidence and overplays his hand). This, in my opinion, is the weakest part of the book because it is the one segment in which Boenig delves into formal theology, and the extent to which he does so threatens to unravel any connection to Lewis. In discussing Lewis's use of the ideas of theologian Gustaf Aulen, Boenig says on page 132 that of all Lewis's writings, it is *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* where we see Aulen's ideas "in full view." Boenig does not begin to show us this "full view" of Aulen's impact on Narnia until eight pages later, enough time for the reader to wonder if he was ever coming back to Narnia at all. Happily, he does, but his explication of Lewis's work in these pages is perhaps the briefest in the whole book. One might wonder if this material could have been cut without affecting the overall effectiveness of the book as a whole.

That one criticism aside, this is a strong work. It is a lean volume with only 150 pages of text, yet there is a tremendous amount of material and detail in those 150 pages. For anyone wishing to possess a full (and I stress the word "full") appreciation for the life and writings of C. S. Lewis, this book is indispensable. There are many sides to C. S. Lewis. There is Lewis the champion of the Christian faith. There is Lewis the children's

author. There is Lewis the World War I veteran. There is Lewis the BBC broadcaster rallying Great Britain during the Blitz of World War II. There is Lewis the family man, husband of Joy Davidman and stepfather of Douglas Gresham. There is even Lewis the avowed atheist. One does not necessarily need to know about Lewis the medievalist in order to appreciate Lewis at all, nor, I suspect, does a professor teaching a course on medieval literature particularly need to know about Lewis the scholar, though it certainly wouldn't hurt. For a professor wishing to incorporate Lewis into a class on medieval literature, this book is indispensable.