

**“To Be Concerned about Being Grown Up”:  
Preoccupation with the Adult in C.S. Lewis’s Boxen Juvenilia**

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C.S. Lewis was born to be a writer. He once overheard his father tell his grandfather, ““He is the most easily amused child I ever saw. Give him pencil and paper and he’ll be quiet for hours”” (C.S. Lewis, “Autobiographical Fragment 2”). As a child, Lewis created imaginary worlds, and his earliest stories grew out of his drawings of Animalland, a country of anthropomorphic animals. At some point, Lewis merged his Animalland with his brother Warren’s land of India to create Boxen, a land inhabited by talking animals and Indians. Five “novels” and one play survive from the Boxen years. Surprisingly, scholars have ignored these earliest Lewis writings. Because juvenilia are traditionally considered non-canonical works “outside the corpus of respectable material for study,” Lewis’s Boxen juvenilia have been relegated to a “marginal literary status” (Alexander, “Defining” 93). However, the Boxen juvenilia deserve scholarly attention because the stories provide a glimpse into the mind of a child author, granting insight into Lewis’s childhood preoccupation with the adult.

In one of the few critical pieces on the Boxen juvenilia, Walter Hooper, the self-appointed literary executor of the Lewis estate and editor of many posthumously published Lewis essays, discussed the young Lewis’s deliberate attempts to “sound adult” in his juvenilia. Because Boxen is rarely mentioned in the critical conversation surrounding C.S. Lewis, this discussion merits long quotation. Hooper argues that the stories

are marred by a conscious effort on the young Lewis’s part to make them “grown up” – which to him meant stodgy, prosaic, and political. What makes this so ironic is that Lewis’s favourite books were fairy tales and romances. He was ashamed of these tastes, however, and in smothering his sense of wonder under the overlay of Boxen newspapers and railway timetables, his literary proclivities were –if not wasted –at least misdirected. There is a good deal of humour in these early efforts, but just at the moment when the

humour seems likely to bubble over and turn the stories in the direction they seem to *want* to take, Lewis brings them under the control of his even greater desire to make them dull and “believable”. Lewis told me that during his childhood “real” books meant, not the kind he enjoyed, but those that reflected most nearly the conversations and interests of adults. (Hooper, Preface 7-8)

Though Hooper, who edited the published version of three of the Boxen manuscripts, has written more about Lewis’s juvenilia than any other critic, his writings on this subject lack depth of critical analysis. He does not cite any of the stories to prove his points, nor does he attach much literary significance to the stories, a fact that is underscored by his immediate transition to Lewis’s teenage rejection of Boxen in favor of poetry. Other scholars have not been as generous as Hooper. In his biography of C.S. Lewis, A.N. Wilson wrote that anyone “looking in this early juvenilia for signs of the later Lewis will be disappointed...his childish fantasies are really rather dull” (16). Certainly, the juvenilia do not have the polished style and clarity of Lewis’s better-known, adult works, but this does not mean they are dull.

Lewis’s juvenilia arose out of a combination of boredom and clumsiness. According to Warren Lewis, the boys were not allowed to play outside their Belfast home when it rained, so they amused themselves with drawing and writing stories that morphed into a cohesive group of tales about their personal imaginary world (*C.S. Lewis* 3). In his autobiography, *Surprised by Joy*, C.S. Lewis offers a different explanation, declaring, “What drove me to write was the extreme manual clumsiness from which I have always suffered” (12). Unable to competently participate in games with other children, Lewis instead turned to writing and discovered his passion. Family letters written during this period of Lewis’s childhood often mention the stories, and Lewis frequently updated his brother, who was attending boarding school in England, on the

latest Boxonian developments. In one undated letter, he writes, “At present, Boxen is SLIGHTLY convulsed. The news has just reached us that King Bunny is a prisoner....Such was the state of affairs recently: but the able General Quicksteppe is taking steps to rescue King Bunny” (Warren Lewis, *Memoirs* 2:76).

In this letter, Lewis was almost certainly referring to one of the earliest Boxen stories; unfortunately, that story has been lost, since none of the surviving stories match the letter’s description. Dating the Boxen stories is extremely difficult, since neither Lewis brother remembered exactly when a particular story had been written; scholars generally estimate that Lewis was between eight and fourteen when he wrote his Boxen juvenilia. Since all of the Boxen stories are handwritten, scholars can determine a rough chronology; “Littera Scripta Manet,” for instance, features more mature-looking handwriting than “Boxen: or Scenes from Boxonian City Life.” After his brother’s death in 1963, Warren Lewis attempted to date some of the stories based on internal evidence such as an invitation dated April 3, 1912 in “Boxen: or Scenes from Boxonian City Life.” As Walter Hooper points out, however, the handwriting changes dramatically from one story to another, making Warren Lewis’s dating methodology seem unreliable (Introduction 18). Another piece of evidence that can help determine a rough timeline for the composition of the juvenilia is a collection of drawings called *Leeborough Studies*. Most of the drawings featuring Boxonian characters are dated 1908-1910, suggesting that Lewis spent a great deal of time working on the stories and related drawings when he was ten to twelve years old (C.S. Lewis, *Leeborough Studies*). Therefore, the best scholars can do is formulate an imperfect chronology of the juvenilia; however, this fact does not detract from the cohesiveness of the stories, or damage their internal chronology. Each Boxonian novel covers approximately one hundred to two hundred handwritten and illustrated pages in Lewis’s notebooks. These six

works (“Boxen: or Scenes from Boxonian City Life,” “The Locked Door,” “The Sailor,” “The Life of Lord John Big of Bigham,” “Littera Scripta Manet,” and an untitled, incomplete story) form a narrative revolving around several main characters and their adventures in politics and war.

The characters of Lord John Big, the kings Hawki V and Benjamin VII and James Bar appear in nearly all of the stories. Big, a frog, holds Boxen’s highest political office, and the two kings, an Indian and rabbit, respectively, are the joint sovereigns of Boxen who allow themselves to be dominated by Big’s overbearing personality. The kings’ characters are very similar – indifferent to politics and boyish. The “hock brown” bear James Bar is a steward in the Boxonian navy and Big’s arch enemy. Politically ambitious, he unceasingly tries to secure a political appointment, but Big always foils his schemes. The stories mainly explore the actions of these characters in the political arena. “Boxen: or Scenes from Boxonian City Life” depicts the life of the Boxonian elite, detailing the parties and plays that the kings and their guests attend, and recording the overthrow of the old Boxonian cabinet. In its sequel, “The Locked Door,” Polonius Green, a member of the new cabinet, is expelled, setting off a chain of events which ends with Boxen embroiled in a war with a neighboring country. “The Sailor” recounts the efforts of a young navy officer, Alexander Cottle, to reform the navy –especially James Bar –and his complicated and humorous attempts to cover up his failure at accomplishing reform. “The Life of Lord John Big of Bigham” gives Big’s biography and the history of his rise to power. “Littera Scripta Manet” alludes to a possible indiscretion in Big’s past and revolves around Bar’s blackmail of Big because of this secret. The final Boxen story is untitled and incomplete; it chronicles the beginning of a war with Prussia and offers interesting insights into various

characters' reactions to the news of war. The striking dominance of politics in the stories provides the most pervasive example of Lewis's admiration of and aspiration towards the adult.

Because of the overwhelmingly political nature of the stories, an understanding of the political makeup of Boxen is imperative to understanding the stories themselves. Boxen's government was roughly patterned after the British government, with several modifications. Boxen was ruled by two kings because, in the early history of the country, Animalland (created by C.S. Lewis) and India (created by Warren Lewis) merged into one unified country that retained the double monarchy. Boxen's Damerfesk was essentially the same institution as the British Parliament, and the Clique functioned as a cabinet of advisors. The highest political office was that of Little Master, a unique position of which Lewis wrote, "No other country in the world has an office so complex and so powerful as that of Little Master. That title includes the duties of speaker of the double House, guardian of the two Kings, head of the Clique or cabinet and Prime Minister" ("Untitled Incomplete Story" 118). Politicians were divided into two parties: the Walterians, who "stand by old customs" and the Divipians, who "are in favour of reform" (C.S. Lewis, "The Life of Lord John Big" 154).

"The Locked Door," which seems to be one of the earlier Boxen novels, is typical in that it centers on politics and war. The novel opens with Lord Big complaining to their Majesties about the presence of an unworthy parrot, Polonius Green, in the Clique. Big half-seriously suggests that the kings remove the parrot from the Clique. The kings carry out this suggestion at the next Clique meeting by declaring, "Whereas, we the kings of Boxen, do hereby lodge a formal objection against Polonius Green Esquire, he is no longer a member of the Clique" (C.S. Lewis, "The Locked Door" 100). Their action infuriates Green and inadvertently sets off a chain of events which ends in Green's procurement of a shipping monopoly with the Chess. A group of

foreigners who seemed to be modeled after European Jews, the Chess are Boxen's largest commercial trading partners, and their decision to transfer all of their shipping to Green's company endangers the Boxonian economy. Boxen subsequently declares war, and the Boxonian navy bombards Chess forts for several days. Complicating the plot is the fact that Green, anticipating the impending war, declines the Chess's offer of a shipping monopoly; however, the letter he sends announcing his intentions does not arrive at the Chessary until after the war has started. Once the Chess receive the letter and realize the cause for war has been removed, they call a cease-fire.

Though politics drive the plot of "The Locked Door," the relationship of some of the characters to their political surroundings is less than straightforward. The seemingly most political of Boxonian figures, the kings, have an ambiguous relationship to politics in this story. Lord Big, formerly the kings's tutor, continues to exert a great deal of influence over them in his office of Little Master, perhaps because the kings "had come to regard Lord Big, if not as a parent, at least as an esteemed and venerable relation" (C.S. Lewis, "The Sailor" 160). Though they are grown men and rabbits, the kings mostly act like boys; indeed, they are frequently referred to as "the boys." They think of politics as an "indescribable bore" and have to be cajoled into participating in Clique meetings (C.S. Lewis, "The Locked Door" 113). They even have to be reprimanded for bad behavior in these meetings; during one grand entry into the Clique chamber, "Benjamin spoilt everything by entering with his [crown] set at a racy angle: at a look, however, from the Little-Master he restored it to a horizontal position" (C.S. Lewis, "The Locked Door" 96). Periodically, however, the boys surprise everyone by actually ruling. When the Clique calls its own meeting (an unprecedented move) and starts to set forth its agenda despite Lord Big's protests, Hawki suddenly steps in and announces that the meeting will be

postponed until the following day. The other characters are shocked, because the “rajah had not done so much ruling on his own for years, and when he looked at Bunny to see if he agreed, that worthy rabbit was too surprised to make any sign” (C.S. Lewis, “The Locked Door” 114). This assertiveness on Hawki’s part is short-lived, however, and he and Benjamin soon revert back to allowing Big to make all major political decisions.

“The Life of Lord John Big” is another highly political story. The biography of Big, it offers a history of the frog’s turbulent youth and his rise to political power. Big was an unlikely character for the office of Little Master, because he had a “naturally hot temper” which lent itself to “excessive indulgence in the practice of dueling” (C.S. Lewis, “The Life of Lord John Big” 150-1). Even more troubling, Big’s past was rather indecorous. As a young boy, he attended boarding school where he participated in smuggling alcoholic beverages into the school and sneaked out at night to “visit loose women in the town” (C.S. Lewis, “The Life of Lord John Big” 144). Big’s questionable actions continue until war breaks out after the malicious lizard Orring destroyed a train “out of personal pique”; in response, Big enlisted in the army and was promoted to general for bravery (C.S. Lewis, “The Life of Lord John Big” 153). His political career began by accident, a result of a failed mission to raise more troops to fight in the war. When the Damerfesk refused to send more soldiers, Big decided to run for election to make his voice heard. He was elected and quickly made his presence known, for on his third day in the Damerfesk, ““he saved his country and established forever his political reputation” by “calling upon the members not as Walterians and Divipians but as Boxonians,” reminding them of “those brave fellows who were doubtless at that moment existing merely on the hope of reinforcements” and argued that if Boxen did not attend to the war, it stood to lose not only its colonies but also Boxonian sovereignty (C.S. Lewis, “The Life of Lord John Big” 164). Big’s talent for polemical



speechmaking secured his place in politics and in the kings's court as tutor to the young princes (who became the Hawki and Benjamin of most of the Boxen stories). "The Life of Lord John Big" is the only in-depth study of any Boxonian character, and its focus on the most prominent politician in Boxen demonstrates the importance the young Lewis placed on his political characters.

The political framework is the most prominent characteristic of Lewis's longing to be adult, but other, smaller elements contribute to the suspicion that Lewis, as a pre-adolescent boy, wanted to be taken seriously as a writer, and that he thought the best way to achieve this goal was to imitate the adult world as closely as he could. Characters play whist in the evenings and attend dinner parties where they engage in polite but boring conversation. In "Boxen: or Scenes from Boxonian City Life," the kings are forced to attend a party. Benjamin strikes up a conversation with another young guest, Phyllis Legrange, which demonstrates the socially awkward conversations endemic to Boxonian elite society:

"Good evening," said Bunny nervously. "Er –have you been to Sangaletto?"<sup>1</sup>

"No," replied Miss Legrange, "I never go to operas."

"I hate them," said the rabbit, feeling it was what he should say.

"Oh your Majesty! That's very bad taste."

Then they both laughed politely. (C.S. Lewis *Boxen* 76)

The polite but boring dinner party conversations reflect the young Lewis's opinion of dreaded "social functions," at which he resolved to "never on any account speak of any subject in which I felt the slightest interest nor in any words that naturally occurred to me" (*Surprised by Joy* 48). Ironically, the adult Lewis claimed to have hated adult dinner parties as a child because of their inherent hypocrisy, writing, "It was the false position...that tormented me; to know that one was

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<sup>1</sup> Lewis inserts a footnote here explaining that *Sangaletto* is "A grand opera of the heaviest type."

regarded as a child and yet be forced to take part in an essentially grown-up function, to feel that all the adults present were being half-mockingly kind and pretending to treat you as what you were not” (*Surprised by Joy* 47). Though he despised the adult world he observed at parties, Lewis nevertheless sought to model his fiction after it, even imitating the very “social functions” he deplored.

If Lewis was trying to write a serious work about Boxonian life modeled after the adult world he observed, he failed miserably. In the most “adult” sections of the stories, the language is stilted, awkward, and less than lucid. Cumbersome wording is endemic to the juvenilia, and it becomes more pronounced towards the end of Boxen. “The Sailor,” most likely the final story, opens with arguably the worst passage in the juvenilia:

The Charlestown express panted its noisy way into the Murry terminus, and its entrance was the signal for a rush of eager porters towards the edge of the brown platform whose surface afforded landing to the passengers of the train. As the breaks squeaked and the wheels ceased to revolve, the door of a first class compartment opened to give egress to a passenger, of whom it is desirable for us to take a brief survey. (C.S. Lewis, “The Sailor” 153)

This convoluted passage in which Lewis clumsily describes a train entering a depot demonstrates a belief frequently held by inexperienced writers. Lacking practice, these authors often assume that by using large words and long sentences, they can make their writing seem more sophisticated and grown up. To borrow from Lewis’s description of one of Lord Big’s speeches, these authors believe their writing contains “Those touches of poetry which are almost poetical in their polished simplicity” (“The Life of Lord John Big” 165). In reality, these attempts to be artful fall flat because they are wordy, unclear, and imprecise. This passage from “The Sailor”

stands in marked contrast to Lewis's later writing, where he comments, "to say the very thing you really mean, the whole of it, nothing more or less or other than what you really mean; that's the whole art and joy of words" (*Till We Have Faces* 294). As he matured and grew more confident in his abilities as a writer, Lewis dropped the self-conscious writing style of his youth and instead strove for clarity and simplicity in his writing.

The clumsy writing style can also betray an ignorance of one's subject matter. One of the most prominent examples of this occurs in "The Locked Door." When the kings and the Little Master go to the Frater Senior Von Quinklë, leader of the Chess, to declare war, Lewis writes a belabored exchange between the two sides that readily illustrates his attempts to have an adult writing style about adult subjects.

"Well," said Big, "get to business. Either you consent or you eat your words. Let me warn you resistance is useless."

"I seem to have heard that phraze [sic] somewhere before: its not original."

"Sir, d—bother your impudence. Remember —"

"Whip me this insolent toad from the presence," said the Chessman in the same even voice. Big's eyes were once more bandaged & he was hurried away, but the Frater Senior's injunctions were not literally carried out.

"Now," he went on, "have you two kings anything to say?"

"We declare war."

"So do we."

"Quite so. Good morning." (C.S. Lewis, "The Locked Door" 127)

This passage illustrates not only the ungainly language Lewis could use as a child (in marked contrast to the simple, clear prose he wrote as an adult) but also the perils of writing about

subjects beyond one's knowledge. Lewis does not have a clear understanding of how nations really declare war on each other, so the Boxonian declaration of war is startling in its simplicity, especially when compared to Lord Big's convoluted language directly above. It is interesting to note that Lewis included a similar declaration of war in the Narnian story *Prince Caspian*. In that story, the young High King Peter declares war by issuing a written challenge to Narnia's enemies, dictating, "Wherefore we most heartily provoke, challenge, and defy your Lordship to the said combat and monomachy" (C.S. Lewis, *Prince Caspian* 190). The language in this later passage is formal and stilted, like in Boxen, but Lewis has a surer grasp of tone. Whereas the kings sound unsure of their ability to declare war in the Boxonian declaration, Peter confidently and almost arrogantly challenges his enemy.

More examples of attempts at adulthood are found in "Littera Scripta Manet," the only surviving Boxonian play. The play is unique in that it avoids overt political discussion, focusing instead on a possible scandal from Lord Big's past. Rumors fly that Gladys Green, the grown daughter of a popular actress, is Big's child; the rumors are based on an autographed photograph of Big that Gladys inherited from her deceased mother. Ambiguous about the truth of this rumor, Lewis leaves the reader uncertain as to Gladys's paternity. Regardless of the truth of Gladys's ancestry, Big allows Gladys and her lover, his old enemy James Bar, to blackmail him in order to keep the scandal quiet, thus preserving his status and reputation. Big's blackmail payments successfully quell damaging rumors, to the point that when Bar and Gladys marry, one of the wedding guests comments on "Lord Big being present and playing the kind old uncle" for the orphaned Gladys (C.S. Lewis, "Littera Scripta Manet" 41). The scandalous subject matter of this story is striking, as it seems much more suited for a tabloid than a young boy's fiction. Not only does Lewis, in the first decade of the twentieth century, casually write about an unmarried couple

living together, he also nonchalantly mentions blackmail as an acceptable, perhaps necessary, part of keeping the indiscretions of private life separate from the political arena.

Lewis continues his shocking subject material in a conversation between Lord Big and Bar. Irrate over the blackmail payments he is forced to make, Big vows that he will not make another payment until Bar and Gladys are married. When he confronts Bar with this resolution, Bar laughs and begins a monologue denouncing marriage as “a relic of the dark ages” that “should have been abolished when its fellow evils were swept away. It belongs to the realm of magic, the burning of witches, religious intolerance, torture, despotic power, the office of the Little Master” (C.S. Lewis, “*Littera Scripta Manet*” 35). Big, infamous for his short temper, cannot tolerate this insult to his honor and subsequently thrashes Bar. Focusing on the slight to his honor and his office, Big overlooks Bar’s surprising statements on the irrelevancy of marriage. Bar is a prankster, making it difficult to determine when he is serious and when he is jesting. His extreme claim that marriage is as outmoded as witch burning hardly reflects the norm of either Boxonian society or early twentieth century Irish society. If Lewis is trying to be grown-up in this play, he is failing to accurately reflect the conservative sphere of his father and his comrades. The adult world personified by James Bar seems to be in rebellion against both the world of Lewis’s father and the world that Lewis portrayed in “The Locked Door.” If, as is commonly assumed, “*Littera Scripta Manet*” was written after “The Locked Door,” the difference may be explained by Lewis’s age and growing independence. Enamored with the prospect of adulthood, Lewis says extreme things –like the marriage speech –in the hopes that he will be received as sophisticated and witty.

Though adult conversations and activities dominate the Boxen juvenilia, Lewis’s penchant for sounding adult does not spoil the charm of his juvenilia, for there are glimpses of

the child author behind the stories. In “The Sailor,” a voyage begins with the crew flipping a coin to decide who will take first watch (169). At another point in “The Sailor,” Lewis introduces the coming of a calamity with “Suddenly it happened! It always does happen suddenly, whether it is the murder of the heroine, or the opening of an overture at an opera, or one’s bow tie slipping” (188). The comparison of a tragedy to a bow tie slipping demonstrates a child’s perspective of disaster, for a child would be concerned about his tie sliding off at the most inopportune moment during an adult dinner party, much like the ones the young Lewis was often required to attend. Most of the glimpses of the young author, however, come in the form of pranks, where Lewis displays his sense of humor and fun. During a meeting of the Damerfesk, the trumpeter discovers, much to his chagrin, that the vindictive Polonius Green had stuffed his trumpet full of glue (C.S. Lewis, “The Locked Door” 119). A similar prank occurs in “The Life of Lord John Big of Bigham.” In that biography of the illustrious Little Master, a courtier, Lord Twinklebury, who dislikes Big and resents his popularity with the kings, petulantly tattles on Big, reporting all of the naughty things the young kings do under Big’s tutelage. He also fills Big’s shoes with glue and straw (C.S. Lewis, “The Life of Lord John Big” 167-8). His actions are petty, and it is hard to believe that any adult would think these behaviors effective or appropriate methods of revenge. For a child, however, they are humorous and perfectly valid ways of vengeance.

The most humorous prank in the Boxen stories, however, is the Golf Ball Incident from “The Locked Door.” It begins when the same vindictive Polonius Green, angered at his recent expulsion from the Boxonian Clique, complains to his friends and seeks their advice for vengeance. One of these friends is James Bar, the most notorious Boxonian prankster, whose captain has to remind him at the beginning of sea voyages to refrain from occupying his free time “in turning my ship into a pandemonium” (C.S. Lewis, “The Sailor” 169). Bar, whose

political ambitions have long been frustrated, can no longer contain his ire at being shut out of the Clique by his enemy, Lord Big. He suggests that Green challenge the Little Master to a duel, but Green contemptuously dismisses this suggestion. Bar “was silent for some seconds & then cried ‘I have it,’ & burst into laughter.” For several minutes, he is so overcome with “aching sides & streaming eyes” at the thought of his brilliant solution that he cannot speak. Finally, he explains his plan, and the friends share “a hearty guffaw at the scheme. It was as follows: to buy (at the Little-Master’s expense) 500 golf balls, with which they would (by the connivance of the palace servants) stuff his mattress” (C.S. Lewis, “The Locked Door” 102). A few pages later, Lewis depicts Lord Big lying on his bed, unable to understand why it is so hard and lumpy. After several valiant attempts to fall asleep despite the discomfort, Big decides he simply cannot stand the pain a moment longer. He takes out his pocket-knife and slits the mattress; “A second later he regretted [sic] the rash act for a deluge of golf-balls sprang out, bouncing from floor to walls and thence to the Little-Master’s person” (C.S. Lewis, “The Locked Door” 104). Green and Bar complete their revenge when Big receives the bill for £50 worth of golf balls. Lewis goes to great lengths to craft this prank, the most elaborate and lengthy trick in his juvenilia. In the midst of politics and awkward language, the pranks provide refreshing glimpses of the child behind the stories.

As Lewis grew older, the focus of Boxen seems to have shifted. The wars of “The Locked Door” and the rearranging of the Clique in “Boxen: or Scenes from Boxonian City Life” give way to the more daring situations and conversations of “Littera Scripta Manet.” The transformation of the world of Boxen is most clearly seen in “The Sailor,” one of the last Boxen stories. This story is unique in that the normal main characters –Lord Big and the kings –have only marginal roles. Instead, James Bar and Alexander Cottle drive the story. Cottle is a young,

idealistic cat who has just graduated from the naval academy. He is assigned to Bar's ship, the *Greyhound*, and is commissioned by Field Marshal Fortescue to reform the "tone" of the navy (C.S. Lewis, "The Sailor" 165). The young cat is flattered by the idea of being entrusted with such a grave mission, and "in imagination saw himself already famous as the Remaker of Boxen's Navy" (C.S. Lewis, "The Sailor" 165). Lewis quickly undercuts the cat's enthusiasm, pointing out, "It never struck the young patriot that there was anything ludicrous in the idea of his, a young lieutenant, being entrusted with the reformation" of veteran sailors ("The Sailor" 165). The reform fails dismally, for most of the crew of the *Greyhound* do not want to be reformed since it will entail more work than they presently are required to perform. Bar especially encourages Cottle to give up his reforming ways, making it clear that he does not want "two gunnery days a week" or "a lot of rot about my duty" (C.S. Lewis, "The Sailor" 176). The two argue over the issue, revealing their very different perspectives:

"Look here," said Bar. "Drop it. Thats [sic] the advice of a man who has been at the game for fifteen years."

"Yes. And what has he done in fifteen years?"

Bar shrugged his shoulders.

"What does anyone do?" he asked.

"His duty!" Cottle fired the words at his opponent, like so many cannon balls.

"What is duty?"

"Well, I suppose, work."

"Well, I do enough work, at any rate."

"You've never done a hand's turn."



“And you, what have you done? Nothing except fool about melodramatically on the bridge deck.”

“I did my best.”

“Well, I’ve been doing my best for fifteen years.”

“I doubt it.” (C.S. Lewis, “The Sailor” 178)

The heated conversation ends in blows as Bar is literally kicked out of the door of his own cabin.

The second half of the story abruptly begins with the appearance of Bar and Cottle on shore leave. They visit Viscount Puddiphat, an old friend of Bar’s and a connoisseur of wine, women, and parties, and inform him that Bar is no longer the leader of a “desperate set” but has been reformed by Cottle’s persistent efforts (C.S. Lewis, “The Sailor” 182). The reform, however, is quickly revealed as a charade, for Cottle has given up reforming and has been influenced by Bar’s lazy, self-indulgent ways. However, Cottle is terrified of returning to Field Marshal Fortescue with news of his failure, so he and Bar agree to pretend that Bar has been reformed. Keeping up this lie leads to trouble. Bar and Cottle attend Puddiphat’s party and are nearly caught there by Lord Big and Fortescue. Worst of all, they miss the sailing of their ship. Knowing that their tardiness makes them deserters, Bar and Cottle, taking a *carpe diem* approach to the situation, calmly decide that nothing can be done and drink some more alcohol before leaving for the railway station. Coincidentally, that night the railway workers go on strike, stranding Bar and Cottle and giving them an excuse for their tardiness. Their captain sees through the obvious lie, but is willing to ignore it in order to get his two officers back “for the good of the ship” (C.S. Lewis, “The Sailor” 194).

Cottle’s change in character is startling partly because it is so abrupt, but more so because Lewis gives no explanation of how Cottle was persuaded to give up his reformation goals.

Instead, Lewis dismisses the entire idea and pokes fun at Cottle's idealistic visions of the navy and his place in it. He ends the story by writing of Bar and Cottle, "They have since been good friends if not good officers and they manage to hit off a golden mean between Bar's desperate exploits and Cottle's absurd idealism" (C.S. Lewis, "The Sailor" 194). This stark assessment of "absurd idealism" is disconcerting coming from a young boy. Lewis seems cynical, a tone he rarely –if ever –displays in his adult writings. The example of Cottle demonstrates that the juvenilia are more complicated than they seem at first glance. They are stories of talking animals, but they are also representations of a boy's worldview –both of what it currently is and of what he is consciously trying to mold it into, in order to make it better fit the adult world he is striving to imitate.

Imitation is a common feature of juvenilia, so it is not surprising that Lewis's juvenilia should copy some of the things he observed in the world around him. Robert Browning argued that imitation is a necessary part of artistic development, because "Genius almost invariably begins to develop itself by imitation...its object is to compete with, or prove superior to, the world's already-recognised idols, at their own performances and by their own methods" (qtd. in Alexander, "Defining" 78-9). Imitation, then, becomes an integral part of the creative process and offers insight into the mind of the child author. By studying the forms and conventions a child imitates, scholars can learn more about that child's reading habits; juvenilia scholars such as Christine Alexander argue that all children –and to some extent, adults, as well –imitate the books they read until they develop confidence in their own abilities as writers. ("Nineteenth-Century Juvenilia" 18). In the case of C.S. Lewis, this assumption does not hold true. Lewis wrote that the books he loved most as a child were fairy tales and similar books: Beatrix Potter, E. Nesbitt's *Five Children and It*, *Gulliver's Travels*, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's *Sir Nigel*

(*Surprised by Joy* 14). Yet his juvenilia does not reflect these literary tastes; if anything, it shies away from them. Instead of being poetic and imaginative like a fairy tale, the Boxen stories are prosaic and practical. Children, then, can imitate far more than simply narrative forms; they can and do imitate the adult life they observe around them.

In particular, Lewis's juvenilia reflect the world of the adults he interacted with. Because most of the Boxen novels center on politics, it would be easy to assume that Lewis had a keen interest in politics. This assumption would be in keeping with prevailing juvenilia criticism, which maintains that because most child art is made for a select audience, or an audience of one, the materials that are included are indicative of the interests of the author (Brent Wilson 46). Lewis biographer Alan Jacobs, operating under similar assumptions, postulates that Lewis made his juvenilia so political and adult-like because, as a boy, he read more adult books than typical turn-of-the-century children's fiction (14). However, Warren Lewis offered a different, more convincing explanation: Lewis's preoccupation with politics resulted from the culture of his home life. Lewis's mother, Flora, died when he was ten, leaving his grieving father uncertain how to raise two rambunctious boys on his own. The boys were often subjected to listening to their father's political conversations. Albert Lewis and his friends of like political opinion regularly engaged in what Warren Lewis described as "a contest as to which could say the most insulting things about 'this rotten Liberal government'" (*C.S. Lewis* 23). In Warren's opinion, the "torrent of vituperation" convinced his brother that "'grownup' conversation and politics were one and the same things, and that therefore he must give everything he wrote a political framework" (Warren Lewis *C.S. Lewis* 23). Warren Lewis's postulation is the best explanation of his brother's preoccupation with politics, for the stories also reflect a conscious effort to be "adult."

Interpreting Lewis's motivations for trying so hard to be adult is a difficult and knotty task. Critics who study juvenilia wrestle with what Brent Wilson calls the "fundamental question" –why children create art in the first place (45). It is clear from his juvenilia and other childhood writings that C.S. Lewis considered himself an author in every sense of the word. He titled his diary "My life during the Xmas holidays of 1907 by Jacks or Clive Lewis author of 'Building of the promanad' 'Toyland' 'Living races of Mouse-land' etc."<sup>2</sup> (Warren Lewis, *Memoirs* 3:89). Juvenilia critics argue that children provide a more "authentic" child's voice than adults can, and assert that there is a place for "what children have to tell us of themselves" in the rapidly expanding twenty-first century literary canon (Alexander and McMaster 1). Children engage in "colonizing the adult world" by giving "an account of both their own and the adult world, adopting the freedoms of the adult world within a defined discourse, and exploring a power not normally associated with childhood" (Alexander, "Play and Apprenticeship" 31). Children often give an image of their world, but they also, like Lewis, portray the world of adults as they interpret it. This idea of the colonization of the adult world is readily apparent in C.S. Lewis's juvenilia, which barely speaks of children or childhood. Instead, the focus is solely on adults –specifically, politicians.

However, conventional juvenilia criticism is ill-equipped to handle Lewis's juvenilia, because Boxen defies many of the expectations critics have placed on juvenilia. Two major trends of criticism surface in current juvenilia scholarship. One school of critics advocates the apprenticeship theory, which holds that "discovering the relation of an author's early work to the same author's adult work" is the major reason to study juvenilia (Alexander and McMaster 3). These critics believe that by studying juvenilia, scholars can catch glimpses of the adult writer maturing as hints of later works appear in the childhood stories. This branch of criticism is

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<sup>2</sup> These are presumably pre-Boxen stories that, unfortunately, have not survived.

countered by advocates of the play theory, which maintains that juvenilia are deserving of serious literary study based on their own merit. Their authors “are not just children working towards the ‘real’ achievement of adult writing. Their writing is valuable because they write *as* children: they provide us with an authentic vision of a world we as adults really need to pay attention to” (McMaster 66).

Both schools of juvenilia criticism rely heavily on biographical criticism, seeking to relate the author’s life to events in his stories. This form of criticism is helpful in understanding the young Lewis’s motivations up to a point. Some of the events in his stories mirror his childhood; in *Surprised by Joy*, for instance, Lewis remarks that readers of Boxen can “divine a certain resemblance between the life of the two kings under Lord Big and our own life under our father” and acknowledges that this is partly true (80). However, the main impetus behind the biographical criticism is to discover the relationship of a known author’s early work to his adult writings. This does not seem to be helpful in Lewis’s case; in fact, the opposite seems to be true. Comparing the Boxen tales to the *Chronicles of Narnia*, for instance, is not as fruitful as contrasting these two sets of Lewis stories. Many juvenilia critics, in their zeal to discover hints of things to come, have neglected to devote much attention to the aspects of juvenilia that do not reappear in the writer’s adult works. As critic Christine Alexander writes,

Whereas adults are constrained by their own inability to pretend, the play of children will by its nature be distinct. The same can be said of writing by children, unconstrained as this writing (which embodies play) often is by self-consciousness, by a judgemental [sic] audience, or by deference to social mores. We find in the manuscripts of child authors an audacity and humour that is often lacking in their adult productions. (“Nineteenth-Century Juvenilia” 27)

This quote is particularly applicable to the juvenilia of C.S. Lewis. Those looking for similarities between Narnia and Boxen will be disappointed, because the writing style and content of the two sets of stories drastically differs. But that does not mean that the juvenilia should be disregarded or relegated to “a marginal literary status,” as they have been by both Lewis critics and juvenilia scholars (Alexander, “Defining” 93). Lewis’ juvenilia display a preoccupation with adulthood not seen again in his later writings. Instead of looking for what is not present in the juvenilia, scholars should pay attention to the presence of elements in the juvenilia that are absent from his adult writings. By ignoring what does not appear in an author’s writings again, critics are quite possibly missing the essence of a child’s writing.

As an adult, Lewis retained his fondness for his juvenilia. During a series of visits to his childhood home in 1927-1928, Lewis worked on cataloging all the extant juvenilia he could find, intending to create an *Encyclopedia Boxoniana*, a task he never completed. Spending such effort on childhood stories attests to their lasting importance. More evidence of Lewis’s enduring attachment to Boxen comes from his diary and letters to his brother. In 1922 –at the age of twenty-four –Lewis recorded in his diary that he and his brother had passed the morning “with some reading of an old MS from the playbox (‘The Sailor’)” (Warren Lewis, *Memoirs* 7:309).

Warren Lewis claims that this was not an isolated incident, and that “right up to the end of Jack’s life I doubt if a week ever passed without a ‘Do you remember...?’ from one of us, followed by a delighted recognition of some attic incident or quotation from Boxonian literature” (*C.S. Lewis* 11). When Albert Lewis died in 1930, the brothers spent days clearing out their childhood home in Belfast and burying their old toys in the garden; however, they carefully saved their stories (Warren Lewis, *Memoirs* 11:5). Indeed, Warren Lewis wrote that they tried to go through the stories, presumably with the intention of choosing some to save and some to

destroy, but “it soon degenerated into a random reading of our old treasures” (*Memoirs* 11:5-6). Perhaps the most important piece of evidence for the importance of Boxen to the adult Lewis comes from a 1927 letter from Lewis to his brother. In the midst of his *Encyclopedia* project, Lewis wrote, “I suppose it is only accident, but it is hard to resist the conviction that one is dealing with a sort of reality. At least so it seems to me, alone in the little end room” (Warren Lewis, *Memoirs* 9:291)

The preoccupation with the adult that Lewis displays in his juvenilia is puzzling because as an adult, Lewis wrote that his father “represented adult life as one of incessant drudgery under the continual threat of financial ruin”; for his part, Lewis “took it all literally and had the gloomiest anticipation of adult life” (*Surprised by Joy* 23). Yet despite this claim from the adult Lewis, it seems apparent that the adult world held a certain attraction for the young Lewis. Perhaps what Lewis was trying to emulate was not really adult but was, in reality, adolescent. In his autobiography, he acknowledges that as a schoolboy, he was deeply impressed by the perceived sophistication of one of his young tutors at boarding school. Lewis calls this young man Pogo, and writes at length about all the things Pogo knew:

Pogo was a great theatrical authority. We soon knew all the latest songs. We soon knew all about the famous actresses of that age...Pogo was a fund of information about their private lives. We learned from him all the latest jokes; where we did not understand he was ready to give us help. He explained many things. After a term of Pogo's society one had the feeling of being not twelve weeks but twelve years older. (*Surprised by Joy* 68)

Lewis confesses that through Pogo, he learned to lust after the World and intensely felt “the desire for glitter, swagger, distinction, the desire to be in the know” (*Surprised by Joy* 68). Lewis's acquaintance with Pogo came after Boxen's creation, but probably before its end

(though this is difficult to determine, given the ambiguity of dating the stories). It is possible that Lewis knew Pogo during the period that he wrote his last few Boxen stories. Certainly, Lewis had been exposed to boarding schools for several years before he ended his Boxen stories. It is likely that he got his ideas for the juvenilia's increasingly scandalous conversation, as seen in "Littera Scripta Manet," and growing disillusionment and cynicism, best seen in "The Sailor," from his classmates and tutors like Pogo. Desiring to be "grown up," Lewis, like many pre-teenagers, mistook adolescence for adulthood.

As an adult, Lewis remarked on the preponderance of adult aspirations in his juvenilia, writing, "such reflections of the real world had not been the germ out of which Boxen grew. They were more numerous as it drew nearer to its end, a sign of over-ripeness or even the beginning of decay" (*Surprised by Joy* 81). The adult Lewis realized what his childhood self had not: that Boxen was at its best when it was most imaginative and least adult-like. The Boxen juvenilia are fascinating in part because they are so stylistically different from Lewis's adult works; in trying to be adult, he stifled the creative impulses that made him a good writer. As an adult, Lewis realized the foolishness of his childhood preoccupation with adulthood and wrote, "To be concerned about being grown up, to admire the grown up because it is grown up, to blush at the suspicion of being childish; these things are the marks of childhood and adolescence" (C.S. Lewis, "On Three Ways" 25). For Lewis, immaturity is characterized by the blind admiration of the adult he displays in his juvenilia. Through Boxen, readers gain an important insight into the character of Lewis that they would otherwise miss. The juvenilia show a different side of the man who, as an adult, was unafraid to write fantasies and children's stories. Secure in his adulthood and confident in his abilities as a writer, Lewis created the kind of stories he wanted to write and liked to read. The fact that he did just the opposite as a child, writing stories whose



content had little that intrinsically interested their author, offers a new perspective on the creative mind and development of C.S. Lewis.

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