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Hamlet in Narnia: The Prince and the Poem in Lewis's Chronicles of Narnia

Abstract

C.S. Lewis is little-known for his Shakespeare scholarship except perhaps for his lecture "Hamlet: The Prince or the Poem" for the British Academy (1942). This essay begins by discussing Lewis's approach to the play and his desire to reenchant his audience with the play he had loved as a child, before character-criticism got in the way. It then explores how Lewis takes the Prince and the aspects he found most affective in *Hamlet* out of the play and explores them, imaginatively, in another world: recasting them "for children" in *Narnia*. The essay considers Hamlet in *The Silver Chair* in which Rilian is literally compared to the Prince, the Hamlet-like trajectory of *Prince Caspian*, and finally, in *The Last Battle*, the recreation of another world characterized by its pervasive atmosphere of death in which characters and readers alike are called to consider "being dead".

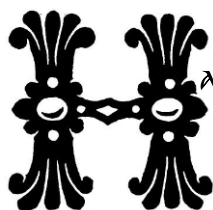
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C.S. Lewis; Shakespeare; Hamlet; Death; The Silver Chair; Prince Caspian; The Last Battle

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HAMLET IN NARNIA:

THE PRINCE AND THE POEM IN LEWIS'S *CHRONICLES OF NARNIA*

SARAH R.A. WATERS

C.S. LEWIS'S WORK ON SHAKESPEARE IS LITTLE KNOWN and little acknowledged.¹ If his work on Shakespeare is known at all, his lecture "Hamlet: the Prince or the Poem?" to the British Academy, given in 1942, is perhaps best-known.² Less acknowledged, but well-documented is the fact that Lewis was interested in and drew on *Hamlet* as a frame of reference throughout his life. As Lionel Adey has noted, from *Boxen* onward we see evidence of Lewis's "sustained interest in *Hamlet*" (4); indeed, "in his first surviving notebook he called it Shakespeare's best play" (4). Walter Hooper notes that "'In Notebook I' [...] Lewis scribbled, 'Who do you think wrote the best plays? I can form a good idea which poet wrote the best. When Shakespeare was alive he wrote the best, what play do you think was best. I think *Hamlet* was'" ("Introduction" 9). Lewis and Hooper tentatively date this comment and this notebook to 1906 (Lewis "*Encyclopaedia Boxoniana*" 197; Hooper 9).³ Elsewhere, Lewis used the relationship between Hamlet and Shakespeare—with Shakespeare representing Spirit, Hamlet, the individual, and the other characters representing other souls—throughout his "Great War" with Owen Barfield (67-69). Thus, he surmises, "metaphorically, I may regard myself as one of the characters in the drama composed by the spirit" ("*Great War*" 68), ultimately concluding that, just as "Hamlet cannot meet Shakespeare," nor can the individual instigate a meeting with the Spirit (70). In *Pilgrim's Regress*, Lewis returns to this same theme of the degree to which the created has any agency (or life) outside being contemplated by their creator when Vertue wonders "Where is Prince Hamlet when the curtain's down" (10.X.254). Again, in *Surprised by Joy*,

¹ Recent scholarship by Joe Ricke and Sarah R.A. Waters is beginning to change this trend (see Works Cited).

² This lecture was subsequently published by the British Academy (1943) and later, in abridged form, as "Death in *Hamlet*" (1964).

³ For justification of this dating see Hooper's discussion of Arthur Conan Doyle's *Sir Nigel* (1905-6) and the inspiration it provided for Lewis's "knights-in-armour" as seen in *The King's Ring* ("Introduction" 9). Hooper also directly links this comment and *The King's Ring*'s play form and vocabulary to Lewis's contemporary interest in Shakespeare arguing that *The King's Ring* seems to be deliberately written in "imitation of Shakespeare" (9).

he writes that early, before his conversion, he saw God as a dramatist, and thus, “if Shakespeare and Hamlet could ever meet, it must be Shakespeare’s doing. Hamlet could never initiate” (181). Significantly, Lewis also returns to this play again on the precipice of his conversion to Christianity (see Waters, “Shakespeare on (and in) the margins”).

Aside from the multitude of references across his canon, Lewis also engaged with *Hamlet* in scholarly ways before his British Academy lecture. It is clear he is dealing with *Hamlet* in his tutorials from the early years of his time as Tutor at Magdalen College, Oxford. Indeed, as early as 1928 he remarks in a letter to his father how much he had enjoyed one of his student’s “brilliant and original views on Hamlet” (25 February 1928, *Collected Letters* [CL] I.746). He published on *Hamlet* in the *Times Literary Supplement* (2 May 1935), and taught textual criticism classes on *Hamlet* from 1933-36 to B. Litt. (graduate) students. Moreover, the *Hamlet* lecture for the British Academy was not his first time to lecture on this play either. Indeed, Roger Lancelyn Green and Hooper have even gone so far as to claim he lectured on this *exact* topic in 1938 writing that “‘Hamlet, the Prince or the Poem?’ [...] was delivered in the Schools at Oxford on 14 October 1938 before becoming the Annual Shakespeare Lecture [...] on 22 April 1942” (160). Following their lead, Joel Heck also claims that Lewis “first delivers his essay ‘*Hamlet, the Prince or the Poem*,’” but seems to indicate that there is some uncertainty about this by, in the same entry, saying that the lecture Lewis gave was “probably the *Hamlet* paper” (725). Neither Green and Hooper nor Heck provide supporting evidence for this claim. It seems unlikely, however, that this paper was the same “Hamlet: The Prince or the Poem” lecture he gave to the British Academy, unless in a very different format.⁴

Nevertheless, it is the British Academy lecture on *Hamlet* which is best-known and constitutes Lewis’s most extended handling of this play. My essay takes Lewis’s remarks in his lecture as its starting point, and then explores the influence of *Hamlet* and Lewis’s ideas about *Hamlet* in *Narnia*. In so doing, it unpacks the way he literally exports a key argument he makes in that lecture: that we should return to the play itself and break *Hamlet* away from its critics so as to be able to read it again “with enjoyment” (“Hamlet: The Prince or the

⁴ While it is certainly true that Lewis lectured on *Hamlet* at Oxford, and there is firm evidence he did so in Hilary term of 1936, alongside Nevill Coghill, C.L. Wrenn and Hugo Dyson (*Gazette* LXVI: 778) and again in Hilary term 1937, alongside the same colleagues as well as J.R.R. Tolkien (*Gazette* LXVII: 284), by the time it is Michaelmas 1938, which is the term to which Green & Hooper refer, Lewis is lecturing for the more broadly defined “Shakespeare” lecture series alongside Dyson, Coghill, Lascelles Abercrombie, Ethel Seaton, Leonard Rice-Oxley, John Bryson and Edmund Blunden (*Gazette* LXVIII: 855), and Green & Hooper and Heck do not give any further evidence that Lewis delivered that precise lecture on *Hamlet* in 1938.

Poem" ["Prince or Poem"] 95), paying attention to "the things a child" notices (104). One way Lewis cuts *Hamlet* away from its critics is by moving Hamlet from the world of literary criticism to *Narnia*. By including *Hamlet* elements throughout Narnia, Lewis addresses different aspects of the play, especially its ghostly presences, its wronged protagonist, and its atmosphere of death—"an atmosphere hard to describe" full of the "prevalent sense of death, solitude, & horror" (Letter to Greeves, CL I.971). By resituating Hamlet in a fantasy world of children's fiction, Lewis allows his readers to "surrender" ("Prince or Poem" 95) themselves to the story and the Prince, as he himself did.

John Cox's essay on *The Silver Chair* offers a brief critical precedent for considering Lewis's references to *Hamlet* in *Narnia* alongside his lecture (160-61), but it is not the focus of his essay. Charles Huttar also discusses the *Hamlet* connections in *The Silver Chair* (149-50), claiming that Lewis's "comparison may well bring us up short, for direct literary references are rare in Lewis's children's tales except ones to books traditionally for children. Thus it cries out for closer examination" (149). This present essay offers, in more detail, this "closer examination." Doris Myers touches on the connections between Hamlet and Rilian through their loss of a parent, as well as the atmosphere of doubt and uncertainty in *Silver Chair* and *Hamlet* (154) but, likewise, it is not her primary focus.⁵ Elsewhere, other scholars have noted the Hamlet echoes in the trajectory of Prince Caspian but as a passing reference rather than an extended discussion.⁶

This present essay suggests, in more detail, the nature of the connection between Lewis's reading of *Hamlet* and his appropriations of the play in *Narnia*. Lewis disperses his *Hamlet* material through a variety of stories but, in no way, does this essay suggest the existence of a "Shakespeare code."⁷ Rather it attempts to show how *Hamlet*, and especially Lewis's response to Hamlet, becomes one of the many frames of reference Lewis uses in Narnia. This essay looks especially at *The Silver Chair*, *Prince Caspian*, and *The Last Battle*, none of which "rewrite" *Hamlet*, but all of which, in different ways and to different degrees, draw on Lewis's understanding of *Hamlet* as expressed in his lecture.

⁵ There is an even briefer mention of this connection by Michael Ward who suggests that for Lewis Hamlet was the "archetypal lunatic" (*Planet Narnia* 134). However, Lewis's reading and use of Hamlet is more complex than Ward suggests.

⁶ See Adey (186); Harry Lee Poe (*Becoming C.S. Lewis* 138; *Completion of C.S. Lewis* 139); Jerry Root and Mark Neal (65); Devin Brown (107-10); Marvin Hinten (26); Elizabeth Baird Hardy (53-4); Andrew P. Porter (141-42).

⁷ Ward attempted in an early stage of his research "to link the Chronicles with different plays by Shakespeare, but I soon abandoned it. I knew I was just twisting the Chronicles to fit in with my own thinking" (*Narnia Code* 13).

THE LECTURE

We learn much of Lewis's approach to Shakespeare in his opening remarks:

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. ("Prince or Poem" 88)⁸

As we might expect, however, Lewis's "childlike" recital turned the world of Shakespeare criticism on its head, and was obviously intended to do so. Lewis laments the centuries of character-criticism, for example, which had interposed between the reader and the story. Sadly noting that, while "historical criticism or character criticism" have "been perfected by long practice" instead "the things [he] wants to talk about" are those on which "criticism has for centuries kept almost complete silence" (104). Lewis emphasizes a return to enjoying the story, to seeing the characters within their stories, and stepping away from what he felt to be the stifling emphasis on character-criticism which had divorced the character from the play. He does this too with his use of Hamlet in *Narnia*.

Lewis "believe[s] our attention to Hamlet's 'character' in the usual sense misses" (103) almost all of Hamlet's character. Character-criticism had made Hamlet an object of study whose actions are to be studied under the microscope, stripping away, ironically, the character aspects which make him Hamlet. Lewis rehumanizes Hamlet by taking him out, not just of his play, but also of the war-zone of character-criticism. Instead, he evokes the Hamlet which enchanted Lewis as an initial reader: "a pale man in black clothes (would that our producers would ever let him appear!) with his stockings coming down, a dishevelled man" (104). In *The Silver Chair* Lewis does indeed let his "like Hamlet" character Rilian appear in such a fashion: "dishevelled" (15.199) and "dressed in black" (10.131).

Lewis notes that for him "the character criticism of the nineteenth century stood between me and my enjoyment" ("Prince or Poem" 94) of *Hamlet*. Although he confesses that his lecture focuses on what he sees to be the problematic "state of criticism about the play" (88), he does this in order to redirect us back to the play, and to remind us again of what it is to find "ourselves caught up" in it (92). To reenchant us and to "rescue" us from the same risk of "disenchantment" he himself experienced from the critics at his

⁸ These opening remarks have been taken literally, without recognition of their rhetorical spin, by Lewis scholars who take Lewis at his word when he claims not to be a "true Shakespearian scholar" (88). See Waters, "'A Critic Who Makes No Claim,'" which offers an alternate reading.

elbow when he tried (and failed) to read Shakespeare "the only proper and grown-up way" (94).⁹

Lewis bucked the contemporary critical trend of focusing on "the problem of Hamlet" and the whys and wherefores of his procrastination. In this, he follows E.E. Stoll by reminding us that "drama is art, not psychology" (70) and that what has been framed by critics as "procrastination" is in fact integral to the story and is, in fact, "action." Very much aligning with Lewis's views, Stoll attributes perceptions of inaction to either being "a critic, or a psychologist; or because you have read others' criticisms of the play" (25). Lewis *does* look closely at the character of Hamlet, but he does so primarily to render Hamlet as a kind of everyman, noting that *Hamlet's*

true hero is man—haunted man—man with his mind on the frontier of two worlds, man unable either quite to reject or quite to admit the supernatural, man struggling to get something done as man has struggled from the beginning, yet incapable of achievement because of his inability to understand either himself or his fellows or the real quality of the universe which has produced him. ("Prince or Poem" 102-3)

Indeed, Lewis argues that when Hamlet says "such fellows as I" (III.i.132), he means not critics and their "Hamlets" but rather "*men*—creatures shapen in sin and conceived in iniquity—and the vast, empty vision of them 'crawling between earth and heaven' is [for Lewis] what really counts and really carries the burden of the play" (102). Lewis's argument, later also articulated by Martin Dodsworth, is that "we have all found a smack of Hamlet in us" (9). In so doing, Lewis's aim is to re-humanize Hamlet and to resist seeing the play as merely "a maze of motives" ("Prince or Poem" 98).

Lewis's self-effacing apology for not being a 'true' Shakespeare scholar is a polite rhetorical tool to disarm hundreds of years of Hamlet scholarship. He is not "true" to the tradition as he finds it, dominated for more than a century

⁹ This "concern about being adult" or worry about being seen as childish is something Lewis returns to throughout his writing. In "On Three Ways of Writing for Children" he notes, "When I became a man I put away childish things, including the fear of childishness and the desire to be very grown up" (34). In *Narnia* being grown-up in contrast to growing up is something which signals an attempt to adopt a voice of and behaviour not one's own. In *The Silver Chair* the narrator notes that "Even in this world, of course, it is the stupidest children who are more childish and the stupidest grown-ups who are most grown up" (16.213), but the most well-known exploration of this in *Narnia* is Susan's desire to be grown-up and to put on adulthood and so hide the beauty of her own individuality and story, see most directly Polly's response to Susan's absence in *The Last Battle*: "Grown-up, indeed," said the Lady Polly. "I wish she *would* grow up" (12.138). For more on this topic see Hilder (145); Williams (41).

by character criticism and, more recently, taken over with T.S. Eliot's dismissal of the play as "an artistic failure" ("Hamlet and His Problems" 90). From his childlike perspective, he complains about the "meddlers" ("Prince or Poem" 94) and their arguments which get in the way of his experience of reading the plays. The invitation to address the British Academy was a prestigious one. However, and in keeping with his distancing from the critics, by emphasizing his "childishness," privately Lewis sounds somewhat like a mischievous child in a room of stuffy adults in his description of his audience to Sister Penelope (11 May 1942) as "a v[ery] stupid audience" characterized by their own self-importance: "They were 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" (CL II.520).

In the lecture, drawing on his own personal experience of soaking in Shakespeare (and *Hamlet* in particular) but feeling increasingly bothered by the "pestilential notion[s]" ("Prince or Poem" 94) of other critics, Lewis urges his audience to return to the story of *Hamlet*. This prioritizing of the play over character-criticism is evident even in earlier references to the play by Lewis, as seen in his 1931 letter to Arthur Greeves: "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" (CL I.971). Similarly, in the lecture, he remembers with fondness his childhood encounters with Shakespeare: "Left to myself I would simply have drunk it in and been thankful" ("Prince or Poem" 94), calling upon his audience to do likewise, while acknowledging that the critical racket might previously have prevented them from doing so.

Lewis then reorients our focus toward experiencing the atmosphere and the story (or "myth") of *Hamlet*, a story, which, he suggests, is so marred by critical retellings that it is waiting to be properly retold again. Lewis famously captures this in his "Hamlet formula," claiming that *Hamlet* is concerned not with "'a man who has to avenge his father' but 'a man who has been given a task by a ghost'" (97). The detail matters. He illustrates this childlike attention to detail with the analogy of re-reading a story to a young child but omitting or adjusting details, as though the child might not notice. But, "the child protests. And the child is right" (105). Lewis argues that such details are not simply "abstractions of literary history" (105) to be stripped of their embedded beauty or dismissed as indicative of the play's failure to conform to a particular set of critical criteria, but crucial details to those who are "living the story" (105) rather than pulling it and its prince apart. Lewis pulls the story back from its dissecting critics, and moves it to another world (literally later, in *Narnia*) and (in the

lecture) moves it back to the world of "concrete imagination" and "childishness" (105).

By highlighting the limitations of reading a text through its criticism rather than approaching a text and then its criticism, Lewis returns to a common thread in his academic writing. This, of course, is most fully explored in *An Experiment in Criticism*, where he notes that "ideally we must receive [a work] first and then evaluate it. [...] Unfortunately this ideal is progressively less and less realised the longer we live in a literary profession or in literary circles," but, he goes on to add, "it occurs, magnificently, in young readers" (92). This neatly captures what Lewis means when he talks of bestowing his childishness upon his audience. Lewis's reading of *Hamlet* enters the childish space in which a ghost appears and charges the atmosphere and the reader's imagination. Lewis recommends an affective and immersive approach,¹⁰ suggesting "we approach the play with our senses and imaginations" ("Prince or Poem" 96). In other words, we should feelingly allow the play to work on our imaginations rather than first approaching it as a mine to be quarried. For Lewis, "childish" in this context is a deliberate reversal of its common derogatory connotation, and highlights the benefits of approaching the experience of the story without the screen of criticism.

This approach is most clearly encapsulated in an intentionally and absurdly long sentence in his lecture, presenting a comprehensive checklist which literally immerses us in both the images of the play and Lewis's rhetorically childlike emphasis on the importance of these images to the story:

I am trying to recall attention from the things an intellectual adult notices to the things a child or 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 these a pale man in black clothes (would that our producers would ever let him appear!) with his stockings coming down, a dishevelled 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. (104)

¹⁰ In his affective reading of the play, Lewis anticipates the so called "affective turn" (see Clough, 1-3) as well as, more specifically, early modern affect studies and readings of Shakespeare which focus on affect such as the work of Gail Kern Paster; Mary Floyd-Wilson and Garret A. Sullivan Jr; Alison Hobgood; Erin Sullivan and Richard Meek; and Eric Langley. This is a critical trend which has been growing particularly since the 1990s.

These, we might say, are the things that matter to Lewis in *Hamlet*. Things that we might expect to find if he does, indeed, work *Hamlet* into Narnia.

By removing “the veil of familiarity” (90), Lewis shifts the focus of his Hamlet criticism from diagnosis toward “submitting to the charm” (94) of the story. Lewis suggests this in his lecture and, at least to some degree, enacts it in his use of *Hamlet* in Narnia. He offers a version of the story, stripped of its critical baggage in which the imagination and emotions can engage with story and criticism is kept in its (secondary) place. Moreover, Lewis’s “everyman” approach to Hamlet reflects how, for him, stories, “[s]cenes and characters from books provide [readers] with a sort of iconography by which they interpret or sum up their own experience” (*Experiment* 3). Hamlet becomes a kind of multilayered iconographic reference point in Narnia, especially in *The Silver Chair*. This may not exactly be allegory, but it is a sort of morality play convention, something with which Lewis’s fiction is replete.

Lewis claims that in fantasy, “fairy land arouses a longing for he knows not what” (“On Three Ways of Writing for Children” [“On Three”] 38). *Hamlet*, of course, is not fantasy, but his reading of it, especially as suggested in his letter to Greeves, is attuned to the same spiritual and emotional longing. We are lifted up and taken out of ourselves, with a longing for something we have not yet known, seen, or experienced. This need not be metaphysical or religious. The young child reading *Narnia* may not yet have encountered Shakespeare, or indeed the Bible or *Gulliver’s Travels* (“Price or Poem” 105), but nonetheless that same child may still feel the longing aroused from reading one story, and might even in that, seek out other literary encounters. This is another application of Lewis’s suggestion that “fairy land” specifically, and imagined realms more broadly, affect readers. This, however is a good thing, it is to the reader’s “life-long enrichment” since it “stirs and troubles him [...] with the dim sense of something beyond his reach” (“On Three” 38). The other imaginative worlds they may seek out, or characters they may try to find, might include the *Hamlet* they find referenced in *Narnia*.¹¹

In different books and in different ways, in *Narnia* we observe the influence of Lewis’s response to *Hamlet* and an example of his interaction with Shakespeare outside of the usual bounds of literary criticism. For one instance, the situation of a son seeking revenge or at least justice for a murdered parent appears in at least two of the Chronicles: *Prince Caspian* and *The Silver Chair*. In the latter, the “task” is given not by a ghost, but by a supernatural creature in a spectral-like form. Both stories feature a ghostly atmosphere of death,

¹¹ Sometimes authors might directly guide the subsequent reading lists of their readers. In a children’s literature context see, for instance, the list of titles Roald Dahl gives in *Matilda* (18).

uncertainty, loss, and plots centering around a task of rescue and, to some degree, revenge (with implications for both the states and the individuals). More directly still, he compares a major character to Hamlet in *The Silver Chair*.

"A LITTLE BIT LIKE HAMLET": HAMLET AND *THE SILVER CHAIR*

In *The Silver Chair*, Lewis makes a direct reference to Hamlet when he describes Rilian as looking "altogether [...] a little bit like Hamlet" (10.131). This is Lewis's most obvious reference to Hamlet in Narnia, and it is his most committed engagement to exploring the character of the play in his fiction. Too passing a reference to be anything like a retelling, nonetheless Lewis's brief simile extends beyond that momentary comparison. In fact, to the reader unfamiliar with the play, as children reading *The Silver Chair* may well be, by comparing Rilian to Hamlet, Lewis introduces Hamlet as a Prince who appears mad, who has lost his parent, who has been affected by supernatural powers, and who is, of course, pale and wearing black.

There are clear parallels between *Hamlet* and *The Silver Chair*. Both open with a lost royal and a mission to avenge a murder, both deal with deception and disguise, and with royal figures being poisoned by serpents (of sorts) who murder and usurp Kingdoms. Both Rilian and Hamlet undergo a kind of living death and enslavement. Rilian loses years from his life; Hamlet loses his. Rilian is trapped underground, and in his enchantment Hamlet isolates himself from his world through his apparent madness and conducts his revenge plot metaphorically "underground," outside the jurisdiction and knowledge of his enemies. Both texts have been read by critics as works which explore repressed desires, erotic bonds, and the mother (or surrogate mother) as the object of the incestuous desires of the sons (Lupton and Reinhard 83). Karin Fry notes, for instance, that the Green Lady "seduces the Prince through her enchanting beauty" (161), while Carina Rumberger-Yanda claims that the Green Lady's "first action, killing the Queen, eliminates any competition she may face for Rilian's 'love' and attention." Both texts may contain such latent meanings. Even the location "Ettinsmoor" (10.132)—where Eustace, Jill, and Puddleglum first meet the mute black knight Prince Rilian—contains aural echoes of Elsinore, particularly given that a sentence earlier, the narrative links Rilian and Hamlet when we are introduced to a character who looks "a little bit like Hamlet" (10.131).

So, this is more than a throwaway simile. The comparison indicates an important aspect of Rilian's character and also points towards the overarching theme of deceptive appearances in *The Silver Chair*. The use of both the Hamlet comparison and "seem" — "there was something about his face that didn't seem quite right" (10.131) — almost in the same breath, is significant. This emphasis on what *seems* echoes Hamlet who also does not "seem quite right" (10.131). Hamlet

the Green Lady and "a suit of armour" (6.78). This description suggests that there is something less than human, perhaps even ghostly, about the Knight who turns out to be Rilian. Puddleglum takes some grim delight in the possibilities the mute and unseen Knight might hint at, even suggesting "someone invisible" or "a skeleton" (6.78). In a story where there are significant allusions to *Hamlet*, we might consider (at the very least) the connections here between who can and cannot see the ghost in the play, the fact that the ghost in *Hamlet* appears also in "armour" (I.i.71), and most immediately, Puddleglum's accurate recognition that all is not as it seems (6.82). This recalls, also, Aslan's caution to Jill that "the Signs which you have learned here will not look at all as you expect them to look, when you meet them there" and, even more directly, his warning to "pay no attention to appearances" (2.21), which again emphasizes the importance of the theme of disguise and deception in *The Silver Chair*.

The significance of identity is evident in both *The Silver Chair* and *Hamlet*. Whilst "under the spell" the Black Knight declares: "I have never heard the name" (that is his own name) followed by the deeply ironic assertion: "to my certain knowledge, there is no such man here" (10.133). The playful irony which precedes the revelation of Rilian from behind the mask of the Black Knight is encapsulated in the words "UNDER ME" (10.133) which literally means more than "underground," since beneath the false laughter and black attire lies a Narnian Prince.¹² When the spell is broken, and the poisonous serpent has been destroyed, Rilian can "remember [his] true self" (11.148) and, critically, remember his status as Prince through his relationship to his father: "I am Rilian, Prince of Narnia, and Caspian the great King is my Father" (11.147). No longer does he simply "seem" (10.131), he *is*. Despite the lies told by the Green Lady, when Rilian really is "sane" (11.143) and in his "right mind" (11.144), he reasserts his name and his identity. There are distinct echoes of Hamlet's own assertion of self in Rilian's "I am" declaration. As he leaps into Ophelia's grave in a moment of deep grief, and as a rebuttal against labels of madness and accusations that he is "not himself" (V.ii.240) Hamlet declares: "This is I, / Hamlet the Dane" (V.i.266-67). This suggests that Lewis, in such moments, may be drawing on *Hamlet* more broadly. The direct comparison between Rilian and Hamlet is foreshadowed by the story of the fate of Rilian's mother. The Ghost's revelation, in *Hamlet*, that the "serpent that did sting thy father's life / Now wears his crown" (I.v.38) is echoed in Lewis's description of

¹² As well as referring to the underground kingdom, the words "UNDER ME" may also suggest the spell which Rilian is under, the power under which he operates, or the sense in which despite being of "divine race" and knowing "neither age nor death" (10.134) and her devilish power, the Green Lady remains under the power of Aslan.

the “sleepy” Queen who lay “on the grassy bank” where she was stung by “a great serpent” (4.49). This is magnified still further when read in the light of the dumbshow (3.2) depiction of Claudius’s murder when the actors perform the scene: the King “lies him down upon a bank of flowers. [The Queen], seeing him asleep, leaves him. Anon comes in another man, takes off his crown, kisses it, pours poison in the sleeper’s ears, and leaves him” (III.ii.148-51). In both stories, sleeping monarchs are left on a bank by their royal companions, and as they sleep they are poisoned. In *The Silver Chair* the Queen’s sleep is interrupted by the poisonous sting of the “great, shining” (4.49) “worm” (12.161). This description then recalls the fate of Hamlet’s father at the hand of the “serpent” Claudius, except that in Narnia, Lewis literalizes the serpent imagery of *Hamlet* and further emphasizes the connection between the “serpent” who stung Hamlet’s father with poison and the serpent sting Rilian’s mother receives from a serpent as “green as *poison*” (4.51, emphasis added). Moreover, in both tales the murderers take new partners who are connected to the rightful ruler (whom they have deposed) in order to attempt to secure their usurping lineage. For both the Green Lady and Claudius, their means to the throne are through a combination of poison and poisonous relationships with the victim’s family.

In both works, a supernatural specter gives a character a message and tells them of signs they must remember; this message and these signs ultimately dictate their trajectory and, as protagonists, thus dictates the direction of each story. The ghost in *Hamlet* haunts Hamlet with the truth of his murder and urges his son to remember to avenge his death. This draws to mind Aslan’s warning to Jill in *The Silver Chair* to “remember, remember, remember the Signs” (2.21). Lewis’s use of epizeuxis, particularly with the word “remember,” is perhaps suggestive of *Hamlet* which is littered with threes. More directly still, this repetition of “remember” echoes the ghost’s imploring of Hamlet to “remember me” (I.v.98) and Hamlet’s thrice repeated “remember” in I.v: “Remember thee?” (I.v.102); “Remember thee?” (I.v.104); and, finally, and more extendedly, his echo of his father’s words with the “word” remember at the heart of his oath: “It is ‘adieu, adieu remember me’/ I have sworn’t” (I.v.118-19).

Further, in *The Silver Chair*, Lewis draws on two key areas of *Hamlet* criticism and creatively offers critical responses. First, the question of Hamlet’s madness. This critical debate is concerned with whether Hamlet really is mad due to the grief and loss he experiences or merely feigns madness or a combination. Lewis alludes to this in his opening discussion of critical positions in his lecture: noting that “some extend [his procrastination] to actual insanity” (“Prince or Poem” 89). But Lewis is interested in the Prince *in* his situation, within his connected atmosphere. So too with Rilian. He appears to be mad, he appears to be a mute pale black knight, but this is explained when we learn he is being enchanted. He seems to be mad because he is being made to seem mad,

though like Hamlet his grief and appearance of madness are connected. As Huttar notes, both Rilian and Hamlet appear in stories where they "behave at times so erratically that observers consider them mad" (150), but they are not. In *Hamlet*, Polonius and Claudius attribute Hamlet's distracted nature to his love for Ophelia. This may be a false lead, but it offers a neat overlap with Rilian who is really intoxicated (and maybe even maddened) with the allure of the Green Lady, as she shifts him from avenging desires to desire for her. Although Ophelia and Hamlet are connected and then disconnected by romantic love, the relationship between the Green Lady and Rilian is at once surrogate mother and son and also a kind of troubling figure of desire (perhaps romantic as well as maternal) for Rilian. Of course, this may also suggest the relationship of Hamlet and Gertrude, his mother.

Another critical concern Lewis plays with in *The Silver Chair* is the idea of procrastination—so significant in *Hamlet* and its critical history. Jill is given the signs and yet it takes the whole story (indeed it governs the plot) for her to follow them to the Prince. Is she procrastinating, or is she simply completing the task as fast as she is able? And is this apparent delay inherent to the plot? As with *Hamlet*, we might spend time wondering about the reasons for her delay and the paralleled delays of the deaths of Claudius and the Green Lady. *The Silver Chair* narrative certainly invites these questions, and Eustace and Puddleglum are also implicated. Lewis does not give a direct response to the critical question of Hamlet's "procrastination" in *The Silver Chair*, but he certainly does explore the idea of a plot which depends on delay and apparent "procrastination." Lewis's use of "procrastination" as a kind of plot device in alignment with a *deus-ex-machina* lion who ensures that good emerges even if the sign-followers err, might also be considered in the light of the critical argument of providence or procrastination which *Hamlet* raises. Hamlet's apparent delay (and indeed the delay of the children in *The Silver Chair*) might be read alongside his attempt late in the play to justify his procrastination as part of the grander design of Divine Providence. He says to Horatio, "There's a Divinity that shapes our ends / Rough-hew them how we will" (V.ii.3-4). He appears to hand over his fate, finally, to this kind of "special providence" (V.ii.234) which bothers many critics. However, this shift towards a providential view of events by Hamlet perhaps suggests that he now believes that justice comes about not just by the hand of revengers (or, in the conclusion of *The Silver Chair*, search and rescue teams). Instead, even their delays may be ordained or part of a higher purpose. Both *Hamlet* and *The Silver Chair*, however, present the tension between the seemingly contradictory reality of "delays" and providential timing without precisely explaining it.

Rilian also procrastinates. The Prince, we learn, is set upon revenge, even before his mother has died (4.49), but especially following her death. The

owl recalls: "he was always riding on the Northern marches of Narnia, hunting for that venomous worm, to kill it and be avenged" (4.50). But he is unable to locate the snake. However, there grows something increasingly strange about Rilian's visage, like Hamlet he also appears as if he has "seen visions" (4.50) of something striking and supernaturally alluring. He delays. He is distracted. Both Hamlet and Rilian are changed by their encounter with supernatural figures who alter their futures. This change in both Princes and the "look in [their] eyes" (4.50) attracts the notice of their respective courts and in Hamlet's case (and later also in Rilian's case, in the Underland) lead his witnesses to conclude that he is "mad."

Through his comparison of Rilian with Hamlet, Lewis aligns the trajectories of the two characters in more than complexion and clothing. Lewis raises further suggestive parallels by incorporating themes of seeming and reality, identity, loss and grief, missing monarchs, revenge for murder, as well as apparent "delays" and distractions, making *The Silver Chair* in more ways than one a little bit like *Hamlet*. *The Silver Chair* names Hamlet directly, but the trajectory of Caspian's narrative, even more so than his son, mirrors that of Hamlet. It is to Caspian's first appearance in *Narnia* that we now turn.

A LATE NIGHT ENCOUNTER: THE USURPING UNCLE, WEIRD MESSENGER, & AVENGING NEPHEW

In the most recent film adaptation of *Prince Caspian* (2008), Ben Barnes claimed that his performance of the titular character was inspired by Mandy Patinkin's Inigo Montoya in *The Princess Bride* (1987). When we consider Montoya's recurrent phrase, "you killed my father. Prepare to die," this seems particularly appropriate. Hamlet hears from his father's ghost as Caspian hears from Doctor Cornelius, the shattering revelation that the present king "murdered your Father" (5.57). In this most immediate sense then, *Prince Caspian* parallels *Hamlet*, as noted by several previous scholars (see fn. 6). Hal Poe, for instance notes that Hamlet "probably provided elements that reworked themselves in *Prince Caspian*. Caspian, like Hamlet [...] had an uncle who had usurped the throne" (*Becoming* 138). In both tales we find usurping uncles whose nephews are called to avenge the death of their fathers and to bring right rule again to their fathers' kingdom. Hamlet dies once his revenge plot is complete, but young Caspian lives. Ironically, he later dies in a book where *his* son takes on the role of *Hamlet*.

The usurpations that take place in *Hamlet* and *Prince Caspian* are more than political change, they are the result of fratricide. In *Hamlet*, the son of the victim is destabilized further by the uncomfortable marriage between Claudius, his uncle, and Gertrude, his mother, which secures the throne for Claudius (see I.ii.8-12). In *Prince Caspian*, the son's situation is destabilized by the birth of a son

to Miraz, his uncle, thus disinheriting Caspian from the Narnian throne. Like Hamlet, Caspian had previously been trained up in princely matters and battle combat as Miraz prepared him to be his heir. Miraz's disinterest in his nephew, and his expectation that to take up kingship is the greatest joy imaginable, shows his own hunger for power and prestige; it hints at his usurping roots, while identifying the naïve Caspian as a more heroic (and humble) character (4.40-41). Although "everyone except" Caspian "knows that Miraz is a usurper" (5.55), even before he learns the truth, much like Hamlet Caspian distrusts and suspects his uncle.

Also like Hamlet, Caspian does not question why he has not inherited the throne.¹³ Indeed Caspian is initially unaware of his heritage and his true status as a Prince of Narnia, and Cornelius questions why Caspian himself has never questioned his position: "'I wonder you have never asked me before,' said the Doctor, 'why, being the son of King Caspian, you are not King Caspian yourself'" (5.55). Through Cornelius, Caspian discovers that he is "the true King" (5.55), which shocks him almost as much as the revelation of King Hamlet's murder shocks Prince Hamlet (I.v.14-119). Of course, Lewis also has other stories of unrecognized nobility, one of which he develops more fully in *The Horse and His Boy*.

Caspian must rush into hiding after the birth of Miraz's heir for he stands "in the way" (5.57) of Miraz's lineage and risks being quickly dispatched. Only by removing Caspian from the picture, and thereby destroying the legitimate lineage, can Miraz continue his unnatural line of descent. In *Hamlet*, the legitimate son is first obstructed by the remarriage of Gertrude to Claudius, but eventually Claudius decides Hamlet must be destroyed as well. Miraz also purges his land of any remaining men from Caspian's father's time, and both princes share the burden of restoring the kingdom to right rule (I.v.189-90).

The murderous efforts of Miraz to destroy the past and to legitimate and assert his own power obviously have dangerous potential consequences for Caspian. Since, as Cornelius emphasizes, there is no-one left to "speak a word" (5.56) for Caspian and his right to the throne.

"You are in the way. He'll clear you out of the way."
 "Is he really as bad as that?" said Caspian. "Would
 he really murder me?"
 "He murdered your Father," said Doctor Cornelius.
 Caspian felt very queer and said nothing. (5.57)

¹³ Unlike the English throne which passed to the eldest son of the ruler, in Danish laws of succession there was no fixed line. Therefore, Claudius and Hamlet would have been rivals for the throne.

Caspian's situation and his response to it is a moment of great affect in the story, especially for a child reader. The Prince himself is hardly more than a child, and his world has been shattered by the intrusion of death and murder. Lewis specializes in such moments, and in fact they are the very kind of moments he points to as the emotional experience of *Hamlet* in his letter to Greeves and lecture on the play.

The revelation of his uncle's plot to murder him (like his father), gives Caspian the kind of profound unease Hamlet feels at the ghost's revelation of his father's fate and the implications that this knowledge may have for his own life (or death). Hamlet, too, is depicted as young and (initially) trusting. Following the loss of his father, the felt betrayal of his mother, uncle, and former friends, Hamlet battles with whether he can trust anyone at all and whether anyone is "true" (I.iii.84). Hamlet is an obstacle in Claudius's path to total control, a remnant of the old order and the last world. Claudius grows paranoid when he suspects that Hamlet knows the truth of the murder, just as Miraz tries desperately to hide the truth from Caspian.

According to H.D.F. Kitto, throughout *Hamlet* the ever-present question is: "whether the villain Claudius will not destroy Hamlet, and triumph" (321). In fact, as Kitto rightly points out, in the end, "villainy does triumph, to the extent that it destroys Hamlet" (321). Yet in the fantastic and perhaps less political (though still treacherous) terrain of Narnia, Caspian is finally saved. In a story set in motion by the history and threat of murder, we wonder throughout how the young protagonist will survive. In fact, the *deus ex machina* arrival and involvement of the Pevensies shifts the story's ground. Technically, from the moment of Caspian's escape from the castle of Miraz until the final battle between the true Narnians and the usurping Telmarines, the same question—who will die—is an ever-present concern in *Prince Caspian*. The atmosphere of danger and death, growing out of murder, usurpation, and an unexpected duty to the dead and the past, characterizes both *Hamlet* and *Prince Caspian*, although the latter's position as a children's story and as part of a larger redemptive series of stories makes *Prince Caspian* much more hopeful. While Caspian is rescued by a supernaturally summoned savior, Hamlet's salvation, Shakespeare implicitly suggests, may lie beyond the grave.

THE LAST BATTLE, HAMLET AND "THE SUBJECT" AND "ATMOSPHERE" OF "DEATH"

It is not just the character of Hamlet, or even the story of the play which Lewis emphasizes in his lecture or reframes in his fiction. He is especially interested in the atmosphere of *Hamlet*, revisiting this in his fiction as well as being interested in Shakespeare's framing of death, specifically in *Hamlet* but also elsewhere such as *The Winter's Tale* (see CL I.968). In his letter to Greeves he calls the atmosphere of *Hamlet* "hard to describe and made up equally of the prevalent sense of death,

solitude, & horror and of the extraordinary graciousness and loveableness of H.[amlet] himself" (CL II.975). We see this interest in atmosphere elsewhere in his fiction, for instance in the literal shifts in atmosphere between Earth and Malacandra in *Out of the Silent Planet* [OSP] as well as the different emotional atmospheres they evoke, in the wintery and after-winter atmosphere in *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, in the way atmosphere reveals the nature of people in *The Voyage of the "Dawn Treader,"* or in the thinness of the transitional atmosphere in the Wood Between Worlds in *The Magician's Nephew*. In his *Hamlet* lecture, Lewis remarks on Shakespeare's emphasis on death and the state of "being dead" ("Prince or Poem" 99) in *Hamlet*. The same atmosphere Lewis locates in *Hamlet* we also find, perhaps surprisingly given this is a children's novel, in *The Last Battle* with omens and the presence of death evident from the outset and throughout.

In his *Hamlet* lecture, Lewis argues that "the subject of *Hamlet* is death. [...] I do not mean that we rise from the reading of the play with the feeling that we have been in cold, empty places, places 'outside', *nocte tacentia late*, though that is true" (98), but rather that the Prince is fearful of "being dead" (99). He expands his argument with an immersive list of images:

In *Hamlet* we are kept thinking about [being dead] all the time, whether in terms of the soul's destiny or of the body's. Purgatory, Hell, Heaven, the wounded name, the rights—or wrongs—of Ophelia's burial, and the staying-power of a tanner's corpse: and beyond this, beyond all Christian and all Pagan maps of the hereafter, comes a curious groping and tapping of thoughts, about 'what dreams may come'. It is this that gives to the whole play its quality of darkness and of misgiving. Of course there is much else in the play: but nearly always, the [same] groping. The characters are all watching one another, forming theories about one another, listening, contriving, full of anxiety. The world of *Hamlet* is a world where one has lost one's way. (99)

In *The Silver Chair* the Prince has lost his way and the children do too, in *Prince Caspian* Narnia itself has lost its way under the leadership of Miraz, but in *The Last Battle* [LB] we enter a murky world, which finally will become a world of "total darkness" (14.148) and nothingness, where characters search for truth, long for escape and for life amidst much death and portents of death. It is a novel full of images of Heaven, Hell, Purgatory and questions about what will come after life. The "quality" or atmosphere of the story is overrun with such concerns. It is not as straightforward as suggesting that *The Last Battle* is Lewis's creative reworking of *Hamlet*; but his reading of *Hamlet* and the aspects he draws out that a child's imagination might notice—even as he makes them things to notice in his imaginative story *for children*—are worth considering, as he

creatively reworks the atmosphere of death, the thought of being dead, and the dreams that (may) come.

Interestingly, when Lewis describes the final moments of apocalypse in *The Last Battle*, he writes that this “seemed rather like a dream at the time and rather hard to remember properly afterwards” (14.144). Moreover, in *The Last Battle*, Narnia provides a picture of the other “country” that Hamlet can only wonder about “from which no traveler returns” (III.i.64). Lewis imaginatively literalizes this “undiscovered country” (III.i.63) in two ways: first positively, in Aslan’s Country (via the children and good rulers of Narnia) and secondly, negatively, as it is seen (or rather is not seen) by those who are outside of it. Part of the torture of the afterlife for the dwarves is that they are blinded to that country.

Although Lewis depicts death elsewhere in visceral even violent ways and death also permeates the proceedings of *The Silver Chair*, the immense pressure of death on the narrative is especially evident in the apocalyptic *The Last Battle*. The ending comes as something of a shock when “most of the central characters die in “a narrative climax involving a small holocaust of major characters” (Williams 125). The final act of *The Last Battle*, with its depiction of a dying world and its dying inhabitants, seems to have been imported straight from a Renaissance tragedy. But there is an important modulation: while in Renaissance tragedy villain *and* hero typically meet violent ends, in *The Last Battle* death is more selective. The children have avoided the pain of death and its associated separation, yet, at the same time the implication is that they have indeed died, at least in the planes of Narnia and earth—the Shadowlands—in order to be able to live in Aslan’s Country. In *The Last Battle*, the children bypass the physical suffering of death—perhaps reflecting Lewis’s suggestion in his *Hamlet* lecture that it is not the “physical fear of dying, but a fear of being dead” (“Prince or Poem” 99) that plagues Hamlet—and yet they still escape the horrors of the world and its poisoned state.

The direct use and forced contemplating of death in children’s literature is not always read positively. Philip Pullman, for instance, takes issue with the goodness located in death and dying in *Narnia* framing it almost like a Noah’s Flood solution, suggesting that “to slaughter the lot of them [the characters], and then claim they’re better off, is not honest storytelling: it’s propaganda in the service of a life-hating ideology” (6). Interestingly, however, if we read *The Last Battle* in the light of Lewis’s reading of *Hamlet* and Shakespeare’s depiction of death there, we might at least query the conclusion that Lewis’s depiction of death in Narnia is a product of a “life-hating ideology” (Pullman 6). Rather it might instead reflect Lewis’s desire to write a story in which we are invited, like Hamlet, to think about being dead, about the atmosphere of uncertainty, of purgatory, of what might come, of hell and

heaven, and the spaces in between death. Lewis *does* force death to the fore in *The Last Battle*, but in so doing he invites his readers to inhabit a world where they really are surrounded by and invited to contemplate and grieve not just the destruction of the world they know, but the experience of *being* dead, including the possibility of other worlds after “life.” Indeed, echoing Ransom’s experience in *Out of the Silent Planet*, by the end of *The Last Battle*, readers and characters have found that “Death [...] rose up and claimed [their] attention” (OSP 176). This emphasis on the “subject of [...] death” (“Prince or Poem” 98) in *The Last Battle* need not be seen as a product of a “life-hating ideology” (Pullman 6) but might instead be better framed as an ideology which contemplates what it is to be and not to be.

The opening atmospheres of *Hamlet* and *The Last Battle*—as worlds are filled with strange sights, sounds, warnings, and presences—establishes the presence of the supernatural and suggests the centrality of death. References to prophecies, astronomy, and stars are used at the beginning of both to conjure up feelings of dread and to indicate the “rotten” (I.iv.67) state of the worlds we find ourselves in. Tirian receives a warning in the form of a report of troubling supernatural signs from Roonwit:

Never in all my days have I seen such terrible things written in the skies as there have been nightly since this year began. The stars say nothing of the coming of Aslan, nor of peace, nor of joy. I know by my art that there have not been such disastrous conjunctions of the planets for five hundred years. It was already in my mind to come and warn your Majesty that some great evil hangs over Narnia. (2.19-20)

The warnings in the stars of “terrible things” (2.19) establishes an ominous tone echoing the prophetic talk of stars (*Hamlet* I.i.36-39). It also recalls the explanations of the ghostly visitations by the watchmen in the first scene of *Hamlet*, as the watchmen discuss what the “portentous figure” (I.i.121) they see appear might mean. Apocalyptic imagery spills forth from Horatio as he contemplates whether this figure’s appearance should be read as a “prologue to the omen coming on” (I.i.135) like figures from Ancient Rome before “Julius fell” (I.i.126) when:

The graves stood tenantless, and the sheeted dead
Did squeak and gibber in the Roman streets;
As stars with trains of fire and dews of blood,
Disasters in the sun; and the moist star,
Upon whose influence Neptune’s empire stands,
Was sick almost to doomsday with eclipse. (I.i.127-32)

In *Hamlet* evil hangs over the country and doomsday images proliferate, with phrases like “heavens face doth glow [...] as against the doom” (III.iv.47-49). This looming evil in both *Hamlet* and *The Last Battle* has direct consequences for both young royal characters. It is clear they must act immediately and take heed of the “disastrous conjunctions” (LB 2.21) these signs indicate for Denmark and Narnia, and heed the aural and visible warnings they have been shown. The worrying silence of the ghost in *Hamlet* increases feelings of tension building up to the moment when he does finally speak to Hamlet. In *The Last Battle*, the tense atmosphere is increased by the introduction of an ominous sound rather than silence: a “wailing sound that was quickly drawing nearer” (2.22). The eerie entrance of minor dissonance from the voices which precede the bodies which utter them, only serves to increase suspense and fears of what is to come then, and later, as the tales progress.

The Last Battle is not the only time Lewis depicts a world at its end in Narnia. Indeed, in *The Magician’s Nephew* Lewis depicts a dying world as well as the newly born Narnia. In Charn, a world close to its end, even the sun appears “weary” and “near the end of its life” (5.61). The name itself, which suggests the imagery of “charring” and its connected hellish undertones of death, cremation, destruction, and burning, also links it with the apocalyptic imagery of *The Last Battle* and *Hamlet*. In Digory’s concern for his mother, and Lewis’s use of in-between spaces and the dying world of Charn where enchantment had previously held that world’s fate in the balance, we are “kept thinking about death” (“Prince or Poem” 99) and what may come in *The Magician’s Nephew*; but the deathly atmosphere Lewis identifies in *Hamlet* is even more pervasive in *The Last Battle*.

Despite the intended joy of Aslan calling everyone home, we are left to contemplate briefly “all that lies dead and frozen behind that door” (LB 14.160) whether in Narnia or the Shadowlands of England and beyond. The dwarves in *The Last Battle* symbolize those destined for eternal death; the very thing Hamlet fears that the ghost may lead him to. Hamlet is full of “bottomless doubt about what may follow” (“Prince or Poem” 100) and wonders whether death is the end. The atmosphere in *The Last Battle* is overwhelmingly one of death, but Lewis transforms what he sees to be Shakespeare’s emphasis on death in *Hamlet*. It is almost as if the bigger story of the “extraordinary graciousness” (CL I.971) of Hamlet, which Lewis identifies in the play, somehow eclipses even Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*. Lewis’s transformation of his response to *Hamlet*—which is both full of a “prevalent sense of death” (I.971) and a powerful sense and maybe shock of grace—allows for a return to the enchanted and shows how for Lewis *Hamlet*’s emphasis on death was significant, but not the end of all things. Dominant though that deathly atmosphere is, *The Last Battle* also points toward Shakespeare’s late Romances, which see the miraculous emerging from the

"prevalent sense of death" (I.971). In his reworking of *Hamlet* and his response to it in *The Last Battle*, Lewis lets his readers encounter a world in which—to return to his early analogy of Hamlet and Shakespeare—Hamlet really can meet Shakespeare because Shakespeare, in calling an end to the "stage" that is "all the world" (*As You Like It* II.vii.140), invites characters to join him in an unstaged eternity.

However, this "country" is not for everyone in *The Last Battle*. Echoing Hamlet's thoughts of afterlives and after death, the dwarves are trapped in an in-between space and, as Aslan puts it, their "prison is only in their minds" (13.150). They remain in the borderlands not in Aslan's Country. They believe themselves to be within the stable and yet they are unable to see the glories beyond. Having chosen neither Tash nor Aslan, they receive their will to be only "for" themselves (13.150). The dwarves are unable to cross the border into that land and are thus trapped between a destroyed Narnia and a land of everlasting joy. Where the children see a "glorious feast" and goodness, those who have chosen darkness see only hay and food scraps with the "black hole" (13.133) epitomizing their tunneled vision. The "fancy" (13.133) or dreams of the dwarves are what limit their vision. This is the kind of purgatory which, early on, horrifies Hamlet when he wonders "in that sleep of death what dreams may come / When we have shuffled off this mortal coil" (III.i.74-5). Aslan's country, however, is given its fuller revelation in *The Last Battle*. The fear, and the conditional tense of "what dreams may come" (III.i.65) expressed in Hamlet's worries about the afterlife, and his uncertainty of what it may hold, is largely transformed in Lewis's heavenly land of Aslan's country where "one can't feel afraid" (16.174), and where, as Caspian had previously noted in *The Silver Chair* "one can't be a ghost" because it is one's own country" (16.213).

Although Lewis does explore the ambiguous "may" of Hamlet's dreams in *The Last Battle*, he supplements this with a rescue from possible nightmares. While Hamlet finds silence on this side of the divide, in *Narnia* the undiscovered country is a place of peace. Death remains real in both, and a pervasive presence even at the end of the stories. Like Hamlet, the children do face death. Lucy mourns deeply for what has been lost despite Peter's surprise at her crying: "Don't try to stop me [...] I am sure Aslan would not. I am sure it is not wrong to mourn for Narnia. Think of all that lies dead and frozen behind that door" (14.149). We are kept, like Lucy, thinking about dying and being dead all the way to the end as even hopeful eternity is tinged with the preceding deaths. The children's entrance to Aslan's country is marked by mourning for lost lands and creatures, even though the discovered country is a place ultimately of peace. Tirian notes that Lucy and Jill "do well to weep. See I do so myself. [...] It were no virtue, but great discourtesy, if we did not mourn" (14.149-50). Tirian whom we only see surrounded by an atmosphere of death, is

perhaps an example of Lewis imagining a version of Hamlet in Aslan's country. However, in *The Last Battle* after death in one world there is hope for readers and children to see as they enter into another "country" beyond the grave: the imagined in *Hamlet* is realized in *The Last Battle* and its child readers thus see an imaginative version of the undiscovered country Hamlet himself wonders about but which the play does not stage.

As all the previous gateways to Narnia had been, in *The Last Battle* the stable door is framed with redemptive hope. As the tears of grief and joy indicate, this is, as *Hamlet* was for Lewis, an affective story. *The Last Battle* is also, in many senses, a didactic tale where, as Williams puts it, "[d]eath is part of a moral landscape" (128). Death is not the end, for there is indeed "something after death" (*Hamlet* III.i.76). Yet, in another way, death is also the end, as Lucy's tears signify.

CONCLUSION

Lewis's critical and creative explorations of *Hamlet* unsurprisingly overlap. Lewis's emphasis on the merits of a childish and imagination-led response to *Hamlet*, is reflected in his reworking of the character, the key images, and the atmosphere of *Hamlet* in *Narnia*. Through the direct comparison of Rilian to Hamlet, the wider exploration of the play as depicted in Caspian and his situation, and the haunted atmosphere of death and the idea of being dead (especially in *The Last Battle*), Shakespeare's play and its tragic protagonist emerge as testament to the impact of the play upon Lewis, as well as his celebration of a text and an experience he used as a touchstone for both literature and his own life.

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