



### Preface to Reading *The Screwtape Letters*: Caution and Comedy

by Robert Moore-Jumonville

Recently Richard Foster wrote the following about *The Screwtape Letters*: *As entertaining as it is, this is one book I suggest you not linger on for an extended period. Perpetual diabolical thoughts have a way of sucking the life out of a person. Lewis himself felt this in the writing, confessing that it “produced a sort of spiritual cramp. The work into which I had to project myself while I spoke through Screwtape was all dust, grit, thirst, and itch.”*

While we should take Foster’s words seriously, there are precautions we can take to ensure that we read the book appropriately. First, we should pay attention to Lewis’s primary admonition in the preface to the edition we’ll be reading: “There are two equal and opposite errors into which our race can fall about the devils. One is to disbelieve in their existence. The other, is to believe and to feel and excessive and unhealthy interest in them” (ix). To remain oblivious of the devil’s designs, in other words, is like going to war without first understanding the weapons and strategies of our enemy. But an unhealthy interest in things diabolical too easily may produce despair, fear, or spiritual sickness. What we should aim for is spiritual discernment.

Second, the two quotes Lewis includes before his preface, from Luther and Thomas Moore, instruct us to jeer, flout, scorn, and mock the devil. In other words, Satan should not be taken too seriously: seriously enough to put up a defense against, not so seriously as to lose any sleep over. Karl Barth also recommended laughing at the devil; for he is after all, an ultimately defeated foe. If we wanted to identify what genre the book fits in, a good option might be *Comic Epistolary Novel*, the “comic” being at least as important as the novel. Look for what amuses you. In the preface to the paperback edition, Lewis uses a Chesterton quote to remind us that it is the devil who takes himself too seriously: he fell “by force of gravity.” And I’m sure he would love to have us take him seriously, too. Medieval morality plays, on the other hand, turn the devil into a buffoon for ridicule. If you want a good chuckle along these lines find an audio version of John Cleese reading *Screwtape* (available on YouTube) and [listen to his rendition of chapter 22](#): it’s quite amusing. Or think of a ridiculous character to turn *Screwtape* into in your imagination—grandpa on the Munsters, or Elmer Fudd. For instance, whenever I read lines of *Screwtape* in class or during a talk, I imitate Peter Lorre. In the final analysis, the devil is a preposterous figure.