



Lewis, Rhodri. *Hamlet and the Vision of Darkness*

Goran Stanivukovic

Volume 41, Number 4, Fall 2018

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1061948ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1061948ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Iter Press

ISSN

0034-429X (print)

2293-7374 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Stanivukovic, G. (2018). Review of [Lewis, Rhodri. *Hamlet and the Vision of Darkness*]. *Renaissance and Reformation / Renaissance et Réforme*, 41(4), 256–258. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1061948ar>

Lewis, Rhodri.

Hamlet and the Vision of Darkness.

Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2017. Pp. xxi, 365. ISBN 978-0-691-16684-1 (hardcover) US\$39.95.

The *Hamlet* that emerges from the pages of Rhodri Lewis's absorbing book is a play written by an intellectual writer, a dramatist attentive to dialectic and inspired by moral philosophy, especially by Cicero. Shakespeare's learnedness, Lewis demonstrates, in turn shapes the world of Hamlet's knowledge as a cognitive and dramatic resource for the play's action and language. With daring erudition, Lewis uncovers deep layers of the play's classicism produced by Hamlet's humanist liberal arts learning. He reveals how Shakespeare's rhetorical, dialectical, and philosophical techniques of argumentation and invention shape Hamlet as a cerebral character and how they determine his interaction with other characters around him on stage. As Lewis sets out to analyze "the qualities of Hamlet's mind and disposition" (11) and "the nature of the parts that he seeks to play" (11), in his ambitious book, he makes these directions the epicentre of his criticism aimed at reconstructing the intellectual universe of Hamlet's learning. The "kinetic flair" (17) of expression and thought, which Lewis ascribes to Hamlet, can equally be ascribed to the flare and force of his own critical discourse. Lewis's erudition shines on every page of this book illuminating numerous connections between the classical ideas about ethics, selfhood, emotion, power, art, eloquence, memory, the form of dramatic poetry, and the literary and historical contexts within which that form was created.

In explaining how these individual elements work in this tragedy, which Lewis describes as an "architectonic whole" (8), he begins by exploring the performance of selfhood on stage, as it emerges from the play's engagement with Cicero's *De officiis* ("On duties"). *De officiis* was a key classical text used in the grammar school for inculcating ideas about moral philosophy, and a work that shaped the humanist interpretation of moral philosophy, from which Shakespeare got the ideas that Hamlet deliberates. Lewis proceeds with critical sensibility to unpack a wide range of references and ideas, demonstrating the play's distinctive dramatization of the balance and tension between "the human condition" (41) and the dramatic art's "refusal" (41) to acknowledge the reality of that condition.

At the intersection of the personal and the socio-cultural in *Hamlet*, Lewis unpacks the hunt metaphor as a source of meaning that determines this intersection. With sharp critical vision, Lewis analyzes the discursive manifestations of the historically determined pastimes of fishing and hunting as “essential to an understanding of the play’s action” (53) of pursuit, of setting up traps, baits, and snares (69), and to an insight into Hamlet as a hunter (78). The critical sensitivity with which Lewis interprets the historical milieu of the hunt in printed documents, previous literature of the hunt, one of the sources for the play, and visual records, and the philological attentiveness with which he then returns to the play’s words from where he started, produce some of the most critically alluring moments in this book of masterful critical execution. At such critical moments, Lewis forwards a detailed analysis of the dialectical and rhetorical arguments of the circumstances that present the hunt, stalking, and entrapment as occasions that inspire Hamlet’s dialectical deliberations in search of moral selfhood. Lewis’s forensic analysis of the circumstantial rhetoric of the hunt makes his argument about the link between the metaphor of this quotidian activity and the characters’ comprehension of their world within it especially original.

The pleasure of reading this book comes not only from being constantly stimulated by the freshness of ideas and the acuity with which they are generated, and by the connections and associations that Lewis establishes, but also from the author’s display of the gift of bridging expansive micro-analysis of the play with compelling macro-analysis of ideas from moral philosophy that underlie the dramatic text. This, for example, is the case with the interpretation of the metaphor that is the well-known phrase “In my mind’s eye” (1.2.185), which Lewis explains within a larger discussion about the meeting of memory, senses, creative imagination, and reason as inspired by Shakespeare’s facility with philosophy, logic, and rhetoric.

Hamlet the historian grapples with both the past and the present on stage. Yet Hamlet the poet reignites the past in the most effective manner, especially as he distills his poetic acuteness in two scenes in particular: “The Murder of Gonzago” and “The Mousetrap.” In search of yet another of many “startlingly fresh readings of the play” (175), which is one of the “ambitions” (175) of his argument, Lewis delves into the learned morphology of Hamlet’s dialectic imagination and poetic passion that fuel these two episodes. Hamlet’s composing of the speech about the “guilty creatures sitting at a play” (2.2.285),

whose guilty conscience is caught in the web of the crime played out before and for them, augments its poetic power within the framework of the rhetorical and ethical argumentation derived from Quintilian and La Primaudaye's Christianization of Aristotle's *Nichomachean Ethics*, and from Francis Bacon. As Shakespeare has Hamlet illustrate, "through his failures with the *Mousetrap*, works of drama should not be taken to function as straightforwardly didactic and forensic tools" (237); the playwright's most original rethinking of the classics lies not in direct imitation, but in their critique. That Hamlet's "philosophical nature is a given" (238) is an inescapable claim. Yet Lewis turns this thesis about Hamlet's way of being, thinking, and speaking into a probing analysis of the character's argumentation about vengeance, his clinging to providence, and his use of natural philosophy and metaphysics. As an intellectual, Hamlet is a fluent philosophical deliberator. His thinking, Lewis shows adroitly, reflects an art of distilling philosophical sources from the past.

In the book's closing paragraph, Lewis asserts that "The brilliantly knowing paradox on which *Hamlet* rests is that it takes the self-reflective contrivances of a dramatic plot to reveal that there is no divine author scripting human affairs; no list of approved parts for humankind to play; no heavenly audience passing judgment on human performance" (303). This paradox is the source of Lewis's readings, which are authentic, full of the surprises of critical invention, ardently articulated, and endlessly thought-provoking.

GORAN STANIVUKOVIC

Saint Mary's University, Halifax, Nova Scotia

Maynard, Katherine S.

Reveries of Community: French Epic in the Age of Henri IV, 1572–1616.

Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2018. Pp. x, 183. ISBN 978-0-8101-3583-3 (paperback) US\$34.95.

Reveries of Community: French Epic in the Age of Henri IV, 1572–1616 takes us on a short but nevertheless rich journey through the work of five French epic poets, some of whom are unfamiliar even to many of those working in French Studies: Pierre de Ronsard, Guillaume Salluste Du Bartas, Sébastien Barnier, Pierre-Victor Palma Cayet, and Agrippa d'Aubigné.