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October 12, 2018: So, Shakespeare Is Now a Nihilist

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Title: So, Shakespeare Is Now a Nihilist

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10/12/2018—By nihilism, I mean the belief in the culture that claims of value are just matters of opinion, and are often just manipulations masking the will to power. I have been arguing for years that nihilism has infected the culture and that the effects are dire, especially in the political realm, leading to hyper-partisanship and the death of truth. Still, it is always a shock to see nihilism in an unvarnished state, certain of itself and unwilling to acknowledge its own uncertainty. I received one of those shocks when reading a review by James Shapiro of Rhodri Lewis's book on Hamlet, *Hamlet and the Vision of Darkness* in the April 19, 2018 issue of the *New York Review*. For Lewis, Hamlet is not the model of nascent subjectivity, inwardness, that he is often seen to be: "He is instead the finely drawn embodiment of a moral order that is collapsing under the weight of its own contradictions." (Lewis's words, quoted by Shapiro) And the reason readers have largely missed this? Because we have been unwilling to acknowledge that Shakespeare himself rejected humanism: Shakespeare repudiates two fundamental tenets of humanist culture. First, the core belief that history is a repository of wisdom from which human societies can and should learn.... Second, the conviction that the true value of human life could best be understood by a return *ad fontes*—to the origins of things, be they historical, textual, moral, poetic, philosophical, or religious (Protestant and Roman Catholic alike). For Shakespeare, this is a sham.... Like the past in general, origins are pliable—whatever the competing or complementary urges of appetite, honour, virtue, and expediency need them to be. Shapiro notes that in Lewis' view of Shakespeare's vision, the search for absolutes by which to live and act is doomed to failure. In the search for meaning or fixity, one discovers nothing of significance. Shapiro draws the natural conclusion from Lewis—"The absence of any moral certainties means that it's a 'kill or be killed' world." That is the jungle President Trump lives in, and increasingly, so do we. We can learn from Shakespeare that "the world has always been amoral and predatory." If I may say so, Professor Shapiro, renowned Professor of English at Columbia, seems unwilling to really criticize Lewis beyond acknowledging that "Lewis's Hamlet is not mine." I believe Shapiro generously wishes to give a newer generation its say without insisting on his own vision of Hamlet. Fair enough—more than fair. But I have to ask, how is it that we can have "paid a steep political price for failing to heed Shakespeare's warning" when we, including Lewis, basically share the vision that Lewis attributes to Shakespeare? We have paid a steep price, but we have paid it for accepting what Lewis is offering. We now need to expose this dark vision for the dead end it has proved to be.