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10-18-2018

October 18, 2018: Rhodri Lewis Responds

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Repository Citation

Ledewitz, B. (2018). October 18, 2018: Rhodri Lewis Responds. Retrieved from <https://dsc.duq.edu/ledewitz-hallowedsecularism/1198>

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Title: Rhodri Lewis Responds

Date: 2018-10-18T04:42:00.001-04:00

10/18/2018--Rhodri Lewis, Professor of English at Princeton and author of *Hamlet and the Vision of Darkness*, responded to my blog post here last Friday. Since I did not obtain his permission, I will only set forth a paragraph from the book that he sent me in arguing that the book does not associate Shakespeare with an entirely nihilistic view. Shakespeare wrote Hamlet as an exercise in truth-telling, an actual way out of the collapse of classical humanism.

It might be objected that I am describing Hamlet as a work of nihilism, in which nothing signifies “but as ’tis valued”. Not so. Rather, this book has endeavoured to demonstrate the extraordinary pains that Shakespeare took to represent the cultural world of humanism as fundamentally indifferent to things as they really are, and as one in which the pursuit of truth is therefore all but an impossibility. All but: taken in new directions that Hamlet lays out for it, dramatic poetry might be able to offer a likeness of this cultural world in all of its self-deceit, illusion, and pretence. Humanist models of history, of poetry, and of philosophy cannot “show ... the very age and body of the time his form and pressure” (3.2.24-25), and are in large measure a part of the problem. By insisting on their own sufficiency, they impede the proper comprehension of the human lot. But precisely because Hamlet is a post-humanist work of tragedy (one might call it anti-humanist but for the fact that the fabric from which it is assembled is so consistently that of sixteenth-century convention), it is not bound by the sort of strictures that Shakespeare brings to bear on superficially imitative neo-classicism. In place of preordained moral reflections that show the world as the playwright and his authorities think it should be, Hamlet – as most clearly articulated in chapter 5 above – provides its readerly and theatrical audiences with the prompt to examine themselves, their presuppositions, and their beliefs about the status of humankind within the moral and physical universes. The audacity of Hamlet is to demonstrate by example, rather than theoretical disquisition, that in the humanistic world of which Shakespeare and his work were a part, dramatic poetry – not history, not philosophy, and certainly not theology – is the medium best fitted to telling the truth. Best fitted to revealing that in its attachment to various forms of theatrum mundi, humankind not only propagates its own ignorance and self-alienation, but ensures that it will remain unable to devise a better way in which to live. Kings, their challengers, and their impetuous heirs will come and go, but the nature of the masquerade will continue unchanged. Only by dramatizing this most self-reflexive of truths alongside the evasions and authority with which it ordinarily eludes scrutiny can fulfilment or progress become a possibility. What that progress might look like, Shakespeare does not say; nor will he do so in Othello, Macbeth, and King Lear. Instead, and to borrow a phrase from Lafew in All’s Well, his tragedies enjoin their audiences to “submit” themselves to “an unknown fear” – one that the canons of neither ancient nor modern wisdom can help them to allay.