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Barry J. Scherr, *Shakespeare's Hamlet and Lawrence Agonistes: The Early Phase*.

Newcastle Upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2018.

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Reviewed by Elise Brault-Dreux

In his enthusiastic book, Barry J. Scherr highlights the meaningful presence of “Shakespeare-Hamlet” in Lawrence’s oeuvre. Scherr proposes a close reading of letters written by the young Lawrence, then focuses extensively on *Women Love*, and concludes with *Aaron’s Rod* and *Kangaroo*. Throughout, Scherr repeatedly stands against the “extreme left-wing” (“feminist”, “atheist” or “Foucauldian”) Lawrentian critiques and deconstructs their analysis, by reading Lawrence’s individualism, anti-intellectualism and defence of the flesh and blood through the lens of Lawrence’s personal interpretation of *Hamlet* – Hamlet as selfish, conceited and anti-sensual.

In Chapter One, Scherr proposes that Lawrence’s quarrel with Shakespeare (first voiced in *Twilight in Italy* [TI 76]) is, as often with Lawrence, based on a uniquely personal reading, his “creative misreading of Hamlet” (132), and through which he ends up exposing his own philosophy. Drawing an obvious link between Lawrence’s attendance at a performance of *Hamlet* in Italy in 1913 and his famous letter about his “Great Religion of the blood” (2L 470–1), Scherr then starts his demonstration of Lawrence’s anti-cerebral stance as a reaction to “Shakespeare-Hamlet”. While Lawrence passionately defends the supreme male, the ideal Self, the highest conception of the I – which for Scherr is a “Jewish” vision of the glorious bodily self – Shakespeare kills it in murdering Hamlet’s father in a “Christian” valorisation of the dying, “crucified” body and self.

Scherr goes on in Chapter Two to introduce Hamlet as a feckless character, unable to prevent Claudius from killing his father, incapable of love, and clearly anti-erotic – a complex feeling of

frustration that leads to his world-famous soliloquy. Scherr does propose a stimulating parallel between Hamlet and Hermione in *Women in Love*, based on Lawrence's insect metaphors: while in *Twilight in Italy* Hamlet is a black beetle that must be squashed (TI 77), Hermione's skull must be "cracked like an insect" (WL 42), and he suggests this equation clearly sets both characters as "sterile-cerebral" egoists who sharply contrast with Lawrence's "passional-creative" consciousness. But, relying on Bloomian theory, Scherr indicates that Lawrence-Birkin tries to redeem, complete and enlarge Hamlet's famous soliloquy, and thus to rescue the Self and strengthen its psychic-ontology. Here, Scherr again warns his reader against too-hasty left-wing interpreters and defenders of equality: the Lawrentian Self is posited as unique, inherently unequal with other selves.

Another keystone analysis in this chapter is Scherr's treatment of the issue of death and rebirth. While Hamlet's sleep of death is negative (Act 3), Lawrence-Birkin's is more "life affirming" and leads to re-birth – a fundamental gap that Scherr relates to Birkin's being psychic-ontologically strong enough to deal with women in love, as opposed to the inexperienced Hamlet who is incapable of love. While Scherr sees that both Birkin and Hamlet share a desire to set the world right, he considers only the "Jewish" patriarchal Birkin is ready to confront "Pagan" Ursula, and that Birkin's "psychic-ontological strength" (a phrase which is omnipresent in the book) derives from his intense desire to turn his own self into something wonderful and makes him – unlike Hamlet – capable of mature love.

In Chapter Three, Scherr shows how Lawrence fashions a "'Jewish' world of leaders/heroes" who are supposed to stand out against the failure of the "Christian"/ "matriarchal" Shakespeare-Hamlet. He then elaborates a convincing portrait of Gerald as a Lawrentian Christian figure of self-sacrifice who has abandoned his sacred self to the woman, Gudrun. This leads Scherr to portray Gerald as a "Christian" Hamlet who destroys himself and Western civilisation as he takes revenge. But like Hamlet, as a tragic hero,

he is unable to complete his revenge, “death swallows him”. Scherr concludes with a debate around the recurrently drawn links between Gerald and Cain.

In Chapter Five Scherr synthesises Lawrence’s philosophy as “Lawrence’s great (anti-Shakespearean) embrace of ‘[self-] fulfilment,’ Lawrence’s great (anti-Shakespearean) attack on ‘[self-] suppression and [self-] abnegation,’ and Lawrence’s great (anti-Shakespearean) valorisation of the ‘immediate intimate self’” (217). Scherr proposes that the “Jewish”/ “pre-Christian”, “anti-social” Lawrence who wants, with *Women in Love*, to liberate Western civilisation, contrasts sharply with Lawrence’s idea of a “Christian-democratic” Shakespeare who, for Lawrence, is the cause of England’s “desecration” (233). Civilisation can be rescued only by “religious ‘priests of life’ and individuality” (295), in touch with spontaneous existence, unlike Claudius for instance, who, according to Lawrence, is deprived of such powerful individuality.

Scherr starts his last Chapter with Lawrence’s essay ‘Blessed are the Powerful’ where Lawrence declares that power “comes from beyond” (*RDP* 321). Scherr then shows that Birkin draws his power from “behind” (as shown with Ursula in “Excuse”), as “one of the Sons of God” – unlike Hamlet whose power derives from his conceited will (324).

Scherr focuses throughout on the contest for supremacy between Lawrence and Shakespeare, and, by the end of his book, seems to be asserting that after *Women in Love* Lawrence somehow makes himself superior in a “Lawrentian realm, that of psychic-ontological strength” (340) and that “the heroic/Judaic/Davidic/Lawrentian Man with his ‘deep power-urge’” (347) has rescued Civilisation from Christian-Shakespearean self-hatred and ideals.

Scherr’s book proposes micro-analyses of Lawrence’s texts which, though often read, here reveal themselves in a new light. In clear opposition (sometimes rather excessive or extreme) to the trend of Lawrentian critiques, Scherr makes his own voice heard, and Lawrence and Hamlet are brought together in a quite original way.