

7-1-2014

## Review of Hillman, Richard. "French Reflections in the Shakespearean Tragic." Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2012

Andrew Vorder Bruegge

Winthrop University, [vorderbruegg@winthrop.edu](mailto:vorderbruegg@winthrop.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: [http://digitalcommons.winthrop.edu/cvpa\\_facpub](http://digitalcommons.winthrop.edu/cvpa_facpub)

 Part of the [English Language and Literature Commons](#)

---

### Publisher Citation

Vorder Bruegge, Andrew. Review of *French Reflections in the Shakespearean Tragic*, Richard Hillman. *Sixteenth Century Journal* XLV(No. 2, Summer 2014): 469-471. Available at: [http://works.bepress.com/andrew\\_vorder\\_bruegge/1](http://works.bepress.com/andrew_vorder_bruegge/1)

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the College of Visual and Performing Arts at Digital Commons @ Winthrop University. It has been accepted for inclusion in College of Visual and Performing Arts Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ Winthrop University. For more information, please contact [bramed@winthrop.edu](mailto:bramed@winthrop.edu).

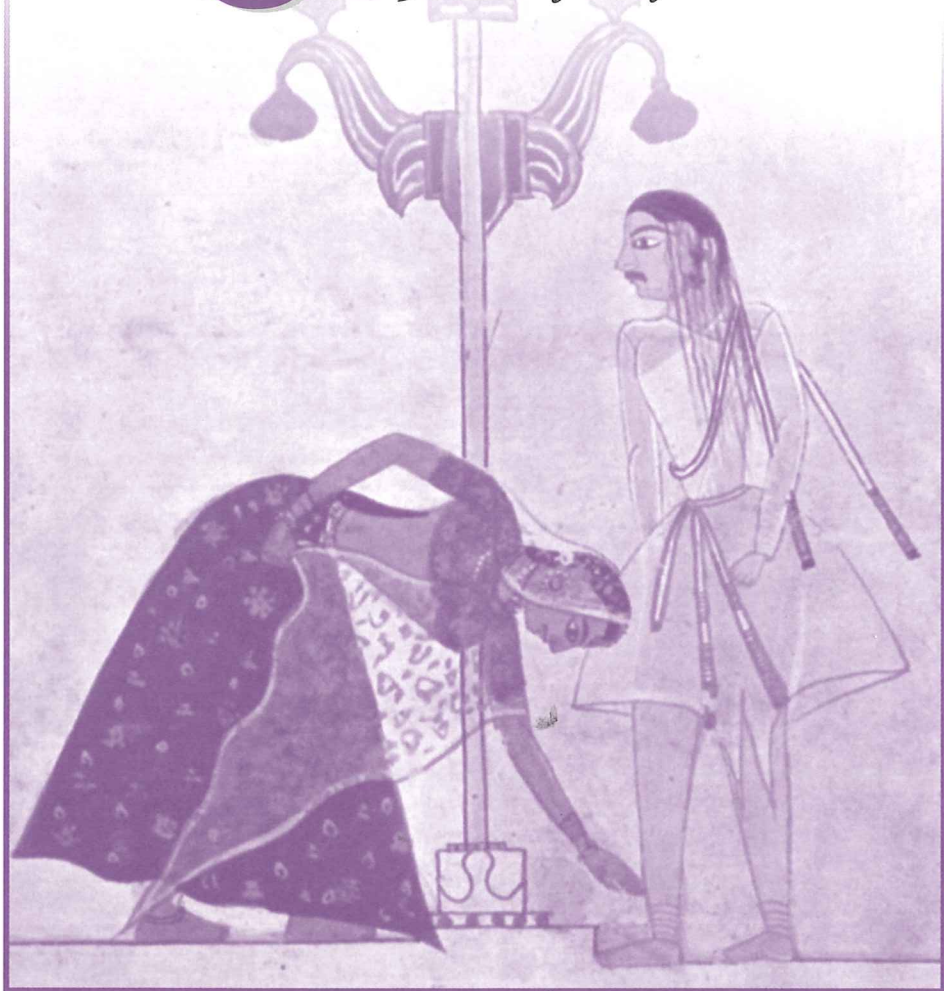
THE

Volume XLV, No. 2

Summer 2014

# SIXTEENTH CENTURY JOURNAL

*The Journal of Early Modern Studies*



0361-0160(201422)45:2;1-8



**French Reflections in the Shakespearean Tragic: Three Case Studies.** Richard Hillman.  
Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2012. 236 pp. \$90.00. ISBN  
978-0-7190-8717-2.

REVIEWED BY: Andrew Vorder Bruegge  
Winthrop University

This study builds upon Hillman's 2010 publication *French Origins of English Tragedy* (also published by Manchester University Press). Generally, Hillman argues against the current grain of scholarly opinion about Shakespeare's competence in French; he believes Shakespeare possessed at least solid reading skills. Nevertheless, he concedes that scholars do not need to assume that Shakespeare had much competency in French in order to account for the French influences in his dramas. His primary motive to pursue this vein of scholarship is to illuminate as much as possible about Shakespeare's use of French sources for shaping his dramas in order to debunk the many "facile linguistic assumptions" (6) that scholars less versed than he in sixteenth-century Anglo-French literary intertextuality tend to make. Hillman's interest centers on that portion of Shakespeare's audience that was educated enough to follow the playwright's clever mind. In any event, Hillman illuminates another elusive corner of Shakespeare's creative process with this study, representing another incremental—but certainly important—advancement in Shakespearean scholarship.

The three case studies here focus on *Hamlet*, *Antony and Cleopatra*, and *All's Well That Ends Well*. Hillman asserts that there were multiple French versions of the Hamlet, Antony, and Cleopatra stories available to English readers/audiences, and their reception of Shakespeare's dramas would be enhanced with rich metaphorical nuance by his evocations of those French sources. Such allusions to French versions of these stories were subtle techniques that Shakespeare used to comment indirectly on contemporary English social or political issues. The author justifies the inclusion of *All's Well That Ends Well* as one of the three case studies by reasoning that the illusion of subjectivity generated in the drama is essentially tragic. Also, the overarching French "flavor" of the drama invites investigation about the possible French sources. Unlike his handling of French sources in the above two tragedies, Hillman believes that Shakespeare wove French sources into the text of *All's Well That Ends Well* in order to steer his audiences away from, not toward, associations with contemporary political topics.

Hillman's most intriguing discussion about *Hamlet* centers on the ways the French sources inform the political aspects of the plot. The author illuminates the complicated mid-sixteenth-century court intrigues in France and how they are portrayed in the most well-known written sources (both in French and in any sort of English translation or gloss). As they were "still in discursive circulation" (33) in England in 1600, they served Shakespeare as crucial tools in making the plot of *Hamlet* and the nature of Hamlet's cautious, wavering character credible to his audiences.

The author notes the compelling power that the ancient Roman stories about Julius Caesar, Marc Antony, and Cleopatra held upon the Renaissance mind. The titanic nature of the dramatic conflicts and the moral lessons (philosophical, personal, and political) to be drawn were irresistible to Shakespeare and his contemporaries. Hillman analyzes the different slants that French authors such as Jodelle, Garnier, and Grevin gave to their versions of these characters' stories. He also meticulously enumerates the copious linguistic resonances in Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra* to the multiple French sources and their contemporary English translations. Hillman notes the scholarly interpretations of this drama that mark it as a propagandistic work during that transitional period from Elizabeth I to James I.

In his analysis of *All's Well That Ends Well*, Hillman gives much attention to the characters of the King and Helena. He tracks the presence of the French sources in Shakespeare's handling of these two characters as embodiments of a romantic remembrance of the past and denial of current reality. These dysfunctional outlooks (particularly on the part of the King) send the drama down the path of tragic loss instead of toward comic redemption. He also links the pivotal topic of Helena's virginity to the historical record of the noble Rousillons family in France and to various literary sources. Risking the commission of those "facile linguistic assumptions" that Hillman scorns, this line of reasoning raises a concern. While many in Shakespeare's audience would be familiar with these sources for *All's Well That Ends Well*, it seems as if evocations of virginity would more likely spark many more vibrant connections with Elizabeth I and Joan of Arc in the minds of most English audience members at the time.

Hillman's scholarship raises interesting questions. With whom among his audience did Shakespeare concern himself as he wove ideas from his various sources into his dramas? Did he care at all if any members of his audience recognized his allusions to his sources? How was he holding the attention of the less literate demographic? My own recent experience as an audience member of the film *Royal Affair* offers at least a practical framework for considering these kinds of questions. The film portrayed the royal Danish court in the

eighteenth century. Like most American audience members, I viewed the film with a growing awareness of my ignorance of the historical moment presented. That ignorance did not, however, mean that I could not appreciate the film's superb portrayal of political intrigue. It did not prevent me from empathizing with individual characters' personal struggles. Finally, the film compelled me to consider the moral dimensions of statecraft. Certainly, every member of *Hamlet's* first audience would have had a fulfilling aesthetic experience, even if they were not cognizant of the French reflections therein.

