

---

**Renaissance and Reformation**  
**Renaissance et Réforme**



**Hall, Crystal. Galileo's Reading**

Nick Wilding

---

Volume 39, numéro 2, printemps 2016

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1086559ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v39i2.26869>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

---

Éditeur(s)

Iter Press

ISSN

0034-429X (imprimé)

2293-7374 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

---

Citer ce compte rendu

Wilding, N. (2016). Compte rendu de [Hall, Crystal. Galileo's Reading]. *Renaissance and Reformation / Renaissance et Réforme*, 39(2), 195–197. <https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v39i2.26869>

---

© Canadian Society for Renaissance Studies / Société canadienne d'études de la Renaissance; Pacific Northwest Renaissance Society; Toronto Renaissance and Reformation Colloquium; Victoria University Centre for Renaissance and Reformation Studies, 2016

Ce document est protégé par la loi sur le droit d'auteur. L'utilisation des services d'Érudit (y compris la reproduction) est assujettie à sa politique d'utilisation que vous pouvez consulter en ligne.

<https://apropos.erudit.org/fr/usagers/politique-dutilisation/>

---

**é**rudit

Cet article est diffusé et préservé par Érudit.

Érudit est un consortium interuniversitaire sans but lucratif composé de l'Université de Montréal, l'Université Laval et l'Université du Québec à Montréal. Il a pour mission la promotion et la valorisation de la recherche.

<https://www.erudit.org/fr/>

**Hall, Crystal.**

***Galileo's Reading.***

Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013. Pp. 249. ISBN 978-1-107-04755-6 (hardcover) \$99.95.

Galileo, long-time hero to historians of science, also casts a giant shadow on the history of Italian prose: his published output spanned many genres, from operation manual to over-sophisticated dialogue. The draft of a play, sonnets and other poetry, and reading notes survived him unpublished. What, asks Hall, did he read, and what was the relationship between his literary reading and his scientific writing?

Hall is closer to answering these questions than any preceding literary critic, though the material may well be more problematic than she admits in this book. (She has since addressed this point in her article “Galileo’s Library Reconsidered” in *Galilaeana*, XII, 2015, 29–82). She’s quite right to resist the clichés of Galileo’s early hagiographies, such as that of his creepy acolyte Vincenzo Viviani, who pitted Galileo’s study of nature against that of books: “He equipped himself with very few books,” Viviani wrote in his 1654 *Racconto storico della vita di Galileo*, “but these were the best and the nicest; he praised good writings on philosophy and geometry to enlighten and arouse the mind to similar or higher speculations, but rightly said that the principal portals via which one should enter the rich treasury of natural philosophy were observations and experiments” (translation mine). Over a century ago, the great Galileo editor Antonio Favaro published his interpretative reconstruction of Galileo’s library, consisting of more than five hundred titles. Favaro depended on several sources: centrally, two imprecise book inventories from Galileo’s heirs, drawn up decades after his death, supplemented by Galileo’s surviving books (sometimes embellished with his marginalia), plus titles mentioned in his correspondence and printed works. Hall has now revisited these documents and uses them as the door to enter Galileo’s study.

Before following Favaro, though, it’s worth considering the problems posed by these sources: a 1641 inventory of Galileo’s own possessions mentions only “forty pieces of books.” Perhaps he gave away his library when he went blind; or perhaps Galileo’s relatives merged their inheritance with their own collections. Indeed, Favaro’s lists are perhaps actually a diversion from the harder question of Galileo’s reading; he had, after all, access to one of the best

private libraries in late Renaissance Italy, that of Pinelli, in addition to those of his Paduan, Venetian, Roman, and Florentine friends and patrons. He even traded books with printers.

As Hall displays with deep erudition, Galileo was clearly well read across genres in Italian, Latin, and vernaculars in translation, and prized his own literary taste highly. His training in literary academies and passion for Ariosto recently informed the best available biography: John Heilbron's *Galileo* (Oxford, 2010). Hall wants to take Heilbron's insights a stage further and place them at the centre of Galileo's argumentation. Whereas Heilbron's depiction of Galileo as Ariosto-mad cast him as culturally conservative, even quixotic, Hall places Galileo's rhetorical mobilizations of Ariosto's paladins centre stage in his attacks on pedantry and Aristotelianism. Hall does a good job alerting us to the lost contexts within which Galileo's quotations from Ariosto originally resonated. But her depiction of Galileo's Ariostianism can become over-determined. The *Sidereus Nuncius*, for example, soars in a world of classical allusion, but there is not a hint of epic there, only the heroic: it is written, as its best editor Isabelle Pantin has argued, as an *avviso*, and inhabits a textual world whose skies are darkened by the arrows of urgent and contemporary pamphlet wars. Yet here, a few scattered references to vernacular epics selected from opponents' responses confirms that this is in fact the correct cultural context in which to read the *Sidereus*. In Hall's account, epics are intrinsically linked to courts and courtliness and opposed to universities, despite the fact that Republican Venice had no court and Galileo worked at the university in Padua for nearly two decades. Hall's conviction that the epic is fundamental to interpreting Galileo makes her disregard much understudied material: contemporaries such as Andrea Salvadori wrote poems on Galileo's discoveries (Galileo even rewrote them), but because they are not epic they are mentioned only in passing here. This has the unfortunate effect of isolating Galileo intellectually. The social world of scholarship, the chatter of the library, the trips to the bookstore and printer, the baroque writing workshop: all these have no place in Hall's reconstruction of Galileo's reading or writing. It is the Bible, more than epic's textual status, that undergoes fraught discussion in this period, yet Hall has little to say on this.

Ariosto does play an important role, well-analyzed here, in *Il Saggiatore*, but the author is so eager to insist on the importance of the full narrative context of each of Galileo's quotes that she ends up reading commonplace citation as *roman à clef*. Similar reading techniques both dull the witty, ludic complexity

of the *Dialogo* and stack the cards in Galileo's favour; resistance is futile, both scientifically and literarily, to Hall's Galileo. His disputes are mapped onto a caricature of Cervantes's rich world, and Galileo wins every time in the game of circular hermeneutics: Peripatetics misread the world just like Don Quixote. This, even though we know absolutely nothing about how, or even whether, Galileo read a word of Cervantes.

This is a promising avenue for research, and Hall should be commended for her original approach and evident skill at close reading. But if the history of reading is going to contribute to the practice of history, and especially the history of science, it has to bring with it a different kind of evidence than that required by literary criticism. Hall's more recent work, indeed, has already moved in this direction, interrogating the library lists as historical documents and bringing the new methodologies of digital humanities to bear upon them. *Galileo's Reading* is the first step into a new kind of history.

NICK WILDING

Georgia State University

**Johnson, Kimberly.**

***Made Flesh: Sacrament and Poetics in Post-Reformation England.***

Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014. Pp. 237. ISBN 978-0-8122-4588-2 (hardcover) \$59.95.

Creating poetry and critiquing it are appreciably different skills. Kimberly Johnson is one of those rare writers who brilliantly combines the two. Author of three poetry collections and translator of Vigil's *Georgics*, Johnson has now turned her UC Berkeley dissertation into a sophisticated and groundbreaking analysis of seventeenth-century devotional poetry. Recent studies have demonstrated poetry's centrality in early modern English culture, and several have focused upon the theological preoccupations of seventeenth-century lyric. What sets this book apart is its rigorous focus upon the formal and material aspects of poetry—on poetics as how poetry means and functions differently from prose, rather than as a general term for literary politics or thematics. In *Made Flesh*, Johnson makes a powerful and necessary case for reading poetry *as poetry*—that is, not as “a set of theological treatises with line breaks” (27), but