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SHAKESPEARE: The Invention of the Human

By Harold Bloom

Riverhead. 768 pp.

I must make immediately clear the central premise of my professional life: Shakespeare's writing dwarfs that of every other writer who's ever lived. His absolute supremacy is more long-standingly self-evident than the proposition that all men are created equal. To those blind to this aesthetic axiom, I'm often tempted to paraphrase Lorrie Moore's words to a comprehensionally-challenged student: "If you can't see why Shakespeare is by far the world's greatest writer, then you just go stand in the hallway until you do."

Readers sharing this belief will find Harold Bloom's massive new study an utter pleasure.

Bloom quickly indicates this will be less a tight critical argument than the full disclosure of a lifelong love affair. While he awards the title "Most Bardolatrous of Critics" to Coleridge, Bloom aspires to wrest it away with such observations as, "The more one reads and ponders the plays of Shakespeare, the more one realizes that the accurate stance toward them is one of awe.... [They] remain the outward limit of human achievement: aesthetically, cognitively, in certain ways morally, even spiritually. They abide beyond the end of the mind's reach; we cannot catch up to them.... [In Shakespeare], we encounter an intelligence without limits."

He knows there are, and takes copious volleys at, contemporary critics who would distort and deny Shakespeare's greatness. He speaks here to those of his sect, like me, who believe, "[The sin of] Bardolatry, to me seems salvation."

Bloom does, however, propose a loose critical argument, hyperbolic in tone, suggested in his subtitle: Shakespeare virtually invented human character in literature, which in turn shaped our character in everyday life. "No one, before or since Shakespeare, made so many separate selves," says Bloom. "Personality, in our sense, is a Shakespearean invention."

Even a casual glance at Homer or Euripides suggests this is not so, but once we grant the ludicrous exaggeration of Bloom's premise as literal fact, we can begin to see its startling accuracy as metaphoric truth.

Bloom is doing nothing new here. Rather, the venerable critic does what the Bard himself keeps attempting in his four final plays: restoring something of central value that has been lost. Bloom puts character once again at the heart of appreciating Shakespeare.

Almost every age--possibly even our own--has introduced some valuable new element into Shakespeare criticism, but each suffered some costly myopia as well. The

G. Wilson Knight/L.C. Knights era of six decades ago offered brilliant insights into the patterns of meaning that emerge when we view the plays primarily as dramatic poems, but they made the fatal mistake (which Knights later told me he regretted) of denying the reality of the characters that had been central during the century extending from Coleridge to Bradley.

Bloom restores the character criticism tradition in full.

Shakespeare, says Bloom (echoing Shelley), created "forms more real than living men." Women too. This ability, which Bloom calls "vitalism," is the capacity to infuse more life into characters than other writers can. As the pinnacle exemplars, he cites those characters "truly endless to meditation": Falstaff, Rosalind, Hamlet, Iago, Lear, Edgar, Edmund, Cleopatra.

He approaches them with a combination of irritating pontification and endearing peccadilloes. Falstaff, whom Bloom adores as "the mortal god of my imaginings," is "a portrait of the artist as an old man." Hamlet is "Shakespeare's ideal son... [and] the most intelligent character in all of literature." Cleopatra is "the archetype of the star, the world's first celebrity." Bloom rhapsodizes on his love for Rosalind in a way that would sound like late-middle-age dotage if I didn't so entirely share that love.

His personal intrusions become like Fielding's in *Tom Jones*, themselves a source of the book's delight. On *Merchant of Venice*, Bloom notes: "Since Shylock is a murderous villain, then Gratiano, though a touch crude, must be taken as a good fellow, cheerful and robust in his anti-Semitism, a kind of Pat Buchanan of Renaissance Venice," and "Portia is dangerously theatrical, and not just when she is cross-dressing."

Bloom freely confesses his critical debt to the great character critics before him, principally Johnson, Hazlitt, Bradley and Harold C. Goddard, all now hopelessly out of key with the tune of our times. Goddard is our century's most regrettably undervalued Shakespearean, eschewed because he frequently--at times led by his Quaker pacifism--slips into lunacies, just as Bloom's own quirks sometimes wander near derangement. To both Bloom and Goddard, the plays are primarily to be loved.

That makes Bloom out of step in 1998, gladly.

He aptly laments that ours is not a heroic age in literary criticism. Compared with the enduring authors they comment upon, most literary critics are large minds trapped in small souls. We feel Bloom weep for the trees that died to produce the spleenful heat that passes today for light on the art of reading, especially from what Bloom calls "the schools of resentment": "Marxists, multiculturalists, feminists, *nouveau* historicists...know their causes but not Shakespeare's plays." Radical feminists, in particular, take several droll hits: "I have not yet seen an article chiding Rosalind for spurning the shepherdess Phebe, though I live in hope." All critics, I hope, live so.

I do not agree with Bloom on all points. We part company on dozens. But when any two critics approach the infinite variety that is Shakespeare's canon, they're no more likely to find complete consort than a perfect DNA match.

Bloom falls victim to some of the sentimentalities Knights tried to correct, such as extending the personal histories of characters outside their plays. He'd like to see Falstaff appear in about half of Shakespeare's plays. He sees far more homo-eroticism in most male friendships than I can. Because throughout his career Bloom views the literary tradition as an Oedipal struggle of poets trying to equal, surpass and throw off the achievement of their precursors, he finds an unwarranted constant rivalry between Shakespeare and Marlowe and Jonson. His readings can verge on perverse: "[Iago's] passion for destruction is the only creative passion in the play," "[The tragedy of *Antony & Cleopatra*] is funnier than any of the great Shakespearean comedies."

In what seems to me its gravest shortcoming, this long book, which could be shortened 100 pages by simply deleting its repetitions, remains so singularly focused on character that it never addresses the incomparable poetry of the most agile verbal mind of which the world has record. For that, we must put Bloom aside and turn to poet/critics: Coleridge, Mark Van Doren, even Keats's marginalia.

Still, Bloom rises above and stifles most contemporary criticism like a lid on a trash can. Most critics in our time write self-referential head stuff, sometime ingenious, but doomed to remain tangential to a deep experience of Shakespeare. Like Bradley and Goddard, Bloom provides moving commentary because he's never afraid to let the plays engage his heart as well as mind, risking the smirks of today's academy.

Sometimes his observations seem mere eccentricities earned from a lifetime of pondering Shakespeare's characters. But far more often, Bloom, like Shakespeare himself, soars, and for a similar reason: he takes the work intensely personally, in the best sense, as something worth living for. Like Shakespeare and those the poet felt worthy of love, he's willing to give and hazard all he has.
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