REVIEWS

Harold Bloom, *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human* (New York: Riverhead Books 1998) 745 pp.

Does Shakespeare exceed all authors in achieving multicultural universality? Is Shakespeare's influence on the world's cultures almost unimaginable? Harold Bloom's *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human* argues we should answer both questions with a resounding yes. Bloom's Shakespeare invented the human by writing characters who change, struggling with their own nihilism in the face of mortal finitude.

Shakespeare's struggle was with Christopher Marlowe's influence. Marlowe's amoral overreachers were declaiming hyperbolic speeches in blank verse to rapt crowds when Shakespeare came to London, became an actor, and began to write plays. Freeing the English theater of stifling moral and artistic conventions, Marlowe wrote characters whose high rhetoric captivated audiences, but who are undifferentiated as persons. Shakespeare had to work through and free himself of Marlowe's powerfully seductive influence to attain his breakthrough: the invention of personages who profoundly influence not only the way we see individual personalities but the way we think of personality itself.

Though Bloom's book does not undertake the sonnets, Joel Fineman's *Shakespeare's Perjured Eye: The Invention of Poetic Subjectivity in the Sonnets* makes an argument similar to Bloom's.[1] Both critics argue Shakespeare invented characters whose inwardness or individuated consciousness is unprecedented in literary history. Shakespeare achieved a fundamental break with his predecessors. The difference between the erotics and poetics of Petrarch's and Shakespeare's sonnets (Fineman's focus), and the difference between the verisimilitude of Marlowe's and Shakespeare's characters (Bloom's focus), are differences, finally not of degree, but of kind. We cannot merely say Shakespeare's characters are true likenesses of people. Shakespeare did not imitate a humanity already simply in existence; rather, in a real sense, he invented the human as we now understand it.

While we would understand neither Fineman's nor Bloom's reading of Shakespeare if we were to say that Bloom merely extrapolates "poetic subjectivity" into "the human," Bloom praises Fineman's work as authentic literary scholarship, and not, for example, Stephen Greenblatt's "New Historicist" investigations of Shakespeare. Bloom denounces almost all current Shakespearean and literary scholarship as being interested in everything and anything but Shakespeare and literature. But if Bloom is right about the current state of literary studies, his polemics and those of his opponents will be of little interest to future generations of readers, however embroiled in them the current one may or may not be.

Bloom's reading of Shakespeare will be of more lasting interest. Bloom's critical stance is an experiential one, but it has little in common with what most of us call empiricism. As Bloom warns us, his book is a personal statement. For

[1]Joel Fineman, *Shakespeare's Perjured Eye: The Invention of Poetic Subjectivity in the Sonnets* (Berkeley 1986).

Bloom, one reads literature as the singular person one is, or not at all. Bloom's readings of literature quest for a knowledge that *happens* as an *event* or *act* opening the text to the self and the self to the text. This mode of reading becomes more complex when the texts being read, Shakespeare's plays, partly invented the humanity of the reader, a situation which might help us understand why Bloom finds Shakespeare's imagination to be uniquely strong. Discussing scholars who would expose ideologies in the plays, Bloom writes, "Demystification is a weak technique to exercise upon the one writer who truly seems to have become himself only by representing other selves" (11).

Shakespeare's writings open to alterity unlike the works of virtually any poet, novelist, or playwright. Bloom insists that Shakespeare is a truly multicultural writer of universal appeal: audiences and readers world-wide find Shakespeare's characters to speak for them and to their hopes and fears. Famous (or infamous) for deidealizing the imaginations of canonical European, British, and American writers as violently rejecting all otherness in favor of an aesthetic solitude, Bloom finds Shakespeare's imagination to be the sublime exception to this rule.

And what, according to Bloom, is Shakespearean sublimity? Sublime works of literature transport readers beyond limits, be they societal, religious, or aesthetic, and toward change: such limits surpassed, and the identities they define voided, the reader achieves a new consciousness of reality. Bloom suggests, "realities change, indeed *are* change," and "*The Complete Works of William Shakespeare* could as soon be called *The Book of Reality*" (2, 17, Bloom's emphases). Shakespeare dramatizes change. In an almost unprecedented fashion, his precursor in this matter being Chaucer, Shakespeare invents characters who are capable of and do change, death being change's final form. As perhaps the only convincing ambassador from that undiscovered country, "Hamlet becomes the sublime personality whose fate must be to perish of the truth," a cognitive demise he achieves "at the price of dying well before his death" (412, 427). Hamlet sublimely brings reality to mind: "[T]he transcendental music of cognition rises up . . . in a celebratory strain at the close of Hamlet's tragedy, achieving the secular triumph of 'The rest is silence.' What is not at rest, or what abides before the silence, is the idiosyncratic value of Hamlet's personality, for which another term is 'the canonical sublime'" (431).

The capacity for valueless being defines Hamlet's sublime value. Bloom calls Iago and Edmund pragmatic nihilists. Dangerously free, they negate all will-restricting norms and surpass Marlowe's Machiavels in their exaltation of the will to power over others, yet, however much they nihilate values, they are not free of that which posits values, the self. Their nihilism is an unfettered pragmatism servicing their wills. They destroy values as idols, except the value of the value-positing selfhood. Hamlet alone achieves the true twilight of the idols and so becomes the paragon of sublimity. He eschews a willful nihilism in favor a sublimer nihilism willing to let the will go, Hamlet's ability to "let be" finally allowing him to transcend nihilism (*Hamlet* 5.2.220).[2] Hamlet led Nietzsche into the labyrinth of nihilism. Nietzsche finally falls short of the

[2]William Shakespeare, *The Riverside Shakespeare*, ed. G. Blakemore Evans (Boston 1974).

sweet prince, but he emerges in Bloom's book as a stronger reader of Shakespeare, and especially of *Hamlet*, than Freud.

While Hamlet achieves the apotheosis of the negative sublime, Falstaff's excellence relates to the Yahwhistic sublime, "the Blessing," or "more life into a time without boundaries" (Bloom 4). Falstaff's comic exuberance produces in readers a wondrous "vitalization of the intellect, in direct contrast to Hamlet's conversion of the mind to the vision of annihilation" (283). Welcoming life, Falstaff is allied with *As You Like It*'s Rosalind, "the most admirable personage in all of Shakespeare" (207). Evading reductive readings that find her merely in search of a father, Rosalind actually quests for freedom, outwitting all comers and presiding over her suitor Orlando's erotic education. Supremely intelligent, Rosalind debunks romantic love while "instruct[ing] us in the miracle of being a harmonious consciousness that is able to accommodate the reality of another self" (211). Rosalind, Falstaff, and Hamlet define Shakespeare's extravagant "peopling of a world" (280).

Many lovers of Shakespeare will be troubled by Bloom's insight: "[T]he authentic Shakespearean litany chants variations upon the word 'nothing,' and the uncanniness of nihilism haunts almost every play, even the great, relatively unmixed comedies" (13–14). Further, the nihilizing consciousnesses of Shakespeare's major characters mark them as beings who evade contextualization. Falstaff, Hamlet, and Rosalind exist as "free artists of themselves," a phrase Bloom borrows from Hegel's comments on Shakespeare (56). These characters become free by negating any determination (ideological, moral, social, etc.) that would enclose them. If such determinations are themselves products of negations ("You are or may be this because you are not or cannot be that"), Bloom's Hegelian implication would be that Shakespeare's characters excel at negating negations. But, for these characters, there is no end to negation and nothing absolute finally remains: they exist just beyond the limits defined by the conceptual schemes our societies, institutions, and identities give us to conceive. According to Bloom, we will never cease trying to catch up with these characters; we will never quite finish reading Shakespeare.

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