

**ON READING HAROLD
BLOOM'S
SHAKESPEARE: THE
INVENTION OF THE
HUMAN**

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The publication in 1998 of *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human* marks Bloom's onslaught against what he calls "the School of Resentment," or in other words the feminist, cultural materialist and new historicist critics who are now hegemonic in Shakespeare studies. The analysis of some recent, and divergent, historicizing approaches brings to the fore Bloom's obstinate refusal to consider the possibility that Shakespeare's characters inhabit a world at the very least situated in history. Bloom of course counteracts what he sees as the hegemonic disregard for character. The chapter on *As You Like It* seems in principle a good place where Bloom could have acknowledged some contemporary contributions, since he, like feminist critics, privileges Rosalind. But once again Bloom shows a cavalier disregard for the realities of contemporary critical practice which, as far as Rosalind is concerned, has focused on the temporary nature of her empowerment in the Forest of Arden, the sexual ambiguities to which the masculine disguise gives rise within the comedy, and the historicizing of such matters as the presence of transvestite women in early modern society, and of boy actors on the stage. The chapter on *Hamlet* is crucial to Bloom's thesis about Shakespeare's invention of the human. He obviously does not join the ranks of post-war scholars who have displaced *Hamlet* in favour of *King Lear* as the Shakespearean tragedy. But then Bloom's total concentration on the Prince makes him overlook a good deal of what the play has to offer, not only regarding character, but also language and structure. By focusing first on two of the most adversarial chapters and last on the one which is probably the least contentious, I have tried to convey something of the style and thrust of *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human*. It seems to me evident that Bloom voices misgivings about trends in literary studies which are widespread in the profession, and that are by no means restricted to the field of Shakespeare scholarship. But the failure to engage with the arguments and practice of feminist and historicist critics undermines Bloom's case.

There is something in philology that appeals to the worst in man.
(George Steiner, "Homer and the Scholars").

With the 400th anniversary of Shakespeare's death only fifteen years away, we can begin to take stock of the main developments in XXth century

Shakespeare studies, which have been marked by the hegemony of academic criticism. But despite its sophistication and the enormously increased number of its practitioners, academic criticism seems not to be much appreciated outside the groves of academe. In Margaret Atwood's latest novel, *The Blind Assassin*, the protagonist, now an old woman, receives inquiries about her late sister (a famous novelist) from budding and established literary scholars, and is dismissive of what she perceives as their pretentious jargon and ignorance:

Dear Miss X., I acknowledge your letter concerning your proposed thesis, though I can't say that its title makes a great deal of sense to me. Doubtless it does to you or you would not have come up with it. I cannot give you any help. Also you do not deserve any. "Deconstruction" implies the wrecking ball and "problematize" is not a verb. (Atwood 2000: 286-87)

Although it is literary scholars who are most often subjected to this kind of criticism, they are not the only ones. In "The Chinese Lobster," the last piece in A.S. Byatt's *The Matisse Stories*, Dr Himmelblau reflects on Perry Diss, a distinguished specialist in art history whom her younger colleagues find "rambling and embarrassing":

Dr Himmelblau, personally, is not of this opinion. In her view Perry Diss is always talking about something, not about nothing, and in her view, which she knows to be the possibly crabbed view of a solitary intellectual nearing retirement, this is increasingly rare. Many of her colleagues, Gerda Himmelblau believes, do not *like* paintings. Perry Diss does. (Byatt 1994: 98. Emphasis Byatt's.)

It is perhaps worth remembering that both Atwood and Byatt read English at highly prestigious institutions, and that the latter was Lecturer and Senior Lecturer in English Literature at University College London from 1972 to 1983. Dr Himmelblau's reference to "nothing" when thinking about contemporary critical work resonates in an uncanny manner when placed next to Harold Bloom's statement, in conversation with Gurpegui, to the effect that he has become "the Sterling Professor of Nothing" (Gurpegui 1996: 167). This conversation is mostly about Bloom's previous work on the Western Canon, but he mentions his intention of going on to write on Shakespeare:

In some sense this book, on the Western Canon, is a prolegomenon to a study of Shakespeare and originality, because, as I say a hundred times in this book, Shakespeare is the Western Canon. I mean one also says that Shakespeare and Dante and Cervantes and Tolstoy are the Western Canon, but above all else Shakespeare is the Western Canon. I mean, if Shakespeare does not manifest what it means to have supreme aesthetic value, then indeed there is no such thing as aesthetic value, which of course I don't believe for a second. (168)

As Bloom has made very clear in the course of this interview and in many other public pronouncements, the need to assert the importance of Shakespeare, and of great imaginative literature in general, is the result of a new *trahison des clercs* perpetrated in the last twenty years by academics. The publication in 1998 of *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human* marks Bloom's onslaught against what he calls "the School of Resentment," or in other words the feminist, cultural materialist and new historicist critics who are now hegemonic in Shakespeare studies. This bulky volume (745 pages in the paperback edition), without notes, bibliography or index, incorporates in its title the thesis, easy to dismiss, that Shakespeare invented human personality as we have known it ever since. Bloom places himself in the critical tradition of Samuel Johnson, William Hazlitt, A.C. Bradley and Harold Goddard (the latter one of the few contemporary critics, together with Graham Bradshaw, that he admires) and locates the genius of Shakespeare in his extraordinary capacity to endow his characters with cognitive and imaginative powers. Of all the characters created by Shakespeare, Bloom singles out Falstaff, Hamlet and Cleopatra (Rosalind almost makes the grade), and proceeds to analyse each play in great detail and in a manner which purposefully negates the practice of modern literary critics who, for him, have "the sadistic aestheticism of Iago" as their ancestor. (Bloom 1999 (1998): 452)

New historicism is Bloom's mighty opponent in his discussion of *Henry IV* and *Henry V*. He begins by locating the centre of the *Henry IV* plays (he rejects the term "Henriad" in favour of "Falstaffiad") on Falstaff, who "speaks what is still the best and most vital prose in the English language" (275) and who, free himself, "instructs us in freedom" (276). He is scathing on scholars, old style and new, who see in Henry V the embodiment of political order and the model for Shakespeare's own political ideal: "I join the now derided 'humanist' critics—including Dr. Johnson, Hazlitt, Swinburne, Bradley and Goddard—in dismissing this idea of order as irrelevant nonsense. To reject Falstaff is to reject Shakespeare." (278)

Bloom is rarely explicit about what specific works or critics he has in mind, but I think we can guess his target when he asks himself: "Just how does the representation of charisma, in Shakespeare, differ from charisma itself? Charisma, by definition, is not a social energy; it originates outside society." (280) We can see in this a swipe at Greenblatt's attempts to explain, in his Introduction to *Shakespearean Negotiations: The Circulation of Social Energy in Renaissance England*, how what he calls "cultural objects, expressions and practices," plays by Shakespeare included, acquired compelling force.

When it comes to defining the kind of social energy that circulates through the stage and that the stage makes circulate, Greenblatt mentions¹ power, charisma, sexual excitement, collective dreams, desire, anxiety, religious awe. When he talks of the four essays on Shakespeare's plays that follow, Greenblatt refers to genres as markers of different zones of circulation and different types of negotiation. In the history plays, a theatrical acquisition of charisma through the subversion of charisma; in the comedies, an acquisition of sexual excitement through the representation of transvestite friction. In the tragedies, an acquisition of religious power through the evacuation of religious ritual, and in the romances, an acquisition of salutary anxiety through the experience of a threatening plenitude (Greenblatt 1988: 20).

After this allusion to charisma, Bloom ignores in his discussion of the "Falstaffiad" the reading strategies Greenblatt deploys in "Invisible Bullets," one of his best-known works and one that has been often reprinted. Originally published in *Glyph* in 1981, a revised version with the title of "Invisible Bullets: Renaissance Authority and Its Subversion, *Henry IV* and *Henry V*" was included in *Political Shakespeare* (Dollimore and Sinfield eds., 1985) and in other collections of essays. It is easy to understand the impact the essay made since it is in itself an excellent sample of early new historicist strategies, and was also instrumental in the reactivation of the history plays in the 1980s as texts privileged by politicized critics. Greenblatt's methodology here is paradigmatic: he begins with an anecdote, follows with a relatively obscure social text before finally reaching *Henry IV* and *Henry V* and issues of power, subversion and containment. The question whether subversion (intellectual subversion, that is) was possible in the Renaissance is central to many controversies around the new historicism. In "Invisible Bullets," Greenblatt's argument tends to demonstrate that what looks like subversion is not really subversion and in order to do that, as Carolyn Porter observes in a brilliant dissection of Greenblatt's essay, he begins by displacing the site of subversion from society to the texts of the dominant discourse (Porter 1988).

The initial anecdote Greenblatt tells in the revised version of his essay is well-known: the report that the spy Richard Baines made to the authorities about the activities of Christopher Marlowe. What really interests Greenblatt in the report is Baines's mention of a "Heriot," who turns out to be Thomas Harriot, great mathematician and expert in cartography and optics, and possessor of a dangerous reputation as an atheist. Harriot is also the author of the first original book on the first English colony in America. Greenblatt's hypothesis is that we can find in *A Brief and True Report of the New Found Land of Virginia* (1588) traces of that religious heterodoxy that Baines's report

¹In what follows, I draw on chapter 7 of Hidalgo (2001).

attributed to Marlowe, and that the study of the relationship between orthodoxy and subversion in Harriot's text can provide a model capable of helping us to understand the far more complex problem posed by Shakespeare's history plays (23).

As I said above, "Invisible Bullets" is perhaps Greenblatt's best-known essay and a number of scholars have taken issue with his arguments, which is something Bloom does not attempt. Roughly speaking, we can classify the responses in two groups: those who accept to a greater or lesser extent Greenblatt's methodology but emphasize different historical circumstances, and those who radically question his methodology and conclusions in "Invisible Bullets." I will deal with one example each of both kinds of response.

At the beginning of his "Pilgrims of Grace: *Henry IV* Historicized," Tom McAlindon mentions both Greenblatt's essay and Graham Holderness's *Shakespeare Recycled: the Making of Historical Drama* (1992) as examples of historicizing approaches that privilege power, dominion and class conflict, although he is aware of a basic difference between the two: whereas Greenblatt establishes an analogical connection between the conflicts of the reigns of Henry IV and of his son and the colonial experience of the Elizabethans in Virginia, Holderness rejects the connection with sixteenth-century politics and sees instead in Shakespeare's plays an analysis of the contradictions of fifteenth-century feudalism (McAlindon 1995: 69). What McAlindon misses in both Greenblatt and Holderness is the presence of the high politics of Tudor England, and he tries to demonstrate that the two *Henry IV* plays exhibit great affinities with sixteenth-century political and religious struggles, specifically with the so-called Pilgrimage of Grace of 1536.

The Pilgrimage of Grace was the most important rebellion in Tudor England, a forerunner of the North rebellion during Elizabeth's reign in 1569-70. The grievances were both political and economic but the main reason was Henry VIII's onslaught against "the old religion," that is, Catholicism. The pilgrims were traitorously defeated. The King invited the leaders to London under false promises and once they arrived there, had them arrested and executed. McAlindon examines traces of the Pilgrimage of Grace in the collective memory of the time, and comes to the conclusion that when Shakespeare wrote the *Henry IV* plays, England was (or believed itself to be) in a situation of political insecurity originating in the threat of Catholic forces, both in the case of the Irish rebellion and in the fear of a second Armada.

Once he has established a historical context in which the rivalry between Catholicism and Protestantism had become acute, McAlindon traces in Shakespeare's plays the presence of concepts that played a special role in the ideological conflict: "grace" and, to a lesser extent, "rebuke". The Gaultree

episode with Prince John of Lancaster presents itself irresistibly as an analogy of the manner in which Henry VIII defeated the Pilgrimage of Grace rebels, and the author singles out other examples of parallels between the time of the house of Lancaster and that of the Tudors, before reaching the conclusion that:

The analogies adumbrated by Shakespeare between the reign of Henry IV and the Tudor period indicate that his interpretation of English history is here affected at every level by ideas derived from the major political and cultural experiences of his own time, as well as by notions of historical recurrence long established in western historiography (83).

McAlindon tries to fill the gaps regarding historical context that he perceives in Greenblatt's "Invisible Bullets." Leeds Barroll's "A New History for Shakespeare and His Time" has greater scope and deals with key issues in new historicist methodology and its renewed efforts to situate Shakespeare historically. Barroll starts from two historical *loci* privileged by historicist criticism in the early 1980s. The first belongs to the reign of Elizabeth I: the performance at the Globe of a *Richard II* play, presumably Shakespeare's, on the eve of the Essex rebellion. The second is the widespread belief that the coming to the throne of James I entailed a new relationship between the monarch and the stage, so that drama became part of the royal political project.

Barroll focuses on the use that both Greenblatt and Dollimore have made of the connection between *Richard II* and the Essex rebellion. He traces the source of the narrative of the connection between Shakespeare and Essex to "a nineteenth-century aristocratic ideology that constantly sought to raise Shakespeare to the status of confidant with the peerage" (Barroll 1988: 443). Against the one-sided reading of the *locus* by recent historicist critics, Barroll undertakes the examination of Elizabethan documents pertaining to the enquiry that followed the failure of the conspiracy, in order to gauge the reaction of power to the performance of *Richard II*. A review of the punishments meted out to those who attended the performance and those who did not, but were involved in the conspiracy, leads Barroll to the conclusion that "if the performance of *Richard II* was indeed dangerous to the state, those who raised the danger were treated rather lightly" (446).

Once he has proved that Elizabethan power did not find dangerous the performance of *Richard II* on the eve of the Essex rebellion, Barroll searches for a different origin of the well-known identification between Queen Elizabeth and her predecessor in the course of a conversation with William Lambarde six months after Essex's execution: "I am Richard II, know ye not that?" The traditional narrative identifies this use of Richard II with Shakespeare's play mainly on account of the suppression of the deposition scene in the Quarto

editions until 1608. Barroll on the other hand reads the “suppression” of the scene quite differently:

The concept of a deposition scene as “suppressed” is a curious and distressing intellectual position for critics who are interested in new approaches to and apprehensions of the history of Shakespeare's time. For the traditional view of a suppressed deposition scene is based on a limited concept of textual transmission in Shakespeare's quartos as well as on formalist assumptions about *Richard II* itself. (448)

Barroll follows those scholars who think that Shakespeare revised his plays and that the presence of new material in later Quartos or in the First Folio does not mean that it had been previously censored. Furthermore, the role of the figure of Richard II in the Essex conspiracy can be examined from another *locus*, from different documents. The deposed and murdered monarch had appeared in a prose history written by John Hayward and published in 1599 under the title *The first part of the life and raigne of king Henrie the III*. Barroll reviews the connections between this work and the Earl of Essex, which go beyond the dedication in the Latin preface. The author was sent to the Tower and questioned several times about the historical sources of his account. In Barroll's summing-up, the interest that the Crown showed in Hayward's history makes the attention lavished upon the performance of *Richard II* look trivial.

The second *locus* that Barroll perceives in new historicist criticism concerns the involvement of the theatre in James I's political theory and rule, and that monarch's supposed preference for the stage. Both Jonathan Goldberg in *James I and the Politics of Literature*, and Leonard Tennenhouse in *Power on Display* have supported the hypothesis, mainly on the grounds that the number of performances at Court increased after James came to the throne. But as Barroll proves from a painstaking analysis of Court records and other contemporary evidence, James was frequently absent from the Court at the time of the performances and engaged in his favourite leisure activity: hunting. It was the Queen and Prince Henry who attended the theatrical performances, and it was the Queen and a group of aristocratic ladies who sponsored the masques as the characteristic spectacle at the Jacobean Court. Barroll does not deny that the theatre played a social role during the time of Shakespeare's career, but he observes that many of the narratives deployed by new historicists are limited by old narratives of a special relationship between the theatre and the state or the person of the monarch. Barroll also calls attention to the peculiar shortsightedness of new historicists concerning gender issues when he remarks that “it was, in fact, the countesses with Queen Anna who sponsored and enacted the masques Ben Jonson is so often said to have written for King James” (463-64).

To return to Bloom after these brief considerations of some recent, and divergent, historicizing approaches, means to confront the obstinate refusal to consider the possibility that Shakespeare's characters inhabit a world at the very least situated in history. Bloom of course counteracts what he sees as the hegemonic disregard for character: "Though most current Anglophone scholars refuse to confront Shakespeare's peopling of a world, that remains his appeal to almost all who attend performances of the plays, or who continue to read them" (280). We could say that whereas Bloom emphasizes "peopling," historicizing scholars choose to emphasize "world," though even when they touch upon character, their interest may lie elsewhere. In "Invisible Bullets," for example, Francis the drawer gets more attention than Falstaff.

Bloom's method when discussing the *Henry IV* plays combines assertion, extensive quotation, and *ad hominem* attacks. It is his personal commitment that endows Bloom's claims, however traditional, with some original flavour:

And it cannot be affirmed too often that Falstaff's most salient qualities are his astonishing intellect and his exuberant vitality, the second probably not so outward a personal endowment of the man William Shakespeare. (287)

And he is capable of making some illuminating connections:

His superbly supple and copious prose is astonishingly attractive. Samuel Johnson and Oscar Wilde's Lady Bracknell (in *The Importance of Being Earnest*) alike are legatees of Falstaff's resourcefulness of speech. (294)

Far less interesting are the repeated *ad hominem* attacks (in a book which is rather repetitive as a whole), particularly if we remember that the common reader almost certainly does not know which *homines* Bloom has in mind. The wilful refusal to engage with the arguments advanced by other scholars is accompanied by the denunciation of academics as a class: "After a lifetime surrounded by other professors, I question their experiential qualifications to apprehend, let alone judge, the Immortal Falstaff" (281). And commenting on four extracts from Falstaff's speeches:

I do not hear mere *knowingness*, which is the professional disease of resentful academic clerks who see Falstaff, like themselves, as questing for room at the top. (284. Emphasis Bloom's.)

In a brief comment on *Shakespeare: the Invention of the Human*, Neil Forsyth states that Bloom's "refusal to grant a central place to the insights of performance means he misses much of what is interesting in the contemporary Shakespeare world" (Forsyth 2000: 70). It seems to me that Bloom does not neglect performance, but rather that the performances he approves of seem all to have taken place at least fifty years ago. He was lucky enough to have seen Ralph Richardson as Falstaff, and Laurence Olivier play Hotspur in the

afternoon and Shallow in the evening in the Old Vic production of 1946, and for him the decline has been steady ever since:

I have suffered through recent performances of the *Henry IV* plays that debased Falstaff into a cowardly braggart, a sly instigator to vice, a fawner for the Prince's favor, besotted old scoundrel, and much more of that sort of desecration of Shakespeare's actual text. (283)

In the end, since for Bloom the magnificent Falstaff cannot be adequately explained by contemporary critics (they do not even try to) or brought to life by contemporary stage productions (he does not mention Orson Welles's Falstaff in *Chimes at Midnight*), the critic finds the only possible way of acknowledging his greatness by positing Shakespeare as secular religion:

Shakespeare secularists should manifest their Bardolatry by celebrating the Resurrection of Sir John Falstaff. It should be made, unofficially but pervasively, an international holiday, a Carnival of wit, with multiple performances of *Henry IV, Part One*. Let it be a day for loathing political ambition, religious hypocrisy, and false friendship, and let it be marked by wearing bottles of sack in our holsters. (306)

Bloom's brief chapter on *Henry V* seems to me especially wrongheaded in his insistence that modern scholars prefer the King as an embodiment of order, to Falstaff. He had already dismissed "academic puritans and professorial power freaks" (282) for siding with Henry, on the premise that "to reject Falstaff is to reject Shakespeare" (278). But no one familiar with new historicist, feminist and cultural materialist critics would share Bloom's assertion that modern scholars side with the King. As a matter of fact, to give just one but significant example, when discussing the destruction of the Bower of Bliss in *Renaissance Self-Fashioning from More to Shakespeare*, Stephen Greenblatt remarks that "like Falstaff's banishment, Othello's suicide speech, and Volpone's harsh punishment, the close of book 2 of *The Fairie Queene* has figured in criticism as one of the great cruxes of English Renaissance literature" (Greenblatt 1984: 170).

The chapter on *As You Like It* seems in principle a good place where Bloom could have acknowledged some contemporary contributions, since he, like feminist critics, privileges Rosalind, whom he sees as, of all Shakespeare's comic heroines, "the most gifted, as remarkable in her mode as Falstaff and Hamlet are in theirs" (203). The chapter opens with a brilliant quotations from Bernard Shaw to the effect that the popularity of Rosalind is due to three causes: that she only speaks blank verse for a few minutes, that she only wears a skirt for a few minutes, and that she makes love to the man instead of waiting for the man to make love to her (202). Bloom immediately alludes darkly to "specialists in gender politics" (presumably feminist critics) who sometimes

give us a lesbian Rosalind. This comment shows a cavalier disregard for the realities of contemporary critical practice which, as far as Rosalind is concerned, has focused on the temporary nature of her empowerment in the Forest of Arden, the sexual ambiguities to which the masculine disguise gives rise within the comedy, and the historicizing of such matters as the presence of transvestite women in early modern society, and of boy actors on the stage.

Bloom dismisses Wilson Knight and Camille Paglia's (not the usual suspects for once) hypothesis about the androgyny of Shakespeare's disguised heroines, on grounds that seem quite persuasive to me: "her (Rosalind's) sexual desires entirely center upon Orlando, a Herculean wrestler and by no means a diffident young man" (208). But if the heterosexual reading of the play is plausible, we cannot ignore the involvement of the heroine in male attire in situations which are, at the very least, potentially ambiguous, as Rosalind herself foregrounds in the metatheatrical Epilogue.

Bloom's comments on *As You Like It*, though sometimes interesting in themselves, lack polemical force as a critique of poststructuralist practice because he makes the common mistake of lumping together feminists, Marxists, cultural materialists, those he calls *nouveau* historicists (even occasionally old historicists), as if there were not important differences both in theoretical underpinnings and critical practice between them. As a matter of fact, *As You Like It*, together with *King Lear*, was one of the textual sites of the critical battles between feminists and new historicists / cultural materialists in the 1980s and early 1990s (see Boose 1987; Neely 1988; Thompson 1991; Hidalgo 1996). He should have noticed feminist criticism of the tendency in materialist readings to erase female characters and gender issues, of which I have selected the following sample.

In Louis A. Montrose's "The Place of a Brother" in *As You Like It: Social Process and Comic Form*, primogeniture is the Elizabethan social process which serves as point of entry into Shakespeare's comedy. Against the previous general tendency to consider Act 1 as a mere device to set the characters on their way to the Forest of Arden, Montrose dwells on the situation of Orlando as Oliver's younger brother. There is widespread evidence about the precarious position of younger brothers in early modern society, and like a good number of literary critics in recent years, Montrose follows Lawrence Stone's analysis of the Elizabethan family. He classifies his approach as socio-anthropological and not psychoanalytic, even though he is aware that the elder brother-younger brother conflict can be read as a projection of the Oedipal rivalry between father and son (Montrose 1981/95: 48). After referring to the role of younger brothers in Shakespeare's plays (Gloucester, Claudius, Edmund and Antonio, besides the decisive role of Duke Frederick in *As You Like It*), Montrose highlights the

anthropological dimension when he observes that conflict between brothers occupies a prominent place in cultural fictions all over the world (58). To a certain extent, Montrose reaffirms the traditional dichotomy literary text / social context, and simultaneously gives the literary work a more active role: *As You Like It* not only reflects a conflict in Elizabethan society generated by the institution of primogeniture, but through its denouement in which Orlando achieves the social and personal rewards usually denied to younger brothers, the comedy offers a theatrical source of social conciliation (66).

Bloom completely overlooks this sort of historization and the fact that it is at odds with feminist approaches. He castigates the excessive emphasis on the role of transvestism in the play, and sees in the Epilogue the moment when Rosalind, rather like Prospero, transcends the boundaries of the play, and becomes a figure for Shakespeare himself. We may agree that perhaps recent Shakespeare scholarship has overinvested in cross-dressing as a site for destabilizing gender boundaries in the comedies, and that there has been excessive speculation surrounding the boy actor and his likely effects on the audience. (See Dusinberre 2000 for the latest contribution from a scholar who was a pioneer in this field). Some scholars have observed that we have to consider first the historical evidence that no actor, whether adult or boy, was ever accused of homosexuality. It is difficult to tell whether the Renaissance audience took the boy actor as a convention or whether they had a metatheatrical consciousness of the female characters' true sexual identity, but there is little doubt that the function of clothes in establishing gender had to undergo a destabilizing process similar, though not equal, to that of the presence of transvestite women on the streets of London.

Because of his refusal to make detailed arguments against the now hegemonic readings of feminist and materialist critics, let alone their theoretical tenets, Bloom is in my opinion most perceptive where he is less combative. He gives a lucid, precise and witty account of *Love's Labour's Lost*, a play from which he derives most unmixed pleasure than from any other by Shakespeare (122). His judicious use of quotation serves him well in his commentary on this difficult text, and his wide-ranging reading allows him to make an unexpected connection when he quotes from Thomas Mann's *Doctor Faustus* on the operatic quality of the Shakespearean play (122). The linguistic and thematic similarities between *Love's Labour's Lost* and the Sonnets have been often pointed out; not so much, I think, the fact that the play "shares with *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *As You Like It* an amiable mingling of social classes" (130). Perhaps part of the attraction of the play lies in that Bloom sees in Berowne a linguistic prefiguration of Falstaff. He credits Act V as "Shakespeare's earliest triumph at closure" (136), and after considering the Spring and Winter songs at the end of the play, concludes that "Shakespeare's

most elaborately artificial comedy, his great feast of language, antithetically subsides in natural simplicities and in country phrases". (147)

The chapter on *Hamlet* is crucial to Bloom's thesis about Shakespeare's invention of the human. He obviously does not join the ranks of post-war scholars who have displaced *Hamlet* in favour of *King Lear* as the Shakespearean tragedy (see Foakes 1993). As a matter of fact, Shakespeare's most famous tragedy has been comparatively neglected by recent criticism (feminism excepted), perhaps because the play's investment in the personality of the Prince is not congenial to current interests. Bloom's reading starts from his acceptance of Peter Alexander's hypothesis that Shakespeare was the author of the *Ur-Hamlet*, written around 1589. This view of *Hamlet* as a revised play in which a crude, Marlovian cartoon created by an author at the beginning of his career, was transformed by a mature Shakespeare into "the leading Western representation of an intellectual" (383) leads to the conclusion that "with the *Hamlet* of 1600-1601, Shakespeare becomes his own precursor, and revises not only the *Ur-Hamlet* but everything that came after it, through *Julius Caesar*" (400).

Bloom's *Hamlet* is very much the Prince's play; he shows scant interest in the rest of the characters, both male and female. Claudius the shrewd politician has no appeal for him, and he disdains the countless Freudian readings in which Gertrude figures prominently, reminding the reader that in his book on the Western canon, he gave a Shakespearean reading of Freud (429-30). Ophelia is just "poor Ophelia," a girl whom Hamlet drives to madness and suicide. Horatio is colourless, Fortinbras a bully boy, and Osric (what else?) a fop. The Prince is very much an intellectual, but his problems as a dramatic character have little to do with the traditional opposition between the man of action and the thinker. Bloom quotes with approval from Nietzsche in *The Birth of Tragedy*:

Knowledge kills action; action requires the veils of illusion: that is the doctrine of Hamlet, not that cheap wisdom of Jack the Dreamer who reflects too much and, as it were, from an excess of possibilities does not get around to action. Not reflection, no —true knowledge, an insight into the horrible truth, outweighs any motive for action, both in Hamlet and in the Dionysian man. (394)

Hamlet's cognitive powers, and what is variously called inwardness, personality and consciousness, are for Bloom the root of his greatness as a literary character. The origin of this internalization of the self has often been connected with Protestant doctrine, but Bloom never wavers in his view of Shakespeare's work as secular. Nor does the actual behaviour of the Prince detract from his attraction: Bloom lists his manslaughter of Polonius, treatment of Ophelia, and his gratuitous dispatch of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to their

deaths, and concludes that there is indeed a considerable case against Hamlet, but that he remains “the Western hero of consciousness” (409).

Revision, personality and change are the key words in Bloom's presentation of the play. The Prince undergoes the most significant and mysterious change between Act IV and Act V. Searching for a word to describe Hamlet's attitudes to life and death in Act V, Bloom cites stoicism, scepticism, quietism, nihilism, only to discard them and settle for “disinterestedness” (429). Bloom does not attempt to solve the puzzle of Hamlet's personality and the power of eliciting interpretation that it has shown in the last three centuries. In the end the Prince's personality becomes “the canonical sublime” (431).

Bloom mentions Dr Johnson's opinion that *Hamlet* was particularly excellent as a play for its variety, and comments that, for him, this seems truer of the Prince than of the drama. But then, as I said above, Bloom's total concentration on Hamlet makes him overlook a good deal of what the play has to offer, not only regarding character, but also language and structure. To give just one example: T. S. Eliot, whose view of the play as an artistic failure Bloom rightly dismisses, observed nevertheless that the first scene of *Hamlet* is “as well constructed as that of any play ever written” and went on to describe the opening twenty-two lines as:

Built of the simplest words in the most homely idiom. Shakespeare had worked for a long time in the theatre, and written a good many plays, before reaching the point where he could write those twenty-two lines... No poet has begun to master dramatic verse until he can write lines which, like these in *Hamlet*, are *transparent*. (Quoted in Kermode 2000: 97)

Frank Kermode provides an example of the sort of variety Dr Johnson perhaps had in mind when he details the material we can find in the scene in which Polonius produces his famous generic catalogue:

The beginning of the Rosencrantz and Guildenstern plot, the successful return of the ambassadors from Norway (diplomatic plot), Polonius's theory that Hamlet is mad for love of Ophelia, Hamlet's teasing of Polonius... the brilliantly sharp first dialogue between Hamlet and Rosencrantz and Guildenstern... the arrival of the players, gossip about the successes of the London boys' companies... more teasing of Polonius when he comes in with stale news about the actors' arrival, further allusions to his daughter, Hamlet's welcome to the players and the recitation of part of an old play, the planning of *The Mousetrap*, the leading actor's tears and, to conclude, Hamlet's soliloquy “O, what a rogue and peasant slave am I!” (96-7)

If Bloom fails to acknowledge the dramatic context, crowded with incident, that Shakespeare provides for the Prince, he is furthermore oddly silent about one of the glories of the play: its stylistic variety and inventiveness. He

mentions the Prince's linguistic range, and reminds the reader of the fact that Shakespeare used more than 21,000 separate words, whereas Racine used fewer than 2,000. He also refers to Harry Levin's analysis of the copiousness of Hamlet's language, of his command of the resources of English syntax and diction, but while he quotes liberally from almost all the plays, the only extended quotation from *Hamlet* is from the Player King's speech in 3.2.

We might say that the usual suspects are missing from the chapter on *Hamlet* because the new critical paradigms have made comparatively little impact on the play. Greenblatt devoted some attention to *Hamlet* in the second half of the 1990s, from his paper at the 1996 Los Angeles World Shakespeare Congress, to the plenary lecture entitled "Hamlet in Purgatory" that he was to have given at the annual meeting of the Spanish Association for English and American Studies at León in 1999. His Introduction to the play in the *Norton Shakespeare* touches on points which are similar to Bloom's, as when he argues that "*Hamlet* seems to mark an epochal shift not only in Shakespeare's own career but in Western drama; it is as if the play were giving birth to a new kind of literary subjectivity" (Greenblatt 1997: 1661). It is true that Greenblatt does not follow Peter Alexander and Bloom in taking Shakespeare for the author of the *Ur-Hamlet*, and that he attaches greater importance to the textual problems posed by the Second Quarto ("*Hamlet* is a monument of world literature, but is a monument built on shifting sands," 1659), but on the whole his presentation of *Hamlet* differs little from the traditions of Shakespeare criticism.

Feminist criticism has invested more on *Hamlet*, although a good deal has been on the cultural reproduction of the text rather than on the text itself. Rebecca Smith's "A Heart Cleft in Twain: The Dilemma of Shakespeare's Gertrude" deals with Hamlet's mother and the way she has been interpreted on the stage and in three film versions: Olivier's (1948), Kozintsev's (1964) and Richardson's (1969). A detailed account of everything Gertrude says and does in *Hamlet* makes Smith conclude that her character, as created by Shakespeare, does not justify her customary portrayal as a sensual and lascivious woman. This conclusion may not look excessively striking now, but the role that male critics and directors have played in the reception of Shakespeare's female characters had remained unstated until feminist scholars uncovered the masculinist assumptions about women that underlie the reproduction of the Shakespearean text (Smith 1980). In a similar vein, Elaine Showalter focuses on the iconography of Ophelia in paintings and drawings, and analyses what it tells us about the cultural construction of femininity and madness (Showalter 1985).

Feminist psychoanalytic criticism has undertaken more radical readings of the play itself. *Hamlet* is central to Adelman's controversial thesis about the return of the maternal body, and is in any case a play in which the mother

determines masculine identity, both the father's and son's (Adelman 1992). In "Hamlet —the *Mona Lisa* of Literature," first published in 1986, Jacqueline Rose approaches Shakespeare's tragedy from the perspective of T. S. Eliot's famous essay in which he combines a critique of *Hamlet* with the introduction of the concept of the objective correlative. Rose is surprised that the origin of the term in Eliot's devaluation of Gertrude as an insufficient cause for the Prince's distress should have been overlooked. She observes that femininity has been at the roots of psychoanalytic interpretations of the play, even before Ernest Jones stated in his famous 1949 study that "Hamlet was a woman" (Rose 1986: 104). Rose finds fascinating that femininity should have played such a central role both in an aesthetic theory (Eliot's) and in a psychoanalytic theory that at that time was focusing on the Shakespearean play described by Freud as an emblem of "the secular advance of repression in the emotional life of mankind" (105).

I cannot obviously give a complete account of Bloom's bulky study. I hope that, by concentrating first on two of the most adversarial chapters and last on the one which is probably the least contentious, I have managed to convey something of the style and thrust of *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human*. It seems to me evident that Bloom voices misgivings about trends in literary studies which are widespread in the profession, and that are by no means restricted to the field of Shakespeare scholarship. It is Shakespeare's unique status that multiplies the impact of anything which enhances or diminishes his work. As Frank Kermode observes, "in the end you can't get rid of Shakespeare without abolishing the very notion of literature" (viii).

Kermode's comment shows that Bloom is not alone in deploring the effects of poststructuralism on literary criticism and the subsequent devaluation of literature. To quote Kermode again: "Every other aspect of Shakespeare is studied almost to death, but the fact that he was a poet has somehow dropped out of consideration" (vii). Even some of those who work within the new paradigms have expressed concern about the swerve from literature. In the special number celebrating the twenty-fifth anniversary of the journal *English Literary Renaissance*, A. C. Hamilton points out the cost incurred by a paradigm shift from a formalist criticism which privileged literary form, to a contextual one which privileges content, particularly when applied to a Renaissance literature characterized by elaborate artifice (Hamilton 1995: 372). Hamilton grants new historicism the merit of having revitalized Renaissance studies, but at the cost of having replaced the study of literature by cultural critique.

The refusal to engage with the arguments and practice of feminist and historicist critics undermines Bloom's case in several ways. First, he overlooks

the differences between feminists and new historicists, new historicists and cultural materialists, or indeed within feminism and new historicism, and seems to believe that they are all intent on debunking Shakespeare, which is patently untrue. Secondly, he tends to give the impression that all contemporary work on Shakespeare is poststructuralist, and neglects previous critiques by Vickers (1993), Leeds Barroll (1988) and Levin (1988, 1989), among others. Finally, he exaggerates the degree of radicalism and novelty in the new readings, and overestimates their capacity of altering the status of Shakespeare's works.

Although I think Bloom's central argument is flawed, *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human* deserves more attention than it has got (See Kerrigan 1998). At a time when literary scholars are overspecialised, Bloom's range is remarkable: besides references to works by Shakespeare and other Renaissance playwrights and poets and to literary critics past and present, in his chapter on *Hamlet* he makes use of Tolstoy, Nietzsche, Milton, Joyce, Montaigne, Kierkegaard, Auden, Eliot, Wilde, Beckett, Brecht, Kushner, Swinburne, Yeats, Blake, Mackenzie, Goethe, Emerson, Carlyle, Huxley, Dostoevsky, Hart Crane, Rabelais, Plato, Socrates, and Scott Fitzgerald. He is a very good reader, possesses a capacious mind and exhibits both commitment to and knowledge of literature, rare qualities that the profession ignores at its peril.

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