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Review by JAMES SHAPIRO  
SHAKESPEARE - The Invention of the Human.  
By Harold Bloom. 745 pp. New York:  
Riverhead Books. \$35.

Ask most scholars what accounts for Shakespeare's enduring appeal and they'll credit a number of factors besides his remarkable artistic gifts. Shakespeare was born in the right place and time: his genius flourished in the richly collaborative world of the Elizabethan theater, and his dyer's hand was steeped in the social and spiritual contradictions of an age poised between the medieval and the modern. While his rival Ben Jonson praised Shakespeare as a writer "not of an age, but for all time," it wasn't until the 18th century that Shakespeare's admirers promoted him as England's unrivaled national poet.

Such explanations are heretical to the noted critic Harold Bloom, a self-confessed Bardolator for whom any attempt to understand Shakespeare historically distracts from the simple fact of Shakespeare's unsurpassed, universal genius. Bloom takes as a given that "The Complete Works of William Shakespeare" is a secular scripture from which we derive much of our language, our psychology and our mythology. He is interested in illuminating why this is so, and his bold argument in "Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human" is that Shakespeare remains so popular and his most memorable characters feel so real because through them Shakespeare invented something that hadn't existed before. Bloom defines this as "personality," inwardness, what it means to be human. In so doing, Bloom adds, Shakespeare invented us as well.

If Shakespeare's drama is secular scripture, Bloom offers himself as its high priest. In trying to substantiate his ideas about Shakespeare's originality Bloom faces the problem confronting any proselytizer: when your object of adoration is beyond comprehension, how do you go about persuading others to believe? His solution is to steer between praise and attack (celebrating Shakespeare's originality and savaging pretty much everything and everyone else, especially those false prophets the feminists and cultural historians).

Bloom cares little for plot, genre or action. And you'd hardly know after finishing this book that Shakespeare was interested in history, politics, law, religion or a host of other concerns that have drawn

generations of readers to his work. Only characters matter -- and not all characters, only those who seem to Bloom uncannily real, like Hamlet, Falstaff, Rosalind, Iago, Edmund and Cleopatra, who "take human nature to some of its limits, without violating those limits" and through whom "new modes of consciousness come into being." Hotspur, Puck, Kent and Ariel may be terrific parts, but they are passed over in relative silence by a critical sensibility restlessly drawn to the presiding consciousness of a play.

Bloom's view of history, including literary history, is highly selective. There's no serious engagement either with the suggestion that perhaps Homer, Sophocles, Euripides, Virgil, Ovid or Petrarch preceded Shakespeare in creating "personality" (and not simply "character," as Bloom would have it), or with the widely accepted view that the introspective turn of the Reformation and Counter-Reformation stimulated a sense of inwardness.

You don't have to swallow Bloom's argument whole, however, to value his local insights. The most exhilarating observations -- and the best chapters are littered with them -- have the quality of aphorisms. Even lifted out of context their incisiveness and rightness compel assent: "Who, before Iago, in literature or in life, perfected the arts of disinformation, disorientation and derangement?"; "To be in love, and yet to see and feel the absurdity of it, one needs to go to school with Rosalind"; "Shakespeare's plays are the wheel of all our lives, and teach us whether we are fools of time, or of love, or of fortune, or of our parents, or of ourselves." His nuanced readings of "The Merchant of Venice," "Henry IV," "Hamlet" and "Antony and Cleopatra" are especially strong.

As much as Shakespeare has invented us, critics reinvent him, and in their own image. Bloom is no exception. The qualities of mind and spirit that he clearly values -- the capacity to be self-dramatizing, witty, charismatic, ironic and skeptical -- turn out to be shared by the characters he considers most real. While few readers will disagree with Bloom's choice of Hamlet as one of Shakespeare's two greatest creations, many may be puzzled by the other: Falstaff, "the mortal god" of Bloom's imaginings. I suspect that there's more than a little projection going on here, once we learn that both are aging, charismatic, brilliant teachers, masters of language who are "turned against all historicisms." Once this identification is established, the subsequent one,

between Falstaff and Shakespeare's intellect and values, makes a lot more sense.

Focusing so exclusively on the creation of a handful of characters as the key to Shakespeare's greatness -- beginning with "King John" and ending 12 years later with "Antony and Cleopatra" -- puts Bloom in the difficult position of deciding what to do with the many plays that come before and after. Early comedies, histories and tragedies get dismissed as relative failures or faintly praised for anticipating the fully realized personalities that are to follow. Bloom is even more hard pressed when dealing with the plays written in Shakespeare's maturity, in which inwardness is largely abandoned. With "Coriolanus" he asks: "Had Shakespeare wearied of the labor of reinventing the human?" In "Cymbeline," his Shakespeare is "alienated from his own art" and resorts to self-parody. By "Henry VIII," Shakespeare "undoes most of what he had invented." Bloom never pauses to consider obvious alternatives to his Procrustean theory. Perhaps Shakespeare came to recognize the limits of character and inwardness and sought by other means -- through wonder, improbabilities and larger patterns of death and regeneration -- to render human experience more fully.

"Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human" is unfortunately marred by a compulsion to denigrate. The least deserving victims are Shakespeare's fellow playwrights, who must be squashed in order to portray Shakespeare as author of himself (only Chaucer and Marlowe are recognized as influences). Lyric poets like Blake and Shelley, subjects of earlier, authoritative books by Bloom, are far better suited to his Romantic notions of autonomous genius than is a collaborative dramatist like Shakespeare. The lengths that Bloom will go to insulate Shakespeare from contaminating influence are often absurd. George Wilkins, who may have had a hand in "Pericles," is described as a "lowlife hack." Poor Thomas Kyd, whose enormously popular "Spanish Tragedy" is unjustly rejected as "hideously written and silly," is stripped of his generally recognized authorship of an early and lost "Hamlet" (Bloom insists that Shakespeare must have written the earlier "Hamlet" too). John Webster, George Chapman, Thomas Middleton and Ben Jonson are all written off as second-raters. Bloom sees himself as one of the great defenders of the Western tradition, but he provides plenty of ammunition for revisionists eager to eliminate these major figures from the canon and the classroom.

In his youth Bloom was "profoundly affected" by seeing Ralph Richardson play Falstaff, a haunting performance that "a half century later was the starting point for this book," but he would deny a similar transformative experience to today's young theatergoers, suggesting that "we might be better off with public readings of Shakespeare." Here again the villain is history, since performances of Shakespeare's plays -- from the staging of "Richard II" on the eve of Essex's rebellion to the latest Off Broadway production -- are always rooted in the here and now. Preferring to wrest Shakespeare out of time, Bloom falls back on the fantasy that Shakespeare (fewer than half of whose plays were printed in his lifetime) preferred readers to playgoers anyway, since he "wrote also to be read, by a more select group." While Bloom is right to take to task some of the more feeble productions he has seen in America, were he more familiar with the work of younger British directors he does not mention -- Deborah Warner's "Titus Andronicus" and Sam Mendes's "Troilus and Cressida" are obvious examples -- his estimation of contemporary productions and of these plays themselves would surely be higher.

Had Bloom, one of the most gifted of contemporary critics, stuck to the plays and characters that he deeply understands, this book would have been a third as long and far more compelling.

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