All the World's His Stage

SHAKESPEARE
The Invention of the Human
By Harold Bloom
Riverhead Books. 745 pp. $35

Reviewed by JOHN F. ANDREWS,
editor of "The Everyman Shakespeare" and president of the Shakespeare Guild.

During a recent conference in Stratford-upon-Avon, a critic best known for his annotated edition of *Shakespeare's Sonnets* (1977) opened a witty address with the arresting assertion that Shakespeare is history's most seriously underrated poet. Illustrating his remarks with several examples of the dramatist's astonishing verbal ingenuity, Stephen Booth then proceeded to show that, notwithstanding the veneration our greatest playwright has enjoyed over the four centuries of his largely uncontested domination of the literary and dramatic pantheon, he's even more brilliant than we've always considered him to be. That, no doubt, is why he continues to delight new generations of readers and audiences with marvels that previous admirers have failed to register.

Now comes Harold Bloom, the Sterling Professor of Humanities at Yale University, with an even bolder proposition: that "Shakespeare, by inventing what has become the most accepted mode for representing character and personality in language, thereby invented the human as we know it."

According to Bloom, "Shakespeare is the original psychologist, and Freud the belated historian." Through characters such as Hamlet, who "has made us skeptics in our relationships," and Falstaff, who instructs us in "a comprehensiveness of humor that avoids unnecessary cruelty," and Cleopatra, "archetype of the star, the world's first celebrity," and the woman "through whom the playwright taught us how complex eros is," we've acquired many of the insights that guide us in a ceaseless quest to comprehend our myriad natures. Without Shakespeare, if Bloom is to be believed, "our ideas would be different, particularly our ideas of the human, since they were, more often than not, Shakespeare's ideas before they were ours."

Bloom is a formidable presence, with more than 20 books and a panoply of laurels to his credit, among them a MacArthur "genius award," and he's widely acclaimed for *The Book of J* (1990), an exploration of the Pentateuch in which he concludes that the most profound of the sacred writers was a remarkably gifted female. Over the last decade Bloom has also emerged as a pivotal figure in the culture wars and in 1994 *The Western Canon* became a bestseller.

According to *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human*, the author who "already was the Western canon"—or at least the author who had long been the anchor who secured a received core of fundamental classics and thereby helped stabilize a measure of spiritual and philosophical coherence—"is now becoming central to the world's implicit canon." That, says Harold Bloom, is because "Shakespeare's influence, overwhelming on literature, has been even larger on life." It "surpasses the effect" of such Greek masterpieces as the works of Homer and Plato, and it "challenges the scriptures of West and East alike" in its impression upon "the modification of human character and personality." And why? Because "here at last we encounter an intelligence without limits. As we read Shakespeare, we are always engaged in catching up, and our joy is that the process is never-ending: he is still out ahead of us."

Bloom goes on to stress that interpreters with different objectives than his, "scholars who wish to confine Shakespeare to his context—historical, political, economic, rational, theatrical—may illuminate particular aspects of the plays, but are unable to explain the Shakespearean influence on us, which is unique, and which cannot be reduced to Shakespeare's own situation, in his time and place." Since he regards most of their efforts as minimally useful, if not entirely counterproductive, Bloom has no patience for today's contextualizing "reductionists." He's persuaded that they tend to "mistake the truth totally," and he therefore dismissively consigns all avant-garde directors, among them the widely acclaimed Peter Brook, and the majority of his academic coevals to what Bloom labels "the School of Resentment," a cacophonous loony bin for Shakespeare-envying "Marxists, multiculturalists, feminists, [and] *nouveau* historicists" who diminish the playwright to whatever the practitioner of a given "ism" is seeking to isolate in a text that has been commandeered for less than noble purposes.

For the man who dubs himself "Bloom Brontosaurus Bardolater," an unapologetic curmudgeon who's proud of his lonely eminence as "an archaic survival," the only legitimate approach to criticism is one in which we "begin by standing in awe of Shakespeare," affirming that "wonder, gratitude, shock, amazement are the accurate responses" to be solicited and welcomed.

Comparing Shakespeare to other prestigious artists, Bloom says that "You can demonstrate that Dante or Milton or Proust were perfected products of Western civilization, as it had reached them, so that they were both summits and epitomes of European culture at particular times and particular places. No such demonstration is possible for Shakespeare, and not because of any supposed 'literary transcendence.' In Shakespeare, there is always a residuum, an excess that is left over, no matter how superb the performance, how acute the critical analysis, how massive the scholarly accounting, whether old-style or newfangled. Explaining Shakespeare is an infinite exercise; you will become exhausted long before the plays are emptied out." If you condescend to the dramatist, moreover, "his universality will defeat you," because "his plays know more than you do, and your knowingness consequently will be in danger of dwindling into ignorance."

These words imply a spirit of humility and openness. But I rather doubt that those are the attributes a lot of readers will associate with the voice they encounter in *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human*. Harold Bloom seems to be in sympathy with few of his contemporaries, and one comes away from his latest book with the sense that he would much rather engage in putative discourse with such exalted predecessors as Samuel Johnson, William Hazlitt, A.C. Bradley, W.H. Auden and G. Wilson Knight than to bother attending conscientiously to anything he might experience in the books, articles, films, theater and television productions of most of his younger colleagues.

They, in turn, will probably feel little incentive to bestow much credence upon the deliberations of an *eminence grise* who treats them with undisguised contempt. He and his publisher will be taken to task for their neglect to supply such minimal courtesies as an index, a set of footnote citations, and a bibliographical listing of the small cadre of current professionals whom Bloom deigns to single out by name. Bloom will almost certainly be told that his latest publication is a bloated, tedious and frequently slovenly monstrosity that needed a vigorous editor to bring some rigor to its repeatedly flaccid prose and eliminate its plethora of irritating, self-indulgent redundancies.

More importantly, Bloom will be reminded that there is a crucial distinction between a random assortment of insufficiently supported generalizations—a number of them so eloquent and memorable as to rise to the level of aphorism, but far too many of them in an Olympian tone that might have struck John Keats as a travesty of the quality he once defined as the "egotistical sublime"—and a responsible attempt to assemble and organize enough pertinent material to prove that a grand but problematical hypothesis is founded upon anything more substantial than its author's often dazzling but occasionally quirky connoisseurship.

This could have been an important contribution to our appreciation of a significant heritage. It might have been a volume that merited its nomination for a National Book Award. Unfortunately it's a grave disappointment, and I fear that the pleasure it affords most readers will come at the price of a regrettable accumulation of exasperation. ■

CRITICISM AND BIOGRAPHY

Bard Watching

SHAKESPEARE'S LANGUAGE
By Frank Kermode
Farrar Straus Giroux. 324 pp. $30
WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE
The Man Behind the Genius: A Biography
By Anthony Holden
Little, Brown. 367 pp. $29.95
SHAKESPEARE IN THE MOVIES
From the Silent Era to Shakespeare in Love
By Douglas Brode
Oxford Univ. 257 pp. $25

Reviewed by JOHN F. ANDREWS

In a study that exemplifies the virtues we've long admired in one of today's most distinguished critics, Frank Kermode takes his cue from a statement about Shakespeare by British theater director Sir Richard Eyre: "The life of the plays is in the language, not alongside it, or underneath it. Feelings and thoughts are released at the moment of speech."

Perhaps so, but can we really assume that even the most cultivated of the playwright's original audiences would have been able to register every nuance in a script as complex as "Coriolanus"? No, Kermode insists, because as Shakespeare's dramatic art evolved it moved "away from rhetorical explicitness and towards a language that does not try to give everything away." If we wish to be alert to what is "going on" in "more than a general way," then, we need to determine, as precisely as possible, just "what the words mean." That is what Kermode endeavors to do, and the inquiries that result yield bounteous rewards.

Among the details to which Kermode helps sensitize us are pronouns. In "The Merchant of Venice," for instance, he notes that "Portia and Nerissa, though apparently intimate friends, observe hierarchical convention in addressing one another: to Nerissa Portia is always 'you,' and to Portia Nerissa is always 'thou'." Of even more interest is the dialogue that follows "To be, or not to be" in the dramatist's most celebrated tragedy. Revealingly, "Ophelia and Hamlet address each other as 'you' and not 'thou,' as might be expected between lovers, until Hamlet says 'Get thee to a Nunnery.'"

Kermode is fond of what he calls a "lighting scene," a brief "episode a little aside from the main movement of the story that is meant to illustrate an aspect of it, such as the argument between Peter and the Musicians in "Romeo and Juliet"—"just the kind of scene an incautious director, worried about the pace of the performance, might be tempted to cut but must not." Kermode admires the way a thematic cluster of sounds can acquire significance, and he emphasizes "Shakespeare's increasing power to produce a text impregnated with ideas, and with words that are always under question" as the action renders any "simple sense" they might carry problematical.

Among the minor disappointments in a volume with many merits is that Kermode largely restricts himself to modern editions and spellings, and thus conveys little about how Shakespeare's language can be distinct from, and far richer than, our own. During a consideration of the dialogue (I.vii) in which the protagonist of "Macbeth" admits to concerns about proceeding with the crime he's plotted with his virile Lady, Kermode observes that she "scorns his humane interpretation" of what a real man would do in her husband's situation. Here it might have been pertinent for the author to remind us that in the 1623 First Folio version of I.v, the title character's wife is preoccupied with a fear that her noble thane's nature "is too full o'th' Milke of humane kindnesse" to commit the deed she knows she'll have to urge upon him. To the playwright and his contemporaries, "humane" was a word with all the implications we now segregate into the two phonemes that derive from it. For them, to be "human" was by definition to embody "kindnesse" in the sense we now attach to "humane." To disregard that logic, as Macbeth and his "dearest Partner of Greatnesse" quickly discover, was to ignore a principle as fundamental to the order of the cosmos as the laws of gravity.

One of the dedicatees of the Kermode collection is Anthony Holden, a popular journalist who has written biographies of Prince Charles and Laurence Olivier and who informs us that his new book on Shakespeare is "For Frank Kermode." In comparison with his friend, whose essays are models of tactful, elegant restraint, Holden comes across as a bold, adventurous spirit. He displays no reluctance to speculate about how "The Man Behind the Genius" found expression in the dramas posterity has ascribed to him. And in a narrative that offers intriguing conjectures on the poet's relationships with key figures in the Jesuit underground—a shadowy, perilous realm for zealots whose religious convictions could not be professed openly during the turbulent reigns of Elizabeth and James—he raises issues that are sure to be examined by the more rigorous sleuths who can be depended upon to follow in his wake.

To assert that Holden proceeds beyond any point to which the available evidence might draw a more prudent scholar—a man such as Park Honan, who ponders some of the same material in his superb *Shakespeare: A Life* (1998)—is not to imply that he is irresponsible or that his hypotheses are not to be taken seriously. It is merely to acknowledge that we're still in quest of a perspective that will allow us to assess the information now coming to light about the years an adolescent Shakespeare appears to have spent at a Lancashire estate notorious for its connections with dissenters who risked, and often sacrificed, their lives for a faith the Anglican establishment was anxious to suppress. Were Shakespeare's parents recusant? Was their son, too, a clandestine Roman Catholic? And would he have remained so once he arrived in London and secured his livelihood as a professional who benefited from royal patronage? If so, how does one account for the anti-papal ideology that seems so integral to the structure of "King John," not to mention the echoes of Reformation doctrine that many of us hear in "Hamlet," "Henry VIII," "Measure for Measure," and other plays?


BY LAURIE ROSENWALD FROM "WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE: THE MAN BEHIND THE GENIUS"

These are but a few of the queries that linger from a perusal of Holden's lively, if finally less than satisfying, attempt to discern the personality behind a corpus that continues to defy any effort to pluck out the heart of its mystery.

During the last decade we've witnessed a remarkable proliferation of motion pictures based directly or indirectly upon Shakespearean scripts. As a consequence we'd expect a ready market for timely surveys of the cinematic fortunes of a 436-year-old artist who's currently enjoying another hot streak as Hollywood's leading screenwriter. Douglas Brode has made a valiant, conscientious effort to supply that niche, but a quick glance at *Shakespeare in the Movies* will probably persuade most browsers to seek elsewhere for more sophisticated guidance. Brode covers a vast range of often fascinating terrain, with sections on silent films and spinoffs as well as on such adaptations as Ian McKellen's brilliant updating of "Richard III." He writes knowledgeably and often eloquently about the work of such producers as Kenneth Branagh, Akira Kurosawa and Orson Welles.

Much too frequently, however, he dismisses a feature that fails to measure up to his occasionally bizarre preconceptions. Meanwhile he habitually refers to Shakespeare, with a familiarity that breeds contempt, as "Will," particularly during introductory paragraphs in which he suggests, for example, that "Anne Hathaway's infamously sharp tongue" may have been the reason "the Bard" wrote "The Taming of the Shrew"—when in fact we know almost nothing about her. How a volume with flaws like these could be published under an Oxford imprint is, as Falstaff might put it, a question to be ask'd.

In the interim those who'd prefer a more reliable history of Shakespeare on screen would be well advised to look at a new compendium of that name by Kenneth S. Rothwell. ■

John F. Andrews, who edits the Everyman Shakespeare, is president of the Shakespeare Guild.

BIOGRAPHY

A Fine and Private Man

WORLD ENOUGH AND TIME
The Life of Andrew Marvell
By Nicholas Murray
St. Martin's. 294 pp. $27.95

Reviewed by DANIEL MCMAHON

Even by contemporary standards of spy-infested states, political chicanery, gross immorality, religious bigotry, unsavory deal-making, political ideologues, fervent extremists, ad hominem attacks, and negative campaigning, we are almost certainly exceeded by mid- and late 17th-century England. Several great thinkers and writers of the time were elbow-deep in the political sewer; one thinks of Thomas Hobbes, John Milton and John Locke in particular. Scores of the less well-known include Robert Filmer, whose *Patriarcha* defended the divine right of kings and attempted to trace the royal families of Europe to the time of Noah; and James Harrington, whose utopian blueprint, *Commonwealth of Oceana*, set limits on land ownership, advocated free schools and promoted freedom of religion while outlawing Jewish practices. Many of these people have had substantial biographical work done on them; but not so in the case of another major literary and political figure, a man who was perhaps the finest pamphleteer of his age and the author of several indisputably great lyric poems, Andrew Marvell.

Nicholas Murray, author of a justly acclaimed biography of Matthew Arnold, aims to rectify this in his *World Enough and Time*, a copiously researched and quite readable study of Marvell (1621-1678) and his times. Murray's biography situates Marvell's life in historical context and attempts to date the poems and to attribute authorship to disputed poems. This last is a notoriously difficult task, for Marvell's poems were published posthumously in 1681, and no copies exist in manuscript.

Murray has studied carefully Marvell's political pamphlets (and the work of those who