REVIEWS

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

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In *The Western Canon* (1994) Bloom argued that Shakespeare, along with Milton, was the center of Western thought. In *The Invention of the Human* he contends that Shakespeare is the center of the Universe. According to Bloom, Shakespeare "went beyond all precedents (even Chaucer) and invented the human as we continue to know it." The Bard is singularly responsible for creating our personalities, not just in the Western world, but in all cultures. Falstaff and Hamlet, the central characters of Bloom's discussions, are "the greatest of charismatics" and are "the inauguration of personality as we have come to recognize it."

It is small wonder that critics of Bloom's book bristle in the face of such sweeping pronouncements. The general reaction is to resent Bloom's snide comments about what he terms the current critical "School of Resentment" which would turn modern readers away from "Bardolatry." Individual critical response seems to depend on the particular school of criticism the respondent adheres to, but most often the critics jump to an *ad hominem* attack against Bloom himself. "Just who does Harold Bloom think he is?" thunders Anthony Lane in *The New Yorker*. Lane denigrates the arguments of the book, but finds the work important enough to give the review five full pages. The reviewers for *Newsweek* focus on Bloom's celebrity rather than on his contentions, but equally grant the importance of the author and his work.

The Invention of the Human is comprised of three major critical discussions by Bloom combined with brief discussions of each of the 37 plays. He begins by addressing "To the Reader" the overwhelming awe he feels for the master writer of the world who is able to create literary characters epitomizing the essential nature of humanity. This introduction concludes, "We need to exert ourselves and read Shakespeare as strenuously as we can, while knowing that his plays will read us more energetically still. They read us definitively." Just how a play reads a person is not clear, but the pitch to the common person is a major theme throughout

the book: Shakespeare shapes all humanity, not just the elite literati. Shakespeare's influence seeps into everyone, everywhere.

In the introductory essay, "Shakespeare's Universalism," Bloom dismisses dissenters as "gender-and-power freaks." He acknowledges that there were great, creative writers before Shakespeare; indeed, "The idea of Western character" defined as "the self as a moral agent" came from many sources. But, he contends, the predecessors created "cartoons" and "ideograms" rather than developing personality. "Every other great writer may fall away, to be replaced by the anti-elitist swamp of Cultural Studies," but "Shakespeare will abide, even if he were to be expelled by the academics…."

At this point Bloom turns to short individual synopses of the plays (the Henry VI plays are reviewed as a unit), with each review intended to support invention of the human. He often slips from this intention, however. Most of the individual play discussions take around seven pages, with the discussions of *Hamlet* and *Henry IV* in more depth since Falstaff and Hamlet are Bloom's major focus as persons. His reviews are rife with long quotations from the plays themselves, but they are interesting to read and fairly self-contained. Shakespeare teachers will find Bloom's insights useful for work with their own classes.

Even here, however, Bloom is contentious. He suggests in his review of *The Comedy of Errors* that "Perhaps all farce is metaphysical." In concluding *Taming of the Shrew*, he pronounces, "Shakespeare, who clearly preferred his women characters to his men (always excepting Falstaff and Hamlet), enlarges the human, from the start, by subtly suggesting that women have the truer sense of reality." He sets up his own order of composition of the plays, and in the final play review, *The Two Noble Kinsmen*, rather than Theseus having the closing lines, Bloom exults that Shakespeare himself is speaking.

After his play reviews, Bloom concludes in an essay, "Coda: The Shakespearean Difference," that "Shakespeare, through Hamlet, has made us skeptics in our relationships with anyone, because we have learned to doubt articulateness in the realm of affection." Bloom identifies intimately with Falstaff: "What Falstaff teaches us is a comprehensiveness of humor that avoids unnecessary cruelty because it emphasizes instead the vulnerability of every ego, including that of Falstaff himself."

Bloom has taken an admirable critical stance which he supports textually, referencing ideas from many other critics, and including many divergent opinions. Yet with his grand pronouncements, his self-assurance comes through far more clearly than any vulnerability. His humor is prominent, but often scathing. No one I have discussed this book with is willing to accept all of Bloom's concepts at

face value, but, equally, no one has suggested that his insights can be dismissed. One point the critics might balk at is that, in contrast to many academics, Bloom is eminently readable, thought-provoking and enjoyable. ❋