Shakespeare With All People as Players

By MICHIKO KAKUTANI

In his 1994 magnum opus, "The Western Canon," Harold Bloom placed Shakespeare, along with Dante, at the very center of the canon, arguing that the two "excel all other Western writers in cognitive acuity, linguistic energy and power of invention." The rest, he argued, "is what they absorbed and what absorbs them."

Mr. Bloom's latest book, "Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human," is in large measure an amplification of the arguments about him set down in that earlier volume, combined with a close textual reading of his individual plays.

In these pages, Mr. Bloom, Sterling Professor of Humanities at Yale University and Berg Professor of English at New York University, goes so far as to assert that Shakespeare "essentially invented human personality as we continue to know and value it."

"Before Hamlet taught us not to have faith either in language or in ourselves, being human was much simpler for us but also rather less interesting," Mr. Bloom writes. "Shakespeare, through Hamlet, has made us skeptics in our relationships with anyone, because we have learned to doubt articulateness in the realm of affection."

He adds that "our ability to laugh at ourselves as readily as we do at others owes much to Falstaff," and that Shakespeare's Cleopatra has taught us "how complex eros is, and how impossible it is to divorce acting the part of being in love and the reality of being in love."

This eccentric notion — that we did not know how to be human before Shakespeare came along to tell us — gives Mr. Bloom a title and thesis, but it thankfully does little to contaminate his book. Indeed, this volume is best read as an old-fashioned humanistic
commentary on Shakespeare's plays that gives us a renewed appreciation of the playwright's staggering achievement, even as it points up the limitations of structuralist, feminist and neo-historicist readings of his work. It is a fiercely argued egotistical argument of Shakespeare's plays in the tradition of Samuel Johnson, Hazlitt and A.C. Bradley, a study that is as passionate as it is erudite, as provocative as it is sometimes perverse.

While the reader may quibble with Mr. Bloom's dismissive treatment of recent productions of Shakespeare's plays, while one may disagree with his readings of individual characters and texts (his assertion that Shylock is a "mysterious villain," for instance, is both simplistic and strangely at odds with his analysis of the moneylender's ambivalent nature), it's hard not to be impressed by his overall knowledge of and insight into his subject's work. Mr. Bloom deftly illuminates the ideas and motifs animating Shakespeare's plays, succinctly shows how the playwright's life (the little that we know of it, anyway) appears to have affected his work, and astutely analyzes the development of his transcendental art.

In earlier books like "The Anxiety of Influence," Mr. Bloom has articulated a Freudian theory of poetic influence, which suggests that writers are shaped by their Oedipal struggle to free themselves from the legacy of their literary forefathers. That theory clearly informs this volume's assessment of Shakespeare's growth and his relationship to his literary ancestors Chaucer and Christopher Marlowe.

As Mr. Bloom sees it, Shakespeare's early histories were heavily indebted to Marlowe, an influence he parodied and excoriated with the bloody "Titus Andronicus" in 1594. Once Shakespeare had emancipated himself from the author of "Tamburlaine," Mr. Bloom concludes, his characters began to evolve from two-dimensional Marlovian cartoons like Richard III into the emotionally complex heroes of his mature work. Hamlet, Falstaff, Rosalind, Othello, Macbeth and Cleopatra: such characters possessed an interior life heretofore unseen in literature, and they signified Shakespeare's maturation as an original artist, an artist in whom the turn would become a forerunner to writers and thinkers as disparate as Kierkegaard, Emerson, Nietzsche, Freud, Ibsen, Strindberg, Pirandello and Beckett.

Shakespeare apparently wrote "King Lear," "Macbeth" and "Antony and Cleopatra" in a fury of composition that spanned a mere 14 months (1608-1609), and those plays, Mr. Bloom argues, "conclude the major phase of Shakespeare's preoccupation with the inner self." His subsequent

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