

Three Thorns for Harold Bloom

**To read attentively, think correctly, omit no relevant consideration,
and repress self-will, are not ordinary accomplishments**

- A. E. Housman, *The Editing of Manilius*

Out of the Whirlwind

In his old age, the one-man publishing industry Harold Bloom, upon reaching the end of his critical survey of the complete works, took up a series of Last Questions. (I'm sorry, I meant to specify the complete works of Western Civilization.) Having watched with paternal dismay and disdain the petty and partisan bickering of his colleagues over the core curriculum of established masterpieces that make up the typical college reading list for English majors, he wrote *The Western Canon* to settle the matter. It turns out that the classics are the classics, the multiculturalists and feminists have no case whatsoever, now will they please shut up. Next Bloom looked in the mirror and asked, "Who is the greatest writer of them all?" The answer: in the field of literature, Shakespeare, by a country mile; and in the field of literary criticism, Bloom himself, for saying so. He accordingly turned the study of Shakespeare into a gnostic religion, and set forth its doctrine in *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human*. The extent of Bloom's bardolatry would embarrass us, were we not savvy enough to identify such hero-worship as a type of self-adulation: for in making Shakespeare's achievement greater than even the most abject devotee has ever dared to claim, and the fit object of religious veneration, Bloom flatters himself that he is the only disciple ever to have recognized it as such.

How great was Shakespeare? According to the title of Bloom's book, and to repeated assertions throughout, Shakespeare invented us. He "invented the human as we continue to know it." He "created us, to an altogether startling degree." He "understood everything that we comprehend and far more." Therefore, we "never will stop catching up to him."

What Bloom means by these remarkable statements is partly a matter for conjecture, but he is clear about one thing, at least – that he is asserting more, *much* more, than just Shakespeare's priority and primacy in the depiction of human behavior. Bloom has chosen his motto carefully: Shakespeare was not merely the first artist to fully *represent* "the human" in an artistic medium; he *invented* "the human." And he did not merely raise characterization to previously-unthought-of levels of sophistication, and so create a new type of theater; he created *us*.

Bloom, then, displays great audacity, even on the title page of his tome, and those of us who are sick of academic timidity and tepidity, and who thrill to the prospect of a scholar with strong opinions, a clear style, and a grand synthesizing thesis, turn the pages eagerly to take up the argument. But sadly, argument there is none. Bloom is no longer a critic or theorist; he is an oracle. He speaks *ex cathedra*, strewing infallible pronouncements like the petals of flowers. And not just variations on his mystico-muddy theme ("We need to exert ourselves and read Shakespeare as strenuously as we can, while knowing that his plays will read us more energetically still"): we are also told that Orlando sees through Rosalind's disguise and pretends not

to recognize her; that Othello never consummates his marriage to Desdemona; that Kate masters Petruchio, letting him enjoy the delusion that he has mastered her; and that Antonio is Shylock's evil twin. Barnardine is "the imaginative center" of *Measure for Measure*; Parolles is "the spiritual center" of *All's Well That Ends Well*. And so on.

No reasons are given. Bloom is above explaining himself: he simply *tells* us what is. He reads, he declaims – that is all.

Why should we believe his amazing statements? Well, where were we when he laid the foundations of literary criticism?

Bloom now looks down from a height so majestic that he can view even his own theory of "the anxiety of influence" as but one of numberless historical schools, above whose provincialisms he floats imperturbably. It is well that he has made gnosticism a late province of his investigations, because he has turned the study of Shakespeare into pure revelation, and he is the guru, the prophet, the Son of the Muses, without whom you and I could not understand the plays at all. He has soared above the theoryheads, who claim that we need them because we need theory – he says boo to theory – he needs no theory – we need no theory – we need *him*. He is now like Franklin Jones, also known as Da Free John or the Adida. The religion of Adidam was not only revealed by Jones, it *is* Jones. Like Jones, Bloom needs nothing but mind, pure mind, *his* mind, to give us one display of immaculate intelligence after another.

Jones knew enough to found his religion upon the bedrock of fashion: he knew how to package his product as standard-issue New Age Enlightenment. So Bloom too,

in the last analysis, is selling a recognizable version of orthodox critical practice. After all, within any institutionalized domain, real originality is strictly proscribed: what is required is the simulacrum of originality. Bloom's "anxiety of influence" is a perfect example of this *faux*-originality: it sounded new at the time, and it was novel in its details; better still, it was an entire theoretical system, comprehensive and esoteric, such as could be applied to every work of literature after the *Iliad*. (The workaholic Bloom actually completed this task of practical application in his own lifetime. Then he turned to more ambitious projects.)

The "anxiety of influence" has the requisite *appearance* of originality: but in fact, it stays with perfect docility within the channel dug by the New Criticism, and leaves unchallenged all the important guiding tenets of modernist theory. Since the 1920s, the academic practitioners of literary hermeneutics have understood and tacitly agreed that the common reader is not invited: the experts – themselves, of course – mediate the self-standing aesthetic objects to the waiting masses. For 100 years, every change of fashion has taken place under the umbrella of this aggressive aestheticism. Even today, at the dawn of a new millennium, the attempt to figure out what the author meant to say is still the "intentional fallacy"; the invocation of the reader's emotional response is still the "affective fallacy"; and only a hopeless philistine – a silly puritan or a sucker for kitsch – believes that art can or should be edifying. The touchstone of great art is that it does not make anything happen, yet makes life worth living; the proper response to it is still the "aesthetic emotion"; the important values are all *literary*; the great works

of the canon are, just like the novels written today by graduates of academic writing programs, riven with irony, shot through with symbolism, and imbued with seven types of ambiguity at a minimum; these important literary effects happen at an unconscious level; they are generated *between* the lines, where the ordinary reader never goes; all of this can be explained by critics.

Thus Bloom writes in *The Western Canon* for pages and pages about Tolstoy's *Hadji Murad* without once discussing Tolstoy's searing and unforgettable indictment of Russian imperial society. It is almost impossible to read late Tolstoy *without* being changed by it, but Bloom not only refuses to discuss the possibility, he is clearly blind to it. Why, exactly, literature is so important to him then becomes an interesting question. One answer, certainly, is that it has been the platform upon which he has erected his own monument; but I do believe he enjoys reading for its own sake. I just don't know why.

A real revolution would reinstate the critical acumen of ordinary educated readers. The critic would affirm the values that are determined by the judgments of these untrained but avid readers. Shakespeare is not great because Bloom has found in him a number of esoteric insights that have escaped the notice of all readers up until the publication of *The Invention of the Human*. He is great because a consensus has been building among literate people for 400 years about the entertainment to be had from reading his plays and seeing them performed. But the academy would never tolerate a real revolution. A truly original critic – one who altered the scale of values

and called the critical enterprise itself into question – would be drummed out.

So Bloom does not operate all the way out in *terra incognita*, beyond the axioms and the habits of critical thought acquired during his lifetime in the academy. All of his statements are imbued with the New Critical presumption that a great artist like Shakespeare is too deep for thee and me. Surfaces are deceptive; deep meanings are to be mined. Our critic has returned to his master, bringing to his task the accumulated wisdom of a lifetime spent in the service of scholarship; and he has gone behind the text to pull out the elusive truths. There, on Shakespeare's stage, things are not what they seem: the shrew is not tamed, the shrew tames Petruchio.

We should note that if this is the case, the title of the play must be ironic indeed – and for hundreds of years, no one "got it." Well, according to Bloom, Shakespeare's "skeptical irony" is his most salient quality.

How lucky the posterity of this Elizabethan sonneteer! He wrote his plays to make money and never imagined any of them would last longer in the public memory than a television script for *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*. That his works have endured for four hundred years would astound him; but what a boon that they were finally comprehended for the first time in New Haven, Connecticut!

Now, irony is practically an invention of 20th Century criticism, and the projection of such vast amounts of it back upon the late 16th Century is a stunning example of the *anachronistic fallacy*, which is the besetting sin of the New Critics. But as long as we have touched upon the subject of irony, we should note that Bloom, for all his contempt

for multiculturalists, postmodernists, and especially feminists, is deathly afraid of letting Shakespeare stand on his own politically incorrect merits. So like the old-style bleeding-heart liberal that he is, Bloom sets out to rehabilitate Shakespeare the blind English chauvinist, the unabashed sexist, the slandering anti-Semite, and the unapologetic pornographer of violence.

He cannot bear to believe that Shakespeare wrote the notoriously bad and bloody *Titus Andronicus*, whether for love or money; so he tells us, on no evidence at all, that the play is a *parody* of Marlowe. No such genre existed at the time. No one then or later noticed that it *was* a parody. Elizabethan audiences liked their revenge tragedy served straight up, and they loved this play. We have the anachronistic fallacy in its purest form: *today's* slasher movies, concocted for no other reason than to pander to the audience and enrich the purveyors, *do* contain riffs on old movies, and various other winks and nods designed to let the intelligentsia know that the director knows that he is a whore – but shouldn't be judged as one, because he is above his work as well as in it. But the playing of this trick, and the movie critics' susceptibility to it, is quite a modern phenomenon.

Not only did Shakespeare, a hungry young hack in his early days, write every word of *Titus Andronicus*, and mean every word, and cash every check: as a mature and successful artist, he wrote the bloody sergeant's speech at the beginning of *Macbeth*, which is terribly graphic when we remember that his playgoers got along without television and were accustomed to using their minds' eyes; and he fell so far

below even the relaxed standards of Elizabethan decorum as to present directly on the stage (in defiance of the unwritten rules of Greek tragedy) the blinding of Gloucester in *King Lear*. Bloom cannot attribute *that* lapse of taste and ethics to parody: his defense is to see no lapse. But I will say this much for Shakespeare: if we could call him on the carpet for pandering to his audience's taste for sensationalism, he would not understand the charge. He was a popular entertainer, and never imagined he was engaged in anything *other* than pandering.

Bloom also cannot believe that Shakespeare was the simple-minded English nationalist that the historical plays reveal him to be, so we are told that we have misunderstood the portrayal of Joan of Arc all these years – that Shakespeare gives us a vibrant, complex woman who is far more appealing than the patriotic Talbot. (No one realized this at the time; no one except Bloom realizes it today, for that matter; nor, turning to another play, has anyone gone as far as Bloom in projecting onto Shakespeare our own era's discomfort with the bellicosity of King Henry V.)

About *The Merchant of Venice*, the Jewish Bloom is in a cleft stick. He *wants* to acquit Shakespeare of a hate crime, but one small part of his neocortex remains stubbornly resistant to the onslaught of Bardolatry mounted by the rest of his brain: he cannot finally persuade himself that this play is not anti-Semitic.

He does what he can, though. Shylock, he admits, is portrayed as evil: but "Shylock's companion in hatred is Antonio." Bassanio is a lightweight – most critics agree with this – but Portia too, he tells us, is a spoiled shallow rich girl no better than

the man she loves. Nothing but mean trickery on display in the courtroom: the Christians of Venice are exposed by Shakespeare as duplicitous, malevolent, and vile.

A better defense, I think, is to acknowledge that the play is anti-Semitic by our standards but that Shakespeare's anti-Semitism is what I would call "casual." He did not know Jews, he did not think about them much one way or the other, and hating them was not important to his psychic economy. He made the Jew a villain as complacently as he provided Bohemia with a coastline in *The Winter's Tale*.

It might be worth while making a small detour here. No critic I know besides Bloom has so denigrated Portia, but many have wanted to rehabilitate Shylock as a character of tragic dignity and grandeur. Can we know with certainty how Shakespeare viewed his characters? Or if that smacks too much of the intentional fallacy, can we at least determine from the play how we in the audience are expected to judge the characters as moral agents? – which we must be able to do in order to understand, in the most basic sense, what the play is about.

Is Antonio a good man?

I wish to suggest that where there is any possibility of doubt, Shakespeare almost always resolves it by putting the correct judgment in the mouth of a minor character whose probity we are given no grounds to question. (A postmodernist might want to argue that a minor character is no more reliable than any other character; but such a position can only be maintained in defiance of another postmodernist tenet that a text is made up merely of words. Characters in a drama are *not* flesh and blood, and,

just as the postmodernists say, they do not continue to exist after they exit the stage or the page. They are the statements they make, and the statements that are made about them, and nothing else. All narrators are unreliable *in real life*, but on a stage or in a novel, the unreliable narrator so beloved of modern criticism is an exceptional creation and one requiring a good deal of skill to bring off. It is merely a truism to state that for us to have any idea of what a play means, in the elementary sense of knowing what reality it is tracking, we must be able to trust the statements of characters. This we will do unless we are given a reason – *in the text* – to doubt the statements.)

Shakespeare's lesser personages are neglected in critical studies because most of them are, almost as a matter of policy, bland and colorless: but this means that they speak the sentiments of ordinary humanity, and we can take their words at face value. Their pedestrian speeches repay interest when we begin to have doubts about how we are supposed to regard the main characters. Thus Benvolio, noting that Mercutio cannot go a quarter-of-an-hour without quarreling, cautions us against the sentimental mistake of transforming that entertaining madcap into a figure of tragic magnitude. Mercutio blames Romeo for getting him killed; but we might better blame Mercutio himself for precipitating the catastrophe by setting out to kill Tybalt.

To return to *The Merchant of Venice*: Salanio and Salarino have almost no function in the play other than to warn us away from Bloom's preposterous reading. Salanio calls Shylock "the villain jew" and "the dog Jew"; Salarino calls him an "impenetrable cur"; then he says of Antonio that "a kinder gentleman treads not the

earth." To hint, as Bloom does, that these two characters are part of the anti-Semitic crowd generally, and thus part of Shakespeare's tract against bigotry, is to turn the play into something George Bernard Shaw might have written. This is not *just* the anachronistic fallacy: for Shaw, and any other playwright worth his salt, would also have taken the trouble to show the audience *why* Salanio and Salarino are not to be trusted.

Minor characters puncture many another Blooming pretension. Our critic, like many of his brethren, bleeds for Malvolio; but Fabian tells us what to think of this self-important, self-righteous, self-adoring, priggish, puritanical, prurient young ass. (It is interesting how many productions try to engage our sympathies for Malvolio by casting him much too old.)

The minor character of Escalus, in *Measure for Measure*, serves us well to help us navigate one of Bloom's most idiosyncratic readings. "It is difficult to decide who is more antipathetic, Angelo or Duke Vincentio," Bloom tells us. "Lucio is the only rational and sympathetic character in this absurdist comedy (except for the superb Barnardine)." Almost as if he anticipated just such a calumny, Shakespeare composed the scene of the Duke's poignant questioning of Escalus. Still in disguise and reeling from Lucio's blithe assassination of his character, Vincentio, in a moment of psychological weakness, can't help asking Escalus for a character reference. The answer is all any of us (except Bloom) would need to vouch for the Duke's all-around excellence as a human being. The "rational and sympathetic" Lucio is, needless to

say, simultaneously proved to be everything the Duke accuses him of being on the last page of the play.

In this case, Bloom has so laughably, and childishly, grafted his own morality upon Shakespeare that we can hardly help staring at the spectacle, transfixed. So gross and palpable an error is a sign of his irrepressible narcissism: it is as if he is saying, "I am a bold free spirit, wise enough to affirm the morality of Lucio over that of Vincentio and Isabel; my master Shakespeare agrees with me, against all the tribe of religious frauds and pale conformists." This same self-image causes Bloom to elevate Falstaff to secular sainthood, in spite of what a host of minor characters tell us about the fat knight – Falstaff becomes, in Bloom's encomium, the wisest spirit who ever lived, the philosopher who tries to teach Hal the holiness of the heart's affections. If the chapter on Falstaff does not amaze us, it is because we are already accustomed to critics who err in the same direction; but no one else has ever turned Falstaff into such a paragon of beauty, truth, and goodness.

Indeed, narcissism is Bloom's Achilles heel. A narcissist, by definition, cannot understand how any person of good will and good information can ever reach a conclusion different from his own. Having extolled Shakespeare as the possessor of the best will and the best information ever concentrated in a single human or demigod, Bloom can only believe that he and his master see everything alike: he is thus committed to an interpretation of each play that would be correct if he had written it

himself.

This explains why there is no single critical methodology or theoretical thread running through Bloom's interpretations. He has not discovered a heretofore-unnoticed principle of unity underlying the collected works, or created a new type of light to shine upon them. Instead we have a bewildering variety of pronouncements, each as bizarre as the next, and seeming at first to fall into no discernible pattern. It turns out that the principle that binds the interpretations together is the unity of Bloom's personality. To an even greater extent than is usual with literary criticism, what we have is psychological autobiography – a confession of Bloom's values and preoccupations. Parolles, Lucio, and Barnardine exalted . . . Falstaff deified . . . Duke Vincentio, Antonio, and Portia cast down . . . we learn nothing about Shakespeare but everything about Bloom's romanticized notion of himself as a lusty, lifeloving hellraiser, the scourge of insipid moralists.

In the case of Falstaff's rowdiness, Bloom tries to disarm us by admitting that he would be flattered to be seen as a Falstaffian character. But he exposes a darker side of himself when he projects his sexual fixations onto Shakespeare. As I have already mentioned, he tries to turn the tables on the feminists by arguing that Kate, in *The Taming of the Shrew*, is the puppeteer and Petruchio the puppet. Thus: Kate is tormented by Petruchio "until at last she discovers how to tame the swaggerer"; in her famous speech at the conclusion of the play, "she is advising women how to rule absolutely, while feigning obedience"; having mastered her husband, she proceeds to

teach "not ostensible subservience but the art of her own will."

Now who would believe this?

Only someone who views "the battle between the sexes" in a particular way.

It is often the case, yet rarely remarked upon, that epic womanizers like Bloom are misogynists. Beneath their deep sexual desire for women is fear and loathing, intensified by their belief that women are inferior beings. These men resent their own dependence and neediness. Ultimately, they deny their emotions and project them outward. Drawn incessantly toward women, they accuse women of incessantly drawing them in. Lusting perpetually after women, they decide, like the authors of the late Middle Ages, that lust is, in *women*, insatiable. Having established and enjoyed the fruits of patriarchy – that vicious system of male privilege and dominance that makes a winsome graduate student one of the perquisites of power, a new plum to be plucked with every returning fall semester – such men claim that women run the world and dangle men like marionettes.

Apropos of Othello, Bloom remarks that "Shakespeare's greatest insight into male sexual jealousy is that it is a mask for the fear of being castrated by death." It is impossible to make sense of this sentence, but it does further illuminate Bloom's gynophobic paranoia – whatever else he means, he certainly means that women are emasculating harpies who are properly feared, and that men, poor dears, are just trying to hold their own. In Bloom's parallel universe, male jealousy isn't a sign of the prerogative of human ownership, backed up by beating, rape, and the occasional just

execution of a spouse believed to be unfaithful – why no, jealousy is a sign of male vulnerability, a window into the existential dread that is exacerbated by the unscrupulous way that women exploit it.

The language expressing the "insight" is, of course, pure Freud, and Bloom's whole career has been built on his Freudian theory that the literary sons try to outwrite their literary fathers; but like all egotists, Bloom is an ingrate. He can't bear to give Freud credit for *anything*, because he can't bear to be in the debt of any person not dead 200 years or more. (Samuel Johnson, long enough deceased, and a man almost as peremptory in his judgments as Bloom, is his critical hero.) So all through this book, Bloom is busy crediting Shakespeare with priority over Freud as a Freudian; but only a diseased Viennese imagination could have posited the fear of death as the *epiphenomenon* to the more fundamental fear of castration.

Of Freud's misogyny there really cannot be any doubt; and Bloom is Freud's truest heir. Their writings share a tendency to digress suddenly and irritably onto the subject of feminism – Freud to take angry and scornful potshots at "emancipated women" and "lady novelists," accusing them of penis envy, and Bloom to venomously excoriate all the tribe of female postmodernists who have dared to suggest that European dead white males do not have a monopoly on literary talent and should not occupy every niche of the pantheon of literary greatness merely because of political correctness of the old-fashioned Anglican type.

Well, at least we can understand *why* Bloom wants to make Petruchio a victim, Antonio a villain, Joan of Arc a heroine, Falstaff a saint, Prince Hal a prig, and Titus Andronicus an over-the-top Marlovian stick-figure. I am more fascinated by Bloom's penchant for supplying answers to questions that no one has ever thought to ask. I cannot for the life of me comprehend what problem he thinks he has solved when he tells us, on no good authority, that the old lost Hamlet play, almost universally attributed to Thomas Kyd, was written by Shakespeare himself. He offers *no* evidence for this, much less any good argument – for he is Bloom. He has, in the company of exactly one other maverick scholar, simply divined this truth. *Pourquoi?* Because Shakespeare played the ghost – Hamlet's *father*, you see – plus the anxiety of influence, Oedipal rivalry with the father, two versions of the play (like father, like son), the strong poets those who most misunderstand the old poets and rewrite them with the most misprision, Shakespeare the inventor of the human, therefore without a rival, therefore rivalry with himself, rewrote *himself* you see, fathering his own son as it were. Something like that, but at great, very great, even inordinate length, for *Hamlet* must automatically elicit a critical response commensurate with its stature.

Nor do I know what confusion Bloom believes he has cleared up when he reveals to us that Orlando recognizes Rosalind through her disguise. I especially do not understand how I am helped by the knowledge that "Othello loves Desdemona, yet seems not to desire her sexually, since evidently he has no knowledge of her palpable virginity and never makes love to her." Instead of illuminating the dark corners of these

plays, he seems to me to have snuffed out the candles. But I suppose the humid dusk into which we are thrown is the best atmosphere for breeding ironies like mosquitoes.

So, for instance, most of us have always thought that we understood *Romeo and Juliet* well enough. Indeed, the play communicates its message clearly even when we translate it to the West Side of New York City or put the youngsters on motorcycles. But now we have Bloom to shroud the play in mystery, the better to solve it with his uncanny intuition. He tells us that the statements made by the feuding fathers at the end of the play are "presented as ironies, and not as images of reconciliation."

Very good. By all means, Harold, speak the word only. Your publisher has given you many, many unedited pages. (If they had been edited, we can assume that his repeated use of the word "proleptic" would have been removed from some of them. But editors no longer exist in the publishing industry: the personnel *called* editors are now bidders at auctions and liaisons between agents and printers. When Bloom was interviewed by the *Paris Review* and asked if his handwritten pages, after being typed by an assistant, were also edited, he said, "No one edits. I edit. I refuse to be edited." This comes as no surprise. It is also the only nugget worth reading in one of the most soporific interviews ever committed to paper, unless you love Bloom even more than he loves himself. By comparison, the Stalinists were amateurs at "the cult of personality.")

Millions of readers and playgoers for four hundred years have been moved by the final words of *Romeo and Juliet* uttered by the broken old men who learn their folly too late and pay the full price of it. Silly geese, all of us. Now Bloom has set things

right. These words and gestures at the end of the play are *not* images of reconciliation: the reconciliation is fraudulent. (I'm not sure how else to understand his contention that the words and gestures are "ironies." I know that literary critics sometimes speak a rarefied dialect of English, and that the term "irony" on their lips is one of those words that, as a character in *Pogo* says, is "fraught with a fraughtness"; however, since Capulet and Montague *profess* reconciliation to each other, whereas Bloom tells us that their statements are *not* images of reconciliation, I attribute to Bloom the belief that the statements are shams of some sort. The other way out is to say that the characters are sincere, but that we in the audience view sincerity itself with skeptical irony – that the gestures are taken by the characters themselves to be the true coin of reconciliation, but that we wise observers in the audience cannot be so easily imposed upon. This is to slip again into the error of projecting our very modern sensibility onto Shakespeare, grafting either a recent psychological theory about false consciousness or a contemporary dramaturgical practice borrowed from Brecht onto a late Medieval soap opera. If we are right to do so, then I suppose Bloom is also right to worship Shakespeare as the Nietzschean Superman who was four centuries ahead of his time – who contrived to entertain his dull countrymen with sentimental pabulum while simultaneously, *with the same words*, sending messages of Freudian ambivalence and postmodern alienation to his Prophet Bloom in a distant generation.)

But Shakespeare not only tells us what the old men think, he tells us what *he* thinks. Shakespeare says in the eighth line of the *prologue* to the play that the deaths

of the two children will serve to "bury their parents' strife." Sounds like reconciliation to me. He also states explicitly that *only* the children's deaths could have ended the parents' rage. Yet Bloom tells us that "Shakespeare stands back from assigning blame, whether to the feuding older generation, or to the lovers, or to fate, time, chance and the cosmological contraries."

Bloom is right that Shakespeare refrains from blaming the lovers, or fate, or time, or chance, or the cosmological contraries, because Shakespeare blames *only* "the feuding older generation," and no one and no thing else. He appears to have written his wooden, undramatic, overly explicit prologue just in case anyone should ever think otherwise – it is as if he saw Bloom coming. The prologue tells us that Romeo and Juliet will die, that their deaths will be caused by their parents' enmity, and that the feud could not have ended any other way.

From forth the fatal loins of these two foes
 A pair of star-cross'd lovers take their life;
 Whose misadventured piteous overthrows
 Do with their death bury their parents' strife.
 The fearful passage of their death-mark'd love,
 And the continuance of their parents' rage
 Which, but their children's end, nought could remove,
 Is now the two hours traffic of our stage

Shakespeare thus anticipates a common critical mistake that is even more pernicious than Bloom's: the contention that had Romeo waited a few more seconds for Juliet to wake up, the children's marriage, and not their death, would have effected the reconciliation. Not so – had old Capulet found his defiant daughter alive and the

murderer of Tybalt returned from banishment, he would have straightway called for Romeo's execution and either married Juliet to Paris or put her in a convent. *Only* his daughter's death will serve to rearrange the blocks in the head of this stubborn, choleric man. That's the tragedy.

Why does Bloom, who professes to revere every utterance out of the mouth of his god, contradict the very words of the prologue to *Romeo and Juliet*?

We are not told; an oracle does not explain itself. We are told only that Shakespeare meant something different from what his words seem to mean – something uncannily akin to what the words would mean had Bloom written them.

It is a funny thing about gnosticism: it purports to be the esoteric knowledge of the secret constitution of the universe; but the knowledge itself always rests upon authority rather than demonstration – an authority unsupported by argument or evidence and buttressed solely by the self-confidence of the gnostic lawgiver. (If this were not the case, the knowledge would be common rather than gnostic.) We can better understand now, I think, why the third great enthusiasm of Bloom's late period, besides Shakespeare and the Western Canon, has been the Old Testament, and especially its protagonist, a patriarch of extraordinary narcissism, vanity, and self-assurance named Yahweh. Bloom is irresistibly drawn to this literary character who, more even than Lucio and Falstaff, seems created in his image.

A blooming, buzzing confusion

In 2003, Harold Bloom published *Hamlet: Poem Unlimited* as a self-described companion or postlude to his *magnum opus* on Shakespeare. Bloom acknowledges at the outset that in *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human*, he had spent so many pages on his theory that Shakespeare was the author of the *ur-Hamlet* that he neglected to plumb the dramatic depths of the world's most famous play. This volume is an apology for his dereliction, at the cost of an additional \$19.95 for an essay that is only a little longer than a student undergraduate paper. The book checks in at 154 pages, but these *caveats* should be noted: the pages are undersized; there are 25 chapters, with lots of blank space and even blank pages at the beginning and end of each; and the text of the play is copiously quoted, sometimes for two pages at a time – for instance, the entire soliloquy "To be or not to be," is printed. The chapter on the grave-digger, occupying five pages, gives us about 200 words from Bloom.

The book is perverse, which we expect; but it also verges on unintelligibility, which we do not. We are prepared for Bloomian pronouncements that startle and amaze, and Bloom does not disappoint: Yorick raised Hamlet; the famous soliloquy is not about suicide; Gertrude and Claudius have been sexually involved with one another for at least 30 years. We are less prepared to find Bloom opaque on the subject of

what the play is about. Since it is impossible to state Bloom's thesis clearly, or to be sure that he has a thesis (as opposed to a congeries of *obiter dicta*), I will confine myself to a brief survey of his effronteries, noting only that he *is* quite clear about one thing at least: that audiences have gotten *Hamlet* wrong for 400 years, because the play does not treat a son's duty to avenge his father's murder, a young man's misery over his mother's corruption, or a prince's concern for the moral decadence of the state that he will some day rule. Here is Bloom in his own inimitable vocabulary, a curious mixture of fervid romanticism and postmodern above-it-all-ness:

- Something in Hamlet dies before the play opens, and I set aside the prevalent judgment that the deepest cause of his melancholia is his mourning for the dead father and his outrage at his mother's sexuality. Don't condescend to the Prince of Denmark: he is more intelligent than you are, whoever you are.
- Despite his passion in the graveyard, we have every reason to doubt his capacity to love anyone, even Ophelia. He does not want or need love: that is his lonely freedom, and it provokes the audience's unreasoning affection for him.
- At the very close, Hamlet fears a wounded name. I suggest that his anxiety pertains not to being a belated avenger, but to his obsessions as a dramatist.
- If we remain in a harsh world where, with Horatio, we will draw our breath in pain, it is because we are not yet ready to accept Hamlet's judgment that the obliteration of consciousness is an absolute felicity. He departs before us, unforgettable as disturbance and as icon.

Comment is superfluous, I think: if these evidence-free *aperçus* are persuasive to the reader, nothing I can say by way of rebuttal will discredit them.

As nearly as I can make out, Bloom's *Hamlet* goes something like this: At the beginning, nothing is rotten in the state of Denmark, unless it be Hamlet's soul. The nation is well governed by King Claudius, who is as comfortable as an old shoe, and Queen Gertrude, who dotes on her adoring husband and frets about her son. Everyone is happy except Hamlet, the most intelligent person who ever lived. "The malaise that haunts Elsinore is not the unrevenged regicide, or the other corruptions of the shuffling Claudius, but the negative power of Hamlet's consciousness." The prince is lonely and touchy; as an explorer of the universe within, he naturally has to go it alone; in any case, no one can keep up with him. He is brooding on *something*, but given Bloom's premises, it is hard to say what it could be, unless it is problems of dramaturgy – for Hamlet cares nothing for court life, has no ambition to occupy the throne, is untouched by either the sudden death of his emotionally remote warrior-autocrat of a father or the scandalous haste of his silly mother in re-marrying, and is bored by his desultory pursuit of the insipid Ophelia. What excites him is the theater. Apprised by a ghost that the present occupant of the throne seduced his mother and murdered his father, Hamlet is galvanized by the news and passes from near-catatonic depression to hyperactivity, animated by the myriad opportunities that this situation affords for . . . playacting. He immediately puts on an antic disposition and toys with all the people who care most about him; he shows especial malice toward Ophelia, to whom, once upon a time, he sent gratuitously insincere love letters. A little later, he is afforded a *really* juicy opportunity for a man of his tastes: to *write* a play and see it

performed. All this feigning is an end in itself: like many actors, Hamlet is thoroughly unsuited to living in the real world. So he dithers around until he loses the name of action and is sent off to England. When he returns, he is transformed, not by an acceptance of whatever Providence may wish to do with him (his words to the contrary notwithstanding), but by a key insight that the ultimate transcendence is death. This does not make him any the less toxic to normal people: "Hamlet discovers that his life has been a quest with no object except his own endlessly burgeoning subjectivity. This truth, intolerable to any of us, helps turn Hamlet into an angel of destruction." He knows the king will try to finish him off and essentially does his best to hasten that felicity. Matters so fall out that he finishes off the king first and thus nominally fulfills the ghost's commission, but this happens almost by the way. Fortinbras, another idiot-warrior like Hamlet's father, comes in at the end to assume the throne, and Hamlet pretends to be pleased.

The curious feature of Hamlet as imagined by Bloom is that he lies continually for no discernible reason. He complains that the behavior of Claudius has made Denmark a byword for drunkenness among the nations, even though he does not care a fig for statecraft. He extols his father to Horatio, although according to Bloom he barely knew the man and scorned his macho shenanigans. He castigates his mother for shamelessness, but in fact he hardly minds her conduct at all. Unable to love anyone, he nonetheless writes passionate love letters to Ophelia and tells her brother how much he loved her. He professes admiration for Fortinbras, whom he despises.

He berates himself for failing to avenge the murder of his father, when he does not believe in vengeance. He grouses that Claudius "popped in between the election and my hopes" even though he really does not care who occupies the throne so long as it someone other than himself. Others lie about him also: Claudius says that Hamlet is "most generous and free from all contriving" when we know from Bloom that he is a monster of solipsistic self-absorption and never gives anyone a straight answer; Ophelia calls him the glass of fashion and the mold of form, and describes him as a soldier, a courtier, and a scholar, in the teeth of Bloom's assurance that Hamlet is indifferent to all such mundane callings. (But perhaps Hamlet's penchant for dissembling egged him on to mislead these other characters before the play opened: no doubt he dressed up and paraded about in well-tailored clothes as another actorish self-entertainment, and engaged in long bouts of pretended interest in military matters, court behavior, and rare books, all for the frisson of gulling Ophelia.)

Let us stay a while with Bloom's conception of a Hamlet who is irresistibly given to dissimulation. We can understand Hamlet's joy at putting on Polonius and maliciously balking Claudius, but victimizing Ophelia with an exhibition of his antic disposition would be heartless and cruel. Bloom is a step ahead of us, though: his Hamlet *is* heartless and cruel, and especially given to abusing the trust of those who love him. The scene where he silently bids farewell to Ophelia, treated by many commentators as a heartbreaking picture of Hamlet's despair, is for Bloom the immediate fruit of Hamlet's plan to feign insanity: "What emerges clearly is that Hamlet

is playacting, and that Ophelia already is the prime victim of his dissembling."

Indeed, Bloom's Hamlet is never happier than when he is lying. All his professed admiration for Fortinbras is a sham:

Hamlet, with amiable irony, has termed Fortinbras "a delicate and tender prince" It is another irony that Hamlet . . . prophesies that Fortinbras will be elected the new king of Denmark, and casts his own vote: "He has my dying voice."

We know that to an academic inhabiting the intellectual empyrean, the word "irony" is numinous in itself and needs no object; but here on earth, irony is usually employed toward some end. If Hamlet thinks that Fortinbras is a blockhead and a stooge, then we can certainly understand that his calling him "a delicate and tender prince" is ironic. But elsewhere Hamlet eschews irony and outright calls Polonius a tedious old fool: he speaks ironically only when Polonius is nearby to hear it or Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are around to appreciate it. Why Hamlet would employ irony about Fortinbras *in a soliloquy* is mysterious. Bloom is ready for us again, however: he calls Hamlet's famous self-lacerating outburst after the players are sent off ("O, what a rogue and peasant slave am I!") a "hyperparody of soliloquy." What this means as a term of literary art is anybody's guess; but what it means for Bloom's Hamlet is that the prince is merely engaging in histrionics. He is playacting for an audience consisting only of himself. For a reader or critic to bog down in the ostensible content of the soliloquy is the mistake of a tyro. Hamlet does not regret his inaction or have any desire to catch the conscience of the king. He just says that.

But even to relate the content of the soliloquy to some sort of fixation that Hamlet harbors about stagecraft is to miss the real point: Shakespeare wrote it solely to give the actor Dick Burbage a star turn that would put Marlowe's favorite actor Edward Alleyn in the dust. *And*, consider further: Not only does Shakespeare allow Burbage to out-act Alleyn, he simultaneously allows Hamlet to out-act the Player (a role that Bloom says was certainly performed by Shakespeare himself, although the evidence for this surmise is non-existent and the authority for it is, once again, Bloom's own capacious and infallible imagination). The Player has ranted about Hecuba; now Hamlet rants even more wildly on the theme of "What's Hecuba to him, or he to Hecuba?" The audience is thus treated to a delicious in-joke, whereby Burbage out-rants Alleyn and the character Burbage plays tops even the author who wrote the character. This is Bloom's *Hamlet* in a nutshell: a 21st century postmodern romp, an exercise in meta-everything, a hyper-parody suffused in multiple layers of irony, a theatrical about theatricality for those in the know (those in the know being the Globe audience then and Bloom now, but nobody in between). How best reveal yourself as a rube, a gull, a naif? Take it straight; believe the play is what it purports to be.

It follows as the night the day that in Bloom's universe, whatever most of us think is bound to be wrong:

Though critics have asserted that Hamlet finds qualities in Horatio that are absent from himself, they plainly are mistaken. Hamlet is so various that he contains every quality, while Horatio, totally colorless, has none to speak of.

Bloom cannot quite bring himself to say that Hamlet's speech of friendship for Horatio is false, but he portrays Horatio as such a dullard that we are invited to question Hamlet's sincerity even here – the more so as Bloom's Hamlet is so relentlessly "ironical" in every other social context. Picture Hamlet saying this to someone devoid of qualities:

Since my dear soul was mistress of her choice
And could of men distinguish, her election
Hath seal'd thee for herself Give me that man
That is not passion's slave, and I will wear him
In my heart's core, ay, in my heart of heart,
As I do thee.

I would say that no man who is not a sociopath – or rather, no man other than Bloom's Hamlet – would say these words to another man while regarding him as a non-entity and a bore.

In the fourth act soliloquy, Hamlet laments that he has not yet killed Claudius and ends by saying "My thoughts be bloody or be nothing worth." In other words, he reaffirms in unmistakable language that from this time forward he must use his capability and godlike reason to perform a revenge killing. This is Bloom's cue:

Vastly intelligent, far beyond us – if we are not, say, Freud or Wittgenstein – Hamlet cannot believe that the proper use of his capability and godlike reason is to perform a revenge killing.

If only Bloom would tell me why Hamlet habitually lies *even to himself*, and spends his last earthly breath still lying, I feel I could die in peace. (*Faux-modesty* requires Bloom to pretend that he too is unable to fully understand Hamlet. Like Socrates, he claims to

surpass the rest of us only in knowing that he does not know. Pushing this pose of humility, he bows in the direction of two greater *savants*. Since Freud is the granddaddy of the interpretation that Bloom decisively rejects – that Hamlet is pathologically immobilized by his strong but contradictory Oedipal feelings about his father and mother – he is a poor choice here for a genius who can grasp the meaning of *Hamlet*. He is also a poor choice for any kind of genius, but the record of Bloom's long susceptibility to Freud's foolishness is unforgiving. Wittgenstein too was incapacitated for appreciating Shakespeare. He was fitfully brilliant and a master of epigrammatic takedowns of other people's nonsense – he eviscerated Freud, for instance, in a few well-chosen words – but he was a lifelong depressive given to passionate religious commitments and to flights of metaphysical poetry alternating with tediously exhaustive investigations into language use. Bloom has picked two avatars who merely resemble him most in gnostic excess and precarious mental equilibrium.)

Bloom can do no other than treat the nunnery scene as one more of Hamlet's triumphs in feigned insanity. He must be credited, however, for his tacit acknowledgment that here his view lands him in some difficulty. On his hypothesis that Hamlet has no motivation for his outburst *other* than yet another demonstration of the antic disposition, even Bloom can see that the hero goes rather farther than is required:

Between Hamlet's "To be or not to be" soliloquy and his Shakespeare-like instructing of the players, we are given the prince's astonishingly brutal verbal assault upon Ophelia, which far surpasses his need to persuade the concealed Claudius of his nephew's supposed madness. What broader ambivalence Hamlet harbors toward Ophelia, Shakespeare will

not tell us, but neither Polonius's exploitation of his daughter as unwitting spy, nor Hamlet's association of Ophelia with Gertrude, can account for the vehemence of this denunciation

If a playwright "will not tell us" why his main character behaves brutally to one of the most important secondary characters – a young woman whom the hero has courted with ardent love letters – said playwright must be one of the theater's great incompetents. T. S. Eliot adopted precisely this explanation of blundering: inasmuch as Hamlet's emotions are in excess of the facts, the play is a failure. And now, strangely, our randy Jewish hellraiser seems to adopt the view of the pinched Anglo-Catholic prig, though without wishing to fault his beloved Bard. Shakespeare is in fact as easily understood here as elsewhere: Gertrude's crime of infidelity toward the man who loved her so well – the ghost twice returns from the grave to urge revenge on Claudius but also to tell Hamlet to be kind to the Queen – has contaminated Hamlet's mind not only toward his mother, but toward Ophelia as well: "Frailty, thy name is woman." Ophelia's actions toward Hamlet have at this critical juncture resembled Gertrude's toward Hamlet's father. At the very moment that a crushing burden had been laid upon him and his soul oppressed with thoughts of his mother's degradation, Ophelia, in perfect obedience to her filthy-minded father, began to return Hamlet's letters unread and to refuse all meetings with him. *Contra* Bloom, the vehemence of Hamlet's denunciation of Ophelia in the nunnery scene is perfectly consonant with Hamlet's justifiable interpretation of Ophelia's conduct and with his inevitable association of Ophelia's behavior with Gertrude's. It also accords with his touchy state generally, and with his

divining that Ophelia is acting a part.

If Hamlet is half as smart as Bloom says he is, he will have no difficulty smelling a rat in Ophelia's clumsy performance – clumsy because she is a fundamentally decent person who is not ordinarily given to such prevarications. (Many critics object to any interpretation that attributes insincerity or contrivance to the divine Ophelia. When confronted with her blatant inversion of the truth – she taxes *Hamlet* with having rejected *her* and says that he has proved unkind – they fall back on conscious or unconscious patriarchal condescension toward the fair sex, treating her words as one of the charming ploys by which pretty girls have traditionally erected little obstacles to test their lovers: "This will be his cue to take me in his arms and assure me that I have been ever in his heart.") If Bloom were half as smart as Bloom thinks he is, he would also question the unwarranted tradition, nowhere justified by the text, that Hamlet is aware of being overheard by Claudius and Polonius. It is not in the least necessary for the unlawful espials to blunder and give away their location just before Hamlet rounds on Ophelia and asks "Where's your father?" Hamlet, thinking on other things, does not immediately cotton to the falsity of the part that Ophelia is playing, or know that the king is nearby – and not even the manic-depressive Hamlet pictured by Bloom and a few other critics would be rash enough to directly threaten the king's life within the king's hearing. But after she begins to act her scene, he knows well enough that she is adding pretense to perfidy, and that whatever her motivation, she is no longer his. And he is right about this: at every stage, she has done the bidding of her father, and is

doing his bidding now. Ophelia is a sympathetic character to us; but she is not a paragon of female virtue, not even by the Victorian standards that equated docility with feminine perfection, and certainly not by Elizabethan standards. As minor a character as Celia in *As You Like It* has the spunk to defy her father and take to the open road rather than follow his base instructions. Sweet but disastrously obedient Ophelia is not fit to mention in the same breath with the heroines of Shakespeare's comedies.

My reading here – that Hamlet is not mad, and is not feigning madness for the benefit of the eavesdroppers, but is authentically distraught and venting powerful but understandable feelings that grow naturally out of his intense disillusionment – is so pedestrian that it is widely shared by almost everyone, even the most mundane commentators; but the supersubtle Bloom, needless to say, is light years ahead of us.

But *all* such trivialities of plot and characterization are peripheral in Bloom's mind to the mystical core of this masterpiece. The play, argues Bloom, is really about Hamlet's attempt to tell us more than even Shakespeare knew, especially about death; and it is also about Shakespeare's attempt – only partially successful given his main character's precocity – to keep a lid on Hamlet's subjectivity. "What is wanted is a director and an actor who are monsters of consciousness, and who can keep up with that true combat of mighty opposites, Hamlet and Shakespeare. In such a death duel, I would want the actor to side with Shakespeare, and the director to favor Hamlet." This notion of a titanic struggle between author and creation, of the character who slips the leash and takes on an independent existence and begins calling the shots to the

subjugated author, is, however preposterous, something of a commonplace among critics with a romantic bent. It originates in the idea that the most grandiose 19th century writers had about themselves as vessels of the collective unconscious or the universal Will. In them, it is mystical mush, the apotheosis of the mundane observation that a character may take on an unforeseen and ever-greater importance during the course of writing out a novel. But I admit that the idea may reflect something that is reflective of their own self-indulgent and undisciplined approach to their craft. Applied anachronistically to any competent author of an earlier century, and especially to a professional entertainer like Shakespeare, it is ridiculous.

Bloom, in touting this combat between Shakespeare and Hamlet, is repeating and intensifying his convoluted argument from his earlier book. Shakespeare, as author, is the creative father of Hamlet and *Hamlet*. He wrote the old Hamlet play, so this play is the son of that one. At the Globe, Shakespeare acted the part of . . . *the ghost!* (Of Hamlet's *father*.) Shakespeare named his son Hamnet. The boy died in between the writing of the old play and the new. This may mean nothing, but best mention it. Shakespeare had an I.Q. of about 16,000. He was so much smarter than you and me that he invented us. Hamlet the character is also smarter than you and me, so we will always be several steps behind him, and almost anything we think about him will fail to do justice to him. (Yet here is this book.) *Hamlet may even be smarter than Shakespeare*. Hamlet, like his authorial father, loves the theater. In the middle of Shakespeare's play, the character Hamlet writes a play, and advises the actors (that is,

the actors of the Globe who are acting the part of actors at Elsinore) how to perform it. By the end of his play, he is tired of acting and is now in a great hurry to consummate "his quest for annihilation." He no longer fears death because he has knowledge about it that he cannot explain to any of the rest of us – perhaps cannot explain even to Shakespeare. Having contrived his own demise, he speaks past Horatio to *us* and passes out of the play altogether into literary history and legend. He tells us he does not wish to leave a wounded name behind. He wants *us* to absent *our* felicity awhile, and draw our breath in pain to tell his story. And we do. We do.

It is difficult to take this *Hamlet* seriously enough to debate it, or even to try to figure out what it means to Bloom. Certainly this interpretation – if that is the right word for such a series of improvisations – exemplifies a long tradition among over-educated aesthetes of treating one of the world's most popular artists, who wrote unashamedly for the box office in an era of almost universal illiteracy, as if he were a combination of Schopenhauer, Kafka, and Samuel Beckett. Bloom has styled himself a gnostic – in common parlance, this would make him someone who believes that the universe has given up its secrets to a few select sages, who have in turn embodied their special knowledge in esoteric texts that are impenetrable to all but the initiates. If I am reading Bloom correctly, *Hamlet* is the scripture that he alone understands: exoterically, it is an Elizabethan revenge tragedy; but its entertaining veneer conceals mystical depths, which have a message for us about the meaning of death so blindingly revelatory that not even our garrulous academic guide – indeed, not even Shakespeare himself – can

put it into words for us.

Meanwhile, as a counterweight to this depiction of Hamlet as an angel of destruction, Bloom makes repeated references to Falstaff as Hamlet's sunny opposite, with much imagining of how the prince and the fat man might have interacted. Bloom's idea of Falstaff is as barmy as his idea of Hamlet, but even if it were not, the many appearances of Falstaff in this book would seem to be the height of self-indulgence: what has Bloom's idolatry of the fat knight to do with our subject? Coming directly from *The Invention of the Human*, however, we know the answer: Bloom, bloated and lecherous and misogynistic, a man of prodigious appetites (although, unlike Falstaff, his most conspicuous appetites, like Freud's, have been for work and renown), believes that he too was invented by Shakespeare and that he *is* Falstaff. No one can be the genius that Shakespeare was, but Bloom will be next best: a genius in the mold of Shakespeare's happiest creation. Therefore, in order to set Falstaff off as Shakespeare's *best* character, and his *morally healthiest*, Bloom views Hamlet as Falstaff's antipode – dark, dangerous, destructive, self-involved, uncaring, cruel, and dedicated to death:

I want to be as clear as I can be about Hamlet's stance: it is pragmatically nihilist, which does not rule out spiritual yearnings, whether Catholic, Protestant, or hermetist (in the manner of Giordano Bruno, as Frances Yates suggested).

(I might have lopped off the end of this sentence to advantage, but it is a delicious exemplum of Bloom's inveterate name-dropping. He's read everything.)

Bloom's book about *Hamlet* turns out to be very much a book about Falstaff, because every book by Bloom is really a book about Bloom. A commentary on *Hamlet* is merely the vehicle whereby Bloom reveals himself to us. What characterizes gnostics to each other is their superiority to the rest of humanity. What characterizes them to the rest of us is their idea of their own specialness, and how very boring they are. Bloom, purporting to set forth the significance of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* for the first time in history, ending 400 years of our childish infatuation with it for all the wrong reasons, is erecting a monument to his own brilliance while having no conception whatsoever of how self-adulating he sounds. There is something almost touching about narcissism this pure.

Appendix: the Player's speech about Hecuba

Inside the big tent of Bloom's bid to stagger us by revamping *Hamlet* as an esoteric gospel of thanatos is his usual three-ring circus of continual small astonishments. On the very first page:

Contrary, doubtless, to Shakespeare's intention, *Hamlet* has become the center of a secular scripture. It is scarcely conceivable that Shakespeare could have anticipated how universal the play has proved to be. Ringed around it are summits of Western literature: the *Iliad*, the *Aeneid*, *The Divine Comedy*, *The Canterbury Tales*, *King Lear*, *Macbeth*, *Don Quixote*, *Paradise Lost*, *War and Peace*, *The Brothers Karamazov*, *Leaves of Grass*, *Moby-Dick*, *In Search of Lost Time*, among others.

I am missing the *Oresteia* here, but Bloom is ready for me:

Except for Shakespeare's, no dramas are included. Aeschylus and Sophocles, Calderon and Racine are not secular, while I suggest the paradox that Dante, Milton, and Dostoevsky are secular, despite their professions of piety.

Vintage Bloom! Dante . . . *Dante* . . . is secular. Aeschylus is not. A paradox indeed.

Will the Master explain it? No. He has *said* it.

Undoubtedly there is a thought behind this pronouncement, even if Bloom will not share it. He must mean *something*. If an interested party would pay me to do it, I could even try to make the argument myself, to wit: the *Oresteia* was part of a religious festival devoted to the god Dionysus; most readers of the *Inferno* skip the Christian apologetics and dive into its juridical aspect – the crimes of the characters and the fittingness of their punishments. Yes, my putative argument is absurd: the *Oresteia* is drama, not liturgy, and proceeds for long stretches as a study of human action and human motivation, whereas Dante's entire *mise en scène* is the Christian afterlife. But how can I be expected to *ad lib* an argument on Bloom's behalf that would *not* be absurd? *Milton* secular? If so, he failed to the last degree of failure, for he stated his purpose explicitly as the justification of God's ways to men. But what does Milton know about Milton, compared to what Bloom knows about Milton?

Will Bloom *dispense* his knowledge? He will pare off a sliver, no more – "I suggest the paradox." I must make do with that. Bloom cannot be bothered to explain it. Either you are with him or you are unworthy of him. My substantive complaint is not

even his provocations. It is his belief that he need not present evidence for them: "I think it, therefore it is."

As we have seen, almost any page is illustrative of Bloom's adolescent urge to shock us with readings that oscillate between the counterintuitive and the outrageous. Let us close our survey with a single example – his discussion of the rhetoric employed by the Player in the speech about Priam and Hecuba.

Bloom tells us that the Player's recitation is "of a poetic badness not to be believed." Many another Shakespearean scholar has found this passage to be woefully bombastic – the epitome of rhetorical excess. Yet, as Bloom acknowledges, "Hamlet professes to admire this, and repeats it from memory, having experienced it at the supposed single performance of the play from which it is extracted, *a play that never existed.*" I have added the emphasis to show where Bloom, in mid-sentence, suffers a brain spasm and passes from the play about Priam and Hecuba as a fictive artefact within the fictive world of the play *Hamlet*, where it has certain characteristics (for instance, that it was "an excellent play, well digested in the scenes"), to the play about Priam and Hecuba as an artefact in the real world of Elizabethan theater, where it obviously "never existed." This mixing up of levels is endemic to lazy critics; and Bloom, while relentlessly industrious when he is compiling a *curriculum vitae*, is among the laziest when it comes either to explaining why we should accept the pure speculation that he plucks from the ether or to stopping himself from running off the rails of coherence when he trips the light fantastic.

Now what is Bloom about here? Suddenly he invokes Shakespeare's *Troilus and Cressida*, a play that may have been written just before *Hamlet*. Without giving the baffled reader any clue to the allusion, he relates Hamlet's statement about the play within a play ("it was never acted; or, if it was, not above once") to a statement in the publisher's preface to the 1609 quarto of *Troilus and Cressida* that the play was "never staled with the Stage, never sullied with the smoky breath of the multitude." Therefore:

Hamlet is treating us to another Shakespearean in-joke. Whatever the account of Priam's slaughter parodies, it is not *Troilus and Cressida* but some imaginary play Christopher Marlowe never survived to write.

No one to my knowledge ever did, or ever would have, suggested that the Player's speech parodies *Troilus and Cressida*. Priam is alive throughout that play; Hecuba never appears in it. The publisher's note was appended to the text of *Troilus and Cressida* when the second quarto was published, five years *after* the first performance of *Hamlet*. About Bloom's divagation here, we could spend many a page and never come to the end of it . . . because he has strayed far from *Hamlet* and from any empirical fact about *Hamlet* or Shakespeare or Marlowe or Elizabethan England.

Now merely mortal critics have suggested that the *style* of the play-within-a-play is Marlovian – but Bloom insists that it is a *parody* . . . of a play that Marlowe *never wrote*. And we have an in-joke, because Hamlet's words about the play-within-a-play – that it was about the Trojan War, that it "pleased not the million" and so forth – could be taken, by five or six people in the know, to allude to Shakespeare's own *Troilus and*

Cressida; but the in-joke is funnier still, don't you see, because the play-within-a-play is *not* a parody of *Troilus and Cressida*, but a parody of a play by Marlowe. That Marlowe never wrote. And here is the capstone of the humor: the play doing the parodying, the play about Priam and Hecuba, is, like *Troilus and Cressida*, "a play that never existed" – but whereas *Troilus and Cressida* never existed in the sense that it was never performed, the play-within-a-play never existed in the sense that Marlowe never lived to write it. It is only a fictive play in the fictive world of Hamlet. We have *two* non-existent plays: one written by Shakespeare but non-existent in that it was never performed; the other written by Shakespeare for insertion into *Hamlet* but non-existent in the sense that it parodies a play by Marlowe that Marlowe did not write. Isn't that just the height of drollery?

My complaint about this alleged in-joke is, let me say, that it is so lame. Nothing is more likely than Shakespeare's putting an in-joke or a topical reference into one of his plays: apparently the gravedigger tells his associate to go buy a beer at a London alehouse near the Globe. The whole discussion of the "late inhibition" in the theaters is topical. But nothing is less likely than his inserting an in-joke so precious, so erudite, and so multivalent. The fantasized in-joke is serviceable only as an index to the mind of Harold Bloom. It converts the ruffian Shakespeare into an academic almost as desiccated as he is.

Why Hamlet pretends to like this allegedly execrable poetry, and to demand that great swatches of it be recited, is never explained by our critic; but the Bloomian

Hamlet dissembles so compulsively throughout the play that we may safely chalk up his praise to his persistent weirdness or his pathological lying. But this still fails to explain why Shakespeare would carry this alleged parody of Marlowe so far: having gotten off a few choice bits of Marlovian rant, why would he go on with fifty more lines of it, exhausting the patience of the audience?

But the strangest fact of all, seemingly overlooked by our psychopomp Bloom in spite of his having read every book in the English language, is that Marlowe *did* write, in collaboration with Thomas Nash, a play very like the one that Hamlet remembers: Shakespeare's speech for the Player is modeled closely on the description that Aeneas gives of these same events in *The Tragedy of Dido Queen of Carthage*. Here is the analogous passage:

Frighted with this confused noise, I rose,
 And looking from a turret, might behold
 Yong infants swimming in their parents blood,
 Headless carcasses piled up in heaps,
 Virgins half dead dragged by their golden hair,
 And with main force flung on a ring of pikes,
 Old men with swords thrust through their aged sides,
 Kneeling for mercy to a Greekish lad,
 Who with steel Pol-axes dashed out their brains.

. . . .

So I escaped the furious Pyrrhus' wrath:
 Who then ran to the palace of the King,
 And at Jove's altar finding Priamus,
 About whose withered neck hung Hecuba,
 Folding his hand in hers, and jointly both
 Beating their breasts and falling on the ground,
 He with his falchion's point raised up at once,

And with Megera's eyes stared in their face,
 Threatening a thousand deaths at every glance.
 To whom the aged King thus trembling spoke:
 Achilles' son, remember what I was,
 Father of fifty sons, but they are slain,
 Lord of my fortune, but my fortunes turned,
 King of this City, but my Troy is fired,
 And now am neither father, Lord, nor King:
 Yet who so wretched but desires to live?
 O let me live, great Neoptolemus,
 Not moved at all, but smiling at his tears,
 This butcher whilst his hands were yet held up,
 Treading upon his breast, strook off his hands.

Dido.

O end Aeneas, I can hear no more.

Aeneas.

At which the frantic Queen leapt on his face,
 And in his eyelids hanging by the nails,
 A little while prolonged her husband's life:
 At last the soldiers pulled her by the heels,
 And swung her howling in the empty air,
 Which sent an echo to the wounded King:
 Whereat he lifted up his bed-rid limbs,
 And would have grappled with Achilles' son,
 Forgetting both his want of strength and hands,
 Which he disdainingly whisked his sword about,
 And with the wound thereof the King fell down:
 Then from the navel to the throat at once,
 He ripped old Priam: at whose latter gasp
 Jove's marble statue 'gan to bend the brow,
 As loathing Pyrrhus for this wicked act:
 Yet he undaunted took his father's flag,
 And dipped it in the old King's chill cold blood,
 And then in triumph ran into the streets,
 Through which he could not pass for slaughtered men:
 So leaning on his sword he stood stone still,
 Viewing the fire wherewith rich Ilion burnt.

What would strike anybody but Bloom about this passage is that it is very nearly

unsurpassable in pornographic violence, which means that it cannot be easily subjected to burlesque, parody, or satire. In any case, Shakespeare does not make the attempt. Bloom's thesis requires Shakespeare's passage to be over the top, but the Player's speech about Hecuba falls well short of the summit that Marlowe attains in terms of bloody excess. The Player's speech is pitched at a level of bombast higher than that of the blank verse spoken throughout *Hamlet* but at a level very much lower than that of Marlowe's purple passage.

Shakespeare set out to differentiate the style of the play-within-a-play from the style of the play proper, and did so by creating an "elevated" literary style that, while intentionally inferior to his own as found in the rest of *Hamlet*, was "dramatic" in its context and therefore acceptable to the audience. This suggestion of mine is modest and unoriginal and reflects the critical consensus. This is hardly a surprise: no play has been examined more minutely than *Hamlet*; and unless you have the irrepressible desire that Bloom has to make mad the guilty and appall the free, you will probably find that, whenever you wish to offer a merely sensible interpretation, you have been anticipated by thousands of predecessors. I will further aver that if the actor recites the speech sincerely, without assuming that his gestures should be as exaggerated as the language, it can take on a coloring of dignity and be at least as effective as Shakespeare's own *Titus Andronicus*. (Bloom, to cover his flank here, repeats his assertion that *Titus* too is a parody of Marlowe, a view that is not merely unsupported by evidence, but unsustainable in reason. For hundreds of years, no critic or reader

found parody, satire, or irony in *Titus*. The bloodthirstiness of that earlier play is no argument: elements of coagulate gore survive even in *Hamlet*, with its accumulation of corpses. This does not daunt Bloom, of course, as he peppers his essays with things never thought before, his prophetic soul dreaming of the wide world beyond the ken of ordinary intelligences.)

In brief, Bloom, complaining that the passage is intentionally bad, starts out in the company of many other scholars who should also know better; but he cannot rest in their simpler explanation that Shakespeare imitates the bombast of Marlovian rhetoric while getting the benefit of it as a language distinct from the verse spoken in the rest of the drama. Bloom must occupy a lofty eminence of sheer perversity: Shakespeare is holding Marlowe up to ridicule, no doubt out of Oedipal rivalry with the earlier author, and creating an absolute travesty of Marlowe's style, while at the same time constructing an elaborately involuted allusion to a circumstance that will be mentioned in the publisher's preface to *Troilus and Cressida* several years later. But would not a scathing parody of another writer's style, of an inordinate length and carried to excesses of hilarity, be just as sensationally out of place at the center of a tragic drama as a postmodernist excursion into a purely self-referential joke directed to a few cognoscenti? Ah well, for an ordinary dramatist perhaps.

I will give Coleridge the last word here on the Player's speech: "The fancy that a burlesque was intended sinks below criticism."

Harold Bloom's field happens to be literature. So the greatest human in the history of the world must be . . . a *writer* . . . who, although renowned, was never properly appreciated until . . . *Bloom* wrote a book honoring that writer for "inventing the human." A professor of literary studies, toiling away in an uncultured and increasingly illiterate nation, was thus the first person on earth to recognize and justly estimate the achievement of this greatest human ever; and that makes the professor more or less entitled to be considered the second greatest human ever. This is what we call ego-inflation.

A. E. Housman listed the qualities needed for textual criticism, especially recommending the ability to "read attentively, think correctly, omit no relevant consideration, and repress self-will." That last requirement is the stinger in the scorpion's tale, the lack of which is the fault that obliterates all the other virtues if it is abused. Bloom, afflicted mortally with self-will, reads selectively, thinks idiosyncratically, and omits manifestly relevant considerations, such as the plain meaning of sentences, and instead elevates wildly irrelevant considerations and even pure fantasies of his own to the places of highest importance.

Narcissistic impairment is no bar to industry and application, but it is an absolute bar to understanding other people. Bloom has read everything and understood almost nothing. It is possible, in an academic setting, to do work on sources and influences and to erect a fancy theory of writers' misreading and rewriting each other, without ever comprehending the real reasons that authors write books, the motivations of fictional

characters, and the nature of the interest that audiences take in literature. If Bloom understands Hamlet rightly, then clearly no one else ever has. This would make the popularity of the play for over four centuries altogether baffling. It is much likelier that *Hamlet* has been famous through the ages because the play speaks clearly to us, and that Hamlet is, of all the Shakespearean protagonists, the one with whom, in many respects, we find it easiest to identify. Indeed, the plays of Shakespeare generally, today as in his own day, are straightforward entertainments that no more need a gnostic interpretation than Marx Brothers comedies. While they may benefit from the scholarly work of humbler practitioners who supply some of the background that was part of the cultural literacy of the Elizabethan theatergoer, they do not lend themselves to exercises in complicated exegesis. Bloom would do better to turn to imaginative literature in his old age, and write the play that he imagines Shakespeare's *Hamlet* to be. It will be like nothing ever seen on a stage before and will mark an epoch in world drama.

A Hamlet without affectation

My topic has been Harold Bloom's *Hamlet*, but like every reader, I have my own. I will begin in left field.

On June 25, 1876, at the Battle of the Little Bighorn, the Seventh Cavalry of the United States Army suffered an overwhelming defeat, and one detachment was totally annihilated in an action that became known as Custer's Last Stand. Almost immediately, this catastrophe, in which 268 soldiers died, was treated as a mystery. It was not credible to white Americans that a band of Indian warriors could have overcome a United States regular army regiment in so decisive a fashion. Over the course of the next century, the battle was mythologized and its terrain studied by hundreds of historians and tens of thousands of amateur buffs. There was endless speculation about how such a thing could have happened, always under the assumption that it would have taken a concatenation of extraordinary coincidences to bring it about.

In fact, there was no mystery at all. General Philip Sheridan appended the following remark to Captain Philo Clark's 1877 report on the battle:

The Indians were actually surprised, and in the confusion arising from the surprise and the attempt of the women and children to get out of the way,

Col. Custer was led to believe that the Indians were retreating and would escape him; furthermore, from the point he left Major Reno he could see only a small portion of the Indian encampment, and had no just conception of its size, consequently he did not wait to close up his regiment and attack with its full strength I do not attribute Col. Custer's action to either recklessness or want of judgment, but to a misapprehension of the situation and to a superabundance of courage.

When we find a mystery where none originally existed, and our solutions to it become ever more convoluted and fantastical, chances are that we need to go back to the beginning and eliminate the assumption that there *is* a mystery.

H. D. F. Kitto begins his incomparable discussion of Shakespeare's most famous play this way:

Surely the real problem of *Hamlet* lies in certain facts briefly reported by Waldock, that up to the year 1736 no critic seems to have found any great difficulty in the play, but since that date one interpretation after another has been proposed and rejected.

It was in that pivotal year of 1736 that one Thomas Hanmer opened Pandora's box with an idle observation:

To speak truth, our poet, by keeping too close to the groundwork of his plot, has fallen into an absurdity; there appears no reason at all in nature why this young Prince did not put the usurper to death as soon as possible, especially as Hamlet is represented as a youth so brave and so careless of his own life. The case, indeed, is this: had Hamlet gone naturally to work, there would have been an end of our play. The poet, therefore, was obliged to delay his hero's revenge; but then he should have contrived some good reason for it.

Hanmer was no mean fellow: he was Speaker of the House of Commons. I am

interested to learn that an Englishman serving in Parliament under King George II regarded it as such an easy matter for a prince to "go naturally to work" and dispatch his sovereign in full view of the court. But certainly Hamlet complains of his own delay; and Hanmer was not the scholar, if any such existed then, to point out that florid self-reproach was part of a recognized genre that academics of a later age would call "Elizabethan revenge tragedy." Asking why the hero of one of these tragedies delays is like asking why the hero of a western spares the life of the villain early in the movie, only to have to eventually track him down and kill him at the end, or why terrorized young people in a horror movie enter dark, lonely houses with blood dripping down the walls.

From the notion that Hamlet's delay is unaccountable, other "mysteries" arise. Why exactly does Hamlet feign insanity? In the old continental narratives, Hamlet's ploy throws the king off his scent – nothing to fear from an imbecile. In Shakespeare's play, the pretended insanity has the opposite effect of arousing the king's suspicion. And from this new crux, yet another emerges: When, exactly, *is* Hamlet putting on "an antic disposition"? And does he ever verge on real insanity? When he apologizes to Laertes in Act V, he refers to his earlier "madness."

We might think that these questions are easy enough to answer, but Professor Bernard Grebanier wrote *The Heart of Hamlet* to make a book-length argument that Hamlet *never* delays, his own self-accusations notwithstanding, and *never* pretends to be mad. What is most intriguing about Grebanier's book is that, setting aside its

deranged thesis, it is chock full of relevant matter. The author is intelligent, entertaining, and can write circles around Bloom.

I agree with Kitto that there is no insurmountable obstacle to understanding *Hamlet*, but Hanmer did raise a legitimate question; and one reason it seems not to be fully answerable from within the text is that pressures are operating from outside the text in precisely the manner that Hanmer mentions in passing. Shakespeare did keep "close to the groundwork" of the plot of an old play, a revenge tragedy composed by Thomas Kyd: while he greatly expanded the scope and richness of his new version, he also retained the essential elements of a proven theatrical hit. He uncritically retained some of Kyd's most primitive effects, and these jangle uncomfortably with his more nuanced treatment of newly written scenes. Such was the commonsensical thesis of J. M. Robertson early in the 20th century; and it is no less correct for having been taken up by one-time *enfant terrible* T. S. Eliot and used as evidence that *Hamlet* is "an artistic failure." (The remark, it need hardly be pointed out, says nothing about Shakespeare and much about Eliot and his constipated formalism. He thought *Coriolanus* was much the better play.)

To some questions about the action in *Hamlet*, then, we can give amusingly cynical answers. Why does Hamlet spare the king at prayer, while giving us a reason for his hesitation that curdles our blood? Because this scene is taken over almost *verbatim* from Kyd's play. Why does Hamlet feign insanity? Because he feigns insanity in every version of the story from the medieval original to the latest Elizabethan

version of it, and the audience for this "re-make" expected him to feign insanity as surely as the audience for a new version of *King Kong* expects the giant ape from the South Pacific tropical island to wind up in urban America climbing a tall building. Moreover, pretended lunacy was a dependable feature of the genre of revenge tragedy.

But in the matter of the antic disposition, as opposed to the sparing of the king at prayer, Shakespeare *did* exert himself to respond to changes that had taken place over time in the script. In the earliest versions of the story – prose narratives by Saxo Grammaticus in Latin and Belleforest in French – the usurper kills King Hamlet openly and naturally fears the possible vengeance of his victim's son. Hamlet's apparent insanity allays his fears. Kyd altered this plot point so that the murder happens in secret, the better to bring on a ghost whose "Hamlet, revenge!" became a byword in the 1590s for theatrical sensationalism. In this changed scenario, Claudius is secure in his deed, having committed the perfect crime with no witnesses, and Hamlet would be better advised to do nothing that calls attention to himself. But in Kyd's play, as in the old narratives, Claudius is surrounded by bodyguards at all times and Hamlet will need to prevail by means of stratagems and wiles. With the removal of any impediment at all to Hamlet's access to the king – Shakespeare's play dispenses with the royal bodyguard – the last pretext for Hamlet's feigned insanity vanishes from Shakespeare's script.

(I speak with authority about Kyd's play because, to scholars who do not have an

axe to grind, it is patent that a hilariously debased version of that old Elizabethan *Hamlet* exists in a German text of 1626 titled *The Fratricide Punished*. While the text is notoriously corrupt and beneath notice as literature, all the incidents of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* are present and accounted for, in the order given by the first quarto. Indeed, that first draft of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* still retains the name of Ophelia's father as found in the German play and presumably Kyd's play: Corambis.)

By the time of the second quarto, however, Shakespeare had fully developed a very different reason for Hamlet's feigning and detached it from its original purpose of duping the king. Whatever may be Hamlet's intention when he swears his friends to secrecy about it – Shakespeare is transcribing the old drama rather faithfully in the cellarage scene – as the play progresses, the antic disposition functions more and more as a psychological safety valve that allows Hamlet to relieve his oppressive feelings and even tell the truth about them without fear of being taken seriously. And in conjunction with this, Hamlet is, on more than one occasion, able to "let himself go" and vent his rage, frustration, and despair under the cover of his reputation for madness. He is enabled thereby to skirt the boundary of normal behavior; and perhaps he does even glimpse the abyss of true insanity from a comfortable distance, while being treated by almost all onlookers except the wary king as quite mad. From just this habit of allowing himself an astonishingly wide range of public behaviors comes much of the fascination of his character.

In terms of working within the recognized genre of revenge tragedy,

Shakespeare need not have provided a motive for the delay. Nonetheless, he did. Hamlet, a young man whose life has been hitherto untroubled and cannot possibly have prepared him for a crisis of any magnitude, is seriously demoralized by a series of four successive shocks: first, the sudden death of his beloved father, who was in the prime of life; next, the precipitate marriage of his mother to a man he has always detested; then the devastating news that his father was murdered by that very man, together with an adjuration to perform a duty of revenge; finally, Ophelia's total rejection of him, when she refuses to see him and sends back all his letters unopened, with no explanation, at the very moment of his greatest emotional vulnerability.

So there are short answers to the pressing questions: Hamlet does delay, but no more than is reasonable for a man faced with so daunting and repugnant a task; Hamlet does decide to feign insanity as a strategy for gulling Claudius, but almost immediately diverts it to other, more personal, uses and ceases to care whether it is working as he originally planned; Hamlet is never insane and never in danger of going insane, but does experience feelings that threaten to tear him apart emotionally and which, if they were to manifest themselves publicly, would impede his purposes. In situations of emotional eruption, his reputation for insanity is especially handy.

The postmodernists have told us, correctly for once, that a text is made of words. *Hamlet* is a theatrical artefact, and what matters most is not how the character of Hamlet might score on the Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory but how he functions in a drama that is the two or three hours traffic of our stage. Shakespeare

was habitually hasty in the production of acting properties for a company whose success was exactly correlated with box-office receipts; nonetheless, he did create a believable personage whose motives make sense to all but a handful of academic loons, especially when we see the play performed. The really key findings, then, are these: the audience takes note of Hamlet's delay only when he does, and is unaware of any hesitancy in him that could be deemed pathological; the audience enjoys the feigned insanity when Hamlet employs it to mock Polonius, toy with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, and enrage Claudius; the audience knows that, while Ophelia believes he is insane when he launches into the nunnery speech, and Gertrude when he kills Polonius, and a few bystanders when he grapples with Laertes over the grave of Ophelia, he is on those occasions in his right mind but highly perturbed.

But perhaps a mystery does remain. Why have commentators ginned up a problem to solve where none exists? And what accounts for the extraordinary reputation of this work over the past four centuries?

From the beginning, the scholars who have puzzled over the play have labored under a serious disadvantage: the play having established itself in the public mind as the greatest of all time, they have felt obligated to pore over it in the privacy of their studies, pausing at every line, so that the drama as a whole loses the name of action. Questions that never arise in an audience during a performance pose themselves to these close readers.

But I will further aver, at the risk of flippancy, that the commentators are almost all too old to understand the play. Hamlet is a young man, and the scholars seem one and all to have forgotten their own youthful days.

I am only too aware of the gravedigger's speech that meticulously fixes Hamlet's age as exactly thirty years old. But no matter how we explain that passage or explain it away, every audience perceives the hero as younger than that – his intellect and wit are prodigious, but his emotions are closer to those of adolescence and his feelings for Ophelia have the blush of first love about them.

We are accustomed to flaws in Shakespeare's plays that seem to proceed from hasty composition, and can imagine that we have here another instance of his carelessly preserving an element from an earlier version of the story; but it is disconcerting that he seems to have taken great pains to insist upon the incongruity. My own feeble guess at the explanation is that Shakespeare is once again playing his favorite game of time-compression. It is characteristic of Shakespeare always to pile event on event in an accelerating tempo. In *King Lear*, the French army lands at Dover and takes the field of battle before word of the old king's distress has had time to cross the English channel. The action of *Macbeth* seems to take place over the course of a few weeks and *Othello* in four days and even shorter. In the oldest versions of the Hamlet story, the action is spread over many years. Now clearly the action of *Hamlet* from the appearance of the ghost through the departure for England takes only a couple of months. During these scenes, Hamlet's age must be compatible with his

being a student at Wittenberg. Please ignore those critics who move heaven and earth to justify the student status of a man of 30. In the Middle Ages, 30 is almost past your prime – a "soldier, courtier, and scholar" will by that milestone have already fought in several wars, the last one as commanding general, and his wife will have borne several children. In any case, the Hamlet of the first half of the play is a student in love with a very young girl; but in the last act, he speaks always as a man of accumulated wisdom and perspective, as might befit a man of . . . 30 or so. The simplest solution to the conundrum is to picture the lapse of several years between the murder of Hamlet's father and the consummation of Hamlet's revenge – in keeping with the original story. That this explanation is defeated by Shakespeare's play taken literally is patent; so we have another instance of an undigested remnant of the older material unsettling our interpretation. But again, the disturbance occurs only in a scholar reading the play in the study, not in an audience viewing a live performance.

Many critics also show their age, or their forgetfulness of their youth, in their finding Hamlet's demoralization at the start of the play hard to fathom. T. S. Eliot was not alone in arguing that Hamlet's emotion is excessive because the external facts about the death of his father and the remarriage of his mother do not add up to an "objective correlative" that immediately evokes Hamlet's emotional state in the viewer. Gertrude in her behavior and personality, says Eliot, is not "an adequate equivalent" for Hamlet's disgust with her. Perhaps Eliot can be forgiven for not knowing what most of us know after a couple of generations of no-fault divorce and the so-called sexual

revolution: half of American children now watch powerlessly as their parents separate and resume dating; and many are eventually forced into the "blended families" that result when second marriages follow upon middle-aged courtship. But it is difficult not to convict Eliot of a colossal failure of imagination. In Tom Stoppard's play *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, the two feckless anti-heroes practice how to "glean what afflicts" Hamlet before their first meeting with him. Guildenstern takes the role of Hamlet and Rosencrantz questions him, ending on this note:

ROSENCRANTZ: To sum up: your father, whom you love, dies, you are his heir, you come back to find that hardly was the corpse cold before his younger brother popped onto his throne and into his sheets, thereby offending both legal and natural practice. Now why exactly are you behaving in this extraordinary manner?

This line is a guaranteed laugh in performance, indicating that where Eliot is baffled, the audience of ordinary theatergoers is comprehending. But it is so much worse than Rosencrantz knows: Hamlet has, from his earliest years, always found this uncle to be abhorrent, adding repugnance to his deep grief; he has since learned that this uncle *murdered* his father, converting his loathing to utmost hatred but at the same time placing upon him an almost intolerable burden of retribution; and at the moment of maximum trauma, Hamlet's girlfriend – I think the text would almost justify me in calling her his fiancée – not only returns all his letters to her unopened, but refuses to admit him to her presence for any sort of explanation. This last factor seems to be perennially underestimated by our middle-aged critics, if not altogether overlooked,

perhaps in part because we onlookers know very well that she still loves him, and in part because Ophelia is always portrayed sympathetically. (She was played by a boy at the Globe, but in modern productions Ophelia is always played by a young actress of exceptional beauty.) But Hamlet has no idea why she suddenly will have nothing to do with him, and can only take it in the most devastating way. However, if he *did* know the reason – and the text indicates that he guesses it in time – he might have been even more demoralized. Should not he, and we, have assumed that a girl with any pluck would have run to him immediately? "Sweet Hamlet, tell me how we'll meet in secret; I'll not obey my father." It is further evidence of Hamlet's inexperience that he so badly overrates the value of this china doll, whose outstanding trait, besides a pretty face and figure, is docility – a docility that conduces to her ultimate ruin.

But, say the professors, Hamlet *said* that he would sweep to his revenge. Criticism like this makes me wonder if the purveyors of it know any actual human beings. Perhaps, however, my barbs at them originate in envy: unlike me, they have clearly never been dispirited for so much as a day in their lives. Hamlet, in ordinary language, is traumatized. In today's world, many therapists, hearing his situation, would diagnose him as suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder without bothering to check the intake sheet for his symptoms, and write three prescriptions to elevate his mood, diminish his anxiety, and help him sleep.

Hamlet may be, as Bloom says, "vastly intelligent," but he is also a young man who has lost his father and watched his mother dote upon a hated step-father; and on

top of that, his sweetheart has dumped him. This situation has always resonated with ordinary theatergoers; and high school students, half of them living with step-parents and all of them nearer the age of the protagonist than are the academic commentators, have found Hamlet easier to understand than most other Shakespearean heroes. Indeed, it is a salutary experience to teach *Hamlet* to high school seniors – as I have done. They have to be browbeaten into seeing any difficulties at all. But after taking my word for the perplexity of the commentators, my students applied themselves to this set of posers: Granted that Hamlet puts on an "antic disposition," most amusingly with Polonius, and at times with the King and with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, is he feigning insanity when he (1) suddenly appears before Ophelia in her private apartment, enacts the conventional gestural language of the heartbroken lover, and retires without a word; (2) rates Ophelia up and down and witheringly orders her to go to a nunnery; and (3) leaps into Ophelia's grave, wrestles with Laertes, and then apologizes for having shot his arrow over his house and hurt his brother? The students see easily that Hamlet is sincere on all three of these occasions, using his *reputation* for insanity as a screen that allows him to vent his own real feelings. Besides the dotard Polonius, it is really only his mother who finds Hamlet mad, when he accosts her in her bedroom. This scene does not even make the list: Hamlet's behavior with her then – impassioned, excessive, feeding on itself – is inflamed but hardly psychotic. This unexceptionable reading of it gives the key to his state of mind in the other three scenes – overwrought but eminently in his right mind.

In the first, where Hamlet seems to take a sorrowful leave from Ophelia, his behavior accords perfectly with that of a sane man who feels bereft of a woman's love, and is explicable as his authentic reaction to her having rejected all his attempts to communicate with her. (A familiar "proof" that Hamlet is playacting here is based on the argument that these are highly conventional "signs" that construct the stereotype of the disappointed lover. A man as imaginative as Hamlet, it is implied, would show his genuine emotion in some original and arresting way; so if he here resembles a stock figure running through the repertoire of familiar lovelorn gestures, he must be role-playing. But the conventional signs of speechless misery and disordered dress are not games people play, but arise naturally out of the distracted and oppressive state of mind that would naturally characterize anyone who has been, with no warning and no explanation, rejected by a loved one. Hamlet has just enough energy to find his way out of doors but not enough to circumambulate *and* to see to his attire. Here we have a misunderstanding not only of Hamlet on stage but of people in real life. In our most compelling moments – the birth of our children, the death of our parents, the revelation of a lover's unsuspected betrayal – we are tongue-tied and resemble each other in our common humanity. To strike off brilliant epithets or to adopt behaviors never before seen in their novelty and extravagance *would* be "actions that a man might play" and thus would indicate pretense much more convincingly than a demeanor that is universally recognized by others as signifying the appropriate emotion. For instance, when he mourns his father, Hamlet says that the true state of his suffering is within, and

"passeth show." Nonetheless, he adopts "the trappings and the suits of woe" that are the conventional signs of bereavement. I await the precocious critic who will "discover" that Hamlet, so preternaturally alert, has divined the truth of his father's murder before the play starts and is *already* feigning at his first appearance.)

The nunnery scene is a harder test, but adolescents who are daily riven by the pangs of disprized love have no difficulty in understanding why Hamlet lashes out at Ophelia. The possibility that Hamlet veers toward actual madness – that it can be dangerous to play with insanity when you are already under a great deal of mental and emotional strain – is interesting to students who ride emotional roller coasters and tend to have an inveterately romantic streak; nonetheless, here too they see the right answer with a minimum of effort.

Again, when Hamlet jumps in Ophelia's grave, he is distraught but not crazy. And when he apologizes to Laertes for offenses committed during his "madness" – perhaps the hardest case for those who deny that he ever crosses the line into insanity – he is, once again, sincere but also availing himself of the protective cover provided by his reputation for madness. In the whirlwind of his passion, he has done things he regrets – for instance, impulsively stabbing through the arras in the hope that he is killing the king, and instead dispatching his friend's father. His alternating bouts of near-mania and melancholia, instigated by his demoralization, have had the practical effect of true madness – they have caused him to shoot the arrow over his house and hurt his brother. Hamlet can sincerely disclaim any intent to hurt Laertes and honestly

state that he feels that these past actions have hurt himself and so made him of the faction that was wronged. If we had only this speech by which to judge Hamlet, we might accuse him of artfulness and legalism. But the rest of the play makes nonsense of any such reading and warrants us in accepting the genuineness of Hamlet's remorse. If it seems unmanly to us for him to shuffle off the responsibility for his actions on his madness, perhaps we are the legalistic party. It is the action of King Claudius – adulterer, murderer, and usurper – that has set in motion the events that wipe out the entire family line of Polonius.

What distinguishes my interpretation of *Hamlet* is its ordinariness. One of my working premises has been that a play this popular in all ages and in most countries is not a gnostic text to be deciphered by ivory tower intellectuals. *Hamlet* is a fairly simple play. The protagonist admittedly has an intellectual turn of mind and an amazing gift for putting things, but he is someone we can all relate to. He is psychologically fraught, but understandably so given his circumstances. His changes of mood are dizzying but not unintelligible. His decision to put on an antic disposition leads to several interesting scenes that unfailingly draw in the audience – some are comically entertaining, when he abuses Polonius and discomfits the King and his spies, and others are more complex and provocative, where, under the cover of his "madness," he is able to relieve his pent-up feelings without fear that he will give away too much about them. His "performances" are varied, no two alike. Some are pure feigning, but in the

more arresting ones, he "acts out" his real feelings, blurring the line, not between sanity and insanity, but between performing an emotion and authentically feeling it – he starts out playing a role, but then the role takes over. He is moreover a character who, although sometimes engendering laughter in the audience by his antics, more often, like Falstaff, displays actual wit in his interactions with other characters. He is humorous and philosophical without being the "type" of the wag or pedant. He was surely, when he was invented, the most complex character that had ever been created for the stage; and he probably still is. But while his behavior is gratifyingly multifarious and unpredictable, it is never opaque. The groundlings then and newcomers to Shakespeare now have no difficulty following the plot and grasping Hamlet's motivations. Play and protagonist keep everyone involved from beginning to end. And the particular glory of *Hamlet* resides where it ever has, and where even the dullest critics have found it: in the incomparable language. The play fulfills the generic requirements of the most formulaic revenge tragedy while serving up a cornucopia of quotable lines that has never been rivaled by any other play or poem. In a straightforward presentation, it never fails to please; but we have the over-stimulated critics to thank for the embarrassing Hamlets we have seen these last one hundred years – some passive and paralyzed, some petulant, some prodromal, and some who are the thing that is rotten in Denmark. As Verdi said, "Let us return to the old days, and that will be progress." In this case, we will need to turn the clock back to a date before that fateful year of 1736.