

Shakespeare and Psychoanalytic Theory

Reviewed by Richard M. Waugaman

Shakespeare and Psychoanalytic Theory. by Carolyn E. Brown, London: Bloomsbury, 2015.

One might form the overall impression from this book that psychoanalytic Shakespeareans tend to begin with one or another psychoanalytic theory, then find ways to apply it to Shakespeare's plays. To her credit, Carolyn E. Brown herself recognizes this risk. Such reductionism is a risk with all theory-driven approaches to Shakespeare. Psychoanalysts lessen analogous risks in their clinical work by allowing the patient's material to shape the analyst's interpretations, rather than blindly imposing one theory or another on the clinical data. In the case of Shakespeare, we must be faithful to the text.

We can also turn to Shakespeare's psychological genius to discover new insights into the mind, that may have been overlooked by psychoanalytic theory. Shakespeare has anticipated insights that later came from the psychoanalytic study of couples, families, and groups. As an example, scholars have discovered that the more closely Shakespeare's text is read (especially in the *Sonnets*), the more hidden layers of meaning are unlocked. Freud focused on the child's oedipal conflicts, downplaying the "Laius complex" of the father, whereas Shakespeare forces us to confront an overtly incestuous father in *Pericles*. Shakespeare also demonstrates an awareness with what are now considered our multiple, normative self states.

In explaining the recent turn away from Freud in Shakespeare studies, Brown lists several attacks on his theory in general, and his approach to Shakespeare in particular. Some scholars consider it improper to view literary characters as comparable to real people. This is ironic, considering the widespread agreement that Shakespeare's characters come close to literary perfection, in their verisimilitude. One suspects there may be a "turf" aspect to this criticism of Freud, since psychoanalysts have something to say about real people, and literary theorists may not want us encroaching on their territory.

Brown writes that "Shakespearean psychoanalytic criticism burgeoned in the 1980s. But it experienced a set-back in 1986 when Stephen Greenblatt published an essay¹ that posits the Renaissance view of identity differs from that of psychoanalytic theory" (69). However, Greenblatt begins with the clarification that "I do not propose that we abandon the attempts at psychologically deep readings of Renaissance texts" (Greenblatt, 221). And Brown notes that, following Greenblatt's essay, many studies

“set out to prove that the early modern period and its literature share attitudes consistent with those of psychoanalytic theory” (91).

Brown defends psychoanalysis from Greenblatt’s critique, at length. She cites the value of Freud’s elucidation of characters’ unconscious conflicts and motives. She says that many current Shakespeare scholars, such as Carol Neely, show that psychological approaches to Shakespeare’s works are still valid. After reviewing numerous refutations of Greenblatt’s essay, she concludes that they offer “solid, tangible proof for a close connection between psychoanalysis and...Shakespeare” (106). Brown might have added that Freud was building on the genius of creative writers, especially Shakespeare. Other writers have not always received adequate credit for their penetrating psychological insights. George Eliot, for example, was especially astute about the unconscious mind – she refers to the “unconscious” dozens of times in her novels, often in the psychoanalytic sense of the word as the dynamic unconscious, not merely in its earlier sense of “unaware.” Brown further explains that psychoanalytic readings of Shakespeare find his characters so life-like that it is legitimate to speculate about their earlier lives, based on the text. Some Shakespeare scholars condemn this, as they do efforts to learn more about the author (more on the author later).

According to Brown, Cynthia Marshall refutes Greenblatt in an especially interesting way, “by suggesting the birth of individualism in the Renaissance was not as smooth or complete as he has argued” (103). Marshall “examines some of the literary instances of reversion [from individualism] that ‘shattered’ rather than affirmed selfhood” (104). She believes that Shakespeare raised theatrical sadomasochism to new heights. Moments such as the nearly unbearable on-stage blinding of Gloucester are, Marshall posits, sadistically gratifying when the audience can identify with the perpetrators. Borrowing from Lacan, she maintains that such moments lead the audience’s sense of identity to be “pleasurably shattered” (104). Insofar as she is correct, perhaps this results from the emergence of usually dissociated sadomasochistic self states in the audience.

The final third of the book shifts from the literature review of the earlier chapters, to

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Brown's original work. She presents her astute commentary on *All's Well that Ends Well*, sensitively applying psychoanalytic thinking to Helena's sexualized relationship with her father, and its displacement onto Bertram. Her close reading of the text parallels close listening in clinical psychoanalysis. She returns to classical psychoanalytic observations, and makes rich use of them in understanding Shakespeare. For example, she cites Freud's observations about the splitting of consciousness and of personal identity after sexual abuse, and she applies these concepts to Helena's contradictory behavior. Brown comes close to our current understanding of dissociative identity disorder – e.g., when she writes that Helena “switches” between her different “side[s]” (127).

In her chapter on *Romeo and Juliet*, Brown seems to create a false dichotomy between hetero- and homosexuality. She calls it “tragic” (163) that scholars have overlooked the homosexual themes in this play, while she herself overlooks the role of bisexuality in it. As a result, she sees heterosexuality in Romeo and Mercutio solely as a “reaction formation” against homoerotic impulses, rather than part of a bisexual mixture of genuinely heterosexual and genuinely homosexual feelings. Whatever validity Brown's thesis may have, she damages her credibility by taking her ideas too far. Literary theory seems vulnerable to such misreadings, based on over-emphasis of only one aspect of a text in order to promote the author's favored theory. Freud's discovery of over-determination can protect us from mistaking a part for the whole.

In her brief epilogue, Brown emphasizes the compatibility of psychoanalysis with many other literary theories. She hopes Shakespeare's female characters will become better understood, as we deepen our understanding of Shakespeare's complex attitudes toward women. Brown ends on an optimistic note, saying she believes “psychoanalytic theory will continue to be at the forefront of Shakespearean studies” (167).

Finally, I come to a surprising feature of this book. Its author, despite her impressive knowledge of Freud's views on Shakespeare's works, seems naively unaware of Freud's pivotal opinion on Shakespeare's identity. For example, she writes that Freud “believes Hamlet reflects Shakespeare's coming to terms with his father's and his son's deaths” (18). This was an opinion that Freud explicitly repudiated, once he accepted the 1920 theory that Shakespeare was the pen name of Edward de Vere. Much of the book becomes more plausible only when it is connected with Freud's conclusion that de Vere was the actual author. For example, Brown credits Otto Rank with connecting Hamlet's Oedipus conflicts with Polonius as a father figure, who blocks Hamlet's interest in Polonius's daughter Ophelia. The prototype for Polonius was none other than de Vere's “father figure” – his guardian William Cecil, after his father died when de Vere was twelve, and de Vere's father-in-law after he married Cecil's daughter Anne. The original name for Polonius was “Corambis,” a mocking allusion to Cecil's motto “Cor unum, via una.”²²

Brown's omission of Freud's deeply held conviction that Edward de Vere wrote the Shakespeare canon is a bit like the Catholic Church writing a survey of the influence of Galileo, while omitting his heliocentric theory – or the British government writing a study of George Washington that fails to mention that he led the Colonial forces against Britain in the Revolutionary War. This omission exemplifies the covertly anti-intellectual implications of the widespread scholarly taboo against acknowledging challenges to the Stratfordian authorship theory.

This groupthink-generated taboo may help explain the attacks on psychobiography that Brown describes in Shakespeare scholarship, even when that scholarship is heavily influenced by psychoanalysis. It is difficult for clinical psychoanalysts to imagine that any human activity can be divorced from the psychology of the protagonists. Yet Shakespeare scholars need to divorce the works of Shakespeare from the life of the Stratford merchant who they insist is their author. Among their many blind spots is their apparent unawareness that a psychobiographical approach exposes the weakness of their authorship theory. When critics such as C.L. Barber try to link the Shakespeare canon with the life of the Stratford merchant, the results are naturally unconvincing. Yet Barber and R.P. Wheeler hit the nail on the head when they noted that Shakespeare himself, like Hamlet, uses “his art for theatrical aggression” (55). But they fail to explain how the Stratford merchant could possibly have gotten away with that, in an era that regularly punished playwrights for offending state power in their plays. Freud introduced the concept of psychic determinism,³ and his conviction that de Vere wrote Shakespeare's works flows naturally from abundant evidence that de Vere's life experiences fit the literary works like Cinderella's foot fits her glass slipper. By contrast, Stratfordians resemble Cinderella's step-sisters when they try to get the works to fit their authorship candidate, so they wisely, if disingenuously, attack the genre of psychobiography itself.

Related to attacks on psychobiography are attacks on psychoanalytic studies that treat Shakespeare's characters as though they are actual people. Of course they are fictions. But they are so life-like that it is indeed fruitful to assume the author imbued them with the psychological conflicts of actual people. Stratfordian Shakespeare scholars may have a shared unconscious wish that the author himself would be more fictive than real; if so, denying his characters are real would be a displacement from this unconscious fantasy. It is as though they are pleading, “Pay no attention to the man behind the curtain.” Brown says that it is now literary scholars, not psychoanalysts, who are writing most psychoanalytic Shakespearean studies, and that they are more eclectic in their use of a variety of analytic theories. Allegedly, they are willing to compare Shakespeare's characters with real people, but they “do not speculate about the shadowy childhoods of Shakespeare's characters when the texts make no mention of them” (49). But what psychoanalyst would refrain from speculating about a patient's childhood, even if the patient made “no mention” of it?

Let me return to Greenblatt's 1986 critique of psychoanalytic Shakespearean studies. Greenblatt's influential chapter focuses on mistaken identity – from the story of Martin Guerre, to mistaken identity in Shakespeare's works. Greenblatt is silent about the fact that the traditional authorship theory involves yet another case of mistaken identity. However, he does emphasize that Renaissance notions of identity were closely linked with a person's property – “purse and person are here inextricably linked” (220). As they certainly were, we might add, for noblemen such as Edward de Vere, whose very title of “Earl of Oxford” alluded to his hereditary property. Greenblatt even admits that “precisely this interest [in identity and property] is voiced, tested, and deepened throughout Shakespeare's career . . . I think property may be closer to the wellsprings of the Shakespearean conception of identity than we imagine” (220). If Greenblatt is correct, it is inadvertently yet another powerful argument for de Vere's authorship of the works of Shakespeare, since he spent his adult life in trying to protect his ownership of the 368 estates he inherited on the death of his father when he was twelve, from a predatory wardship system that, with Queen Elizabeth's tacit consent, robbed him of much of his inheritance.⁴ It would thus be natural for de Vere to link identity with property.

I suspect that the turn away from psychoanalytic approaches to Shakespeare was also influenced by Freud's role in promoting skepticism as to the traditional theory of Shakespeare's identity. In 1984, a widely reviewed book by Charlton Ogburn, Jr.⁵ revived interest in Freud's belief that Edward de Vere wrote under the pen name William Shakespeare. Ogburn's book received a surprisingly even-handed review in the *Shakespeare Quarterly*. That review was written by Richmond Crinkley, a former staff member of the Folger Shakespeare Library.⁶ Crinkley did not endorse the Oxfordian authorship theory, yet he was sharply critical of the orthodox refusal to consider that theory on its merits. Crinkley characterized that stance as showing “a contempt for dissenters that was as mean-spirited as it was loudly trumpeted” (515): “I was enormously surprised at what can only be described as the viciousness toward anti-Stratfordian sentiments expressed by so many otherwise rational and courteous scholars. In its extreme forms, the hatred of unorthodoxy was like some bizarre mutant racism” (518). For example, the prominent Shakespeare scholar Gary Taylor, when interviewed by the *Times* of London, defended having compared me with Holocaust deniers. Gail Kern Paster, former Director of the Folger Shakespeare Library, often compares authorship skeptics with creation scientists, who deny evolution.

Russ McDonald offers another perspective on Shakespeare criticism in the 1980s. He said the rise of New Historicism led to an unfortunate neglect of the texts themselves – “With the rise of theory in the 1980s, Shakespeare studies began to suffer from the tyranny of [historical] context. . . To look too closely at the literary text was [allegedly] ‘to fetishize’ it, and at least for a decade it was impossible to publish anything that involved close attention to poetry [which is McDonald's own approach].”⁷ Many psychoanalysts remain unaware that Freud was a post-Stratfordian. Not long

before his death in 2016, Jerome Oremland was gracious enough to send me the English translation of an unpublished 1935 letter by Sigmund Freud, containing Freud's only known statement of unequivocal support for the 1920 theory that Shakespeare was the pen name of Edward de Vere, Earl of Oxford. The letter was written to Percy Allen, a supporter of that theory, which may be the reason that Freud felt free to express his opinion so decisively. After stating that *King Lear* can "only be understood psychologically on the assumption that Oxford is the author," Freud wrote, "I believe Edward de Vere to have been the creator of all the other genuine Shakespeare plays."⁸ Perceptively, Freud added this comment about the authorship debate, "Very strict scrutiny is necessary, and one must keep one's critical faculties alive; one must be ready to meet sharp criticism, and to work against one's own inclinations" (emphasis added). Analysts tend to ignore Freud's authorship opinion, and they instead defer to the Shakespeare scholars, who (like Brown) are often silent on this pivotal matter.

In his important 1983 article on *Hamlet*,⁹ Oremland seems unaware that Freud eventually repudiated his earlier theory that Hamlet was influenced by the death of Shakspeare's father. Oremland was generous in sharing Freud's letter. A year before he sent it to me, he reacted to my review of the Oxfordian documentary film *Last Will. & Testament in The American Psychoanalyst*.¹⁰ He wrote to the film column's editor, Bruce Sklarew,¹¹ that Freud did not explain why he changed his mind about Shakespeare's identity. Oremland was apparently unaware of the sizeable literature on this topic. Oremland said, "[Freud's] unexplained switch [in his opinion about who wrote Shakespeare] poses a problem, for in my writing and lecturing on creativity, I often point to the discussion of *Hamlet* . . . in [Freud's *The Interpretation of Dreams*] as the beginning of the psychoanalytic understanding of the role of mourning in creativity" (email, April 9, 2015). Oremland is commendably candid about what must have been a source of cognitive dissonance for him: Oremland's valuable work on the role of mourning in creativity was influenced by Freud's earlier belief that the death of Shakspeare's father shaped *Hamlet*; but Oremland personally owned the only known letter in which Freud unequivocally states that he no longer believes the merchant of Stratford wrote the Shakespeare canon. Oremland's dilemma is an especially clear example of the conflict many analysts face in encountering Freud's controversial authorship opinion.

Freud's authorship opinion was profoundly influenced by J. Thomas Looney's 1920 book.¹² Ruth Mack Brunswick gave him this book, and Freud read it twice, then recommended it enthusiastically to his friends. Looney developed a list of attributes of the author through a close study of the works, then read biographies of Elizabethan writers, before concluding the best match was with Edward de Vere. Brown cites Joel Fineman's opinion that Shakespeare suffered from "defensive gynophobia" (49). As with the characteristics Looney examined, this matches de Vere much more than it matches the scanty evidence about Stratford's William Shakspeare.

Brown's book suffers from her blind spot about the authorship question – she misses frequent opportunities to make salient connections with de Vere as the real author. For example, many critics highlight Shakespeare's preoccupation with powerful women (e.g., Wheeler, on p. 53). The most powerful woman in Elizabethan England, the queen herself, was an important figure in de Vere's life, starting in his childhood. As a young man, he was one of her favorite courtiers, and his standing as the best courtier poet of the early years of her reign no doubt enhanced his stature in her eyes. She also turned against him repeatedly, as when she allowed other favorites to steal much of his wealth in his adolescence, and when she imprisoned him in the Tower after he impregnated one of her ladies in waiting. Brown says that one scholar, Valerie Traub, views *As You Like It* as merging the heterosexual with the homoerotic. This is precisely what one might expect from a bisexual author such as de Vere.

Another weakness of Brown's book is that it, like Shakespearean scholarship in general, focuses on the plays to the relative neglect of his poetry. His long poems, *Venus and Adonis* and *Rape of Lucrece*, outsold his plays in the late 16th century. The former gets two sentences, and the latter is scarcely mentioned at all. The *Sonnets* fare only slightly better. Yet they are the most autobiographical of all Shakespeare's works, so they naturally offer numerous connections with the life of Edward de Vere.

Still, I strongly recommend this book to anyone who wants a concise review of worthwhile contributions that psychoanalysts as well as psychoanalytically informed scholars have made to our understanding of the magnificent literary works of Shakespeare.

Notes

- 1 “Psychoanalysis and Renaissance Culture.” In Patricia Parker and David Quint (eds., 1986), *Literary Theory/Renaissance Texts*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, pp. 210-224.
- 2 Whereas Burghley’s motto meant “One heart, one way,” “Corambis” suggests double-hearted, or duplicitous.
- 3 “A central hypothesis of psychoanalysis that holds that nothing in the mind is arbitrary or undetermined; all psychic acts and events have meanings and causes; all are determined by and can be understood in terms of the psychic events that came before them” (Burness E. Moore and Bernard D. Fine, eds, *Psychoanalytic Terms and Concepts*, New Haven: Yale University Press, p. 150).
- 4 See Nina Green (2009). “The Fall of the House of Oxford,” *Brief Chronicles* 1: 41-95.
- 5 Ogburn (1984). *The Mysterious William Shakespeare*. McLean, VA: EPM Publications.
- 6 Richmond Crinkley (1985). “New perspectives on the authorship question.” *Shakespeare Quarterly* 36: 515-522.
- 7 M.P. Jensen (2016). Talking books with Russ McDonald. *Shakespeare Newsletter* 65: 75-81 (quotation on p. 78).
- 8 Richard M. Waugaman (2017), “An Unpublished Letter by Sigmund Freud on the Shakespeare Authorship Question.” *Scandinavian Review of Psychoanalysis*, 39: 148-151.
- 9 Oremland (1983). Death and transformation in Hamlet. *Psychoanal. Inq.* 3: 485-512.
- 10 Waugaman (2015). “The Tempest,” *The American Psychoanalyst*. 49:17, 22-23.
- 11 Oremland asked Sklarew to share his email with me.
- 12 Looney (1920). “*Shakespeare*” *Identified*. New York: Frederick A. Stokes, 1920.