

Shakespeare's *Missing* Personality

Shakespeare's Personality

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I no longer believe that William Shakespeare the actor from Stratford was the author of the works that have been ascribed to him...

—Sigmund Freud, *Autobiographical Study*¹

William Kerrigan, in his essay in *Shakespeare's Personality*, voices a minority opinion: "The absence of personality is a bad omen for most human pursuits, and literary criticism is particularly in need of personality" (175). This critique of deconstructionism applies, perhaps with unintended irony, to the specific personality missing from this book. But unlike Kerrigan, the editors express no anxiety over the disappearance of the subject proclaimed in the book's title: "It is our fortune, good or bad, to complete this book on Shakespeare's personality at a moment in literary criticism when its 'subject' (in several senses) has disappeared" (1). As in advance reports of the death of Mark Twain, however, some readers may suspect exaggeration. Shakespeare's personality has not really disappeared; it has been fractured into a myriad of competing, sometimes contradictory personalities.

So it is a pleasant surprise to find that Shakespeare is actually diagnosed here not as schizophrenic, but merely neurotic, by the contributors to this volume. For instance, Barber and Wheeler's essay, "Shakespeare and the Rising Middle Class," employs Kohut's (1971) theory of "object hunger" to explain Shakespeare's creative genius.

Kohut's theory describes how the ego is consolidated from the gradual incorporation of parental objects which meet the basic needs for physical security and nurturance of the developing infant. The failure of parental objects, however, can result in a traumatic loss to the psyche, causing it to "remain fixated on an archaic self-object" (Kohut 1971, 45). Barber and Wheeler suggest, therefore, that the rich diversity of Shakespeare's field of linguistic objects can be clinically explained as a result of the poet's adolescent "object hunger" incurred through the decline of his father's business fortunes in the late 1570s and '80s. This trauma resulted in an "intense

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form of object hunger'...fulfilled in the dramatist's power to create others' (27).

Unfortunately Kohut's theory requires extensive modification before it can usefully be applied to the biographical facts in question: "John Shakespeare's decline, which seems to have coincided with his son's early adolescent years, would not have presented the kind of 'very early traumatic experiences' with which Kohut is most concerned" (26). The adolescent Shakespeare's hunger, in other words, was neither "early" nor decisively traumatic.

Even more surprising, Kohut's theory was not designed, as these authors recognize, to explain creative genius; instead Kohut wanted to account for the formation of *the addictive personality*, which, because of its fixation on an inadequate archaic object,

will throughout life *be dependent on* certain objects...they are not objects (in the psychological sense of the term) since they are not loved or admired for their attributes, and *the actual features of their personalities, and their actions, are only dimly recognized*. (Kohut 1971, 45; emphasis added).

The extent to which this model of object hunger is at variance with the biographical conjectures it is expected to substantiate in this essay scarcely requires emphasis. An author with the largest vocabulary in the history of English, who coined some 800 new English words from Latin roots, who created some of the most enduring and fully developed literary characters in the history of human literature, who is the prototype of literary genius familiar with the technical language of law, music, biology, and medicine, is explained as a personality addicted to an inadequate archaic object and unable to perceive the phenomenal attributes of a varied world of social objects.

Barber and Wheeler ask us to believe that the adolescent Shakespeare, who married Anne Hathaway in 1582, was sufficiently troubled by his father's business failure to suffer an emotionally catastrophic blow which accounts for the foreboding sense of psychological torment expressed in *Hamlet*.

The theory, of course, says nothing at all about the figurative and dramatic structures of *Hamlet* or any other Shakespeare work. It merely posits—oxymoronically, it turns out—their compensatory superabundance. Many readers will fail to be convinced. The essay passes all-too-easily from an astonishingly romanticized view of rural life in Stratford to the tropical existentialism of Elsinore, over the improbable theoretical bridge of adolescent object hunger. On this journey we discover an abundance of rhetorical

objects of dubious ontological status that may be taken by some readers as indicating the continued viability of Kohut's theory. We read, for example, the following ingenious paragraph:

The action in *Hamlet* is determined by the violent dethronement and death of a father. But this father is first to be apprehended as a "goodly king" (I.2.186), strong majestic. As Shakespeare moves up, in social terms, beyond caste difference, to invest his creative powers in the son (Hamlet) who might inherit from such a father, he moves back, in terms of individual development, to the derivatives of the world of childhood, where such a figure would have been known and then lost. (27)

In these three sentences are tropical turns that should astonish the most empirical reader. The short transitional sentence between the play, *Hamlet*, and the Stratford "author" employs a citation to the play, complete with reference line number. Grammatical quibbles aside, a reader may notice the flaccid language employed in the sentence: "This father is first to be apprehended as a 'goodly king'." Apprehended by whom, the reader may ask. Turning to the cited text, the answer is evident: Horatio! Whose father are we talking about here, anyway? And whose son? It seems as if the ghost of Horatio has been introduced merely to get the authors back from Elsinore to Stratford again.

This is bad psychology and worse history. According to John Dover Wilson, in his classic criticism of the play, *What Happens in Hamlet?* (1928; 1956), "Hamlet is an English prince, the court of Elsinore is modeled upon the English court, and the Danish constitution that of England under the Virgin Queen" (1956, 28). But for Barber and Wheeler, Hamlet's court is alternately a butcher's shop in Stratford in 1580 and a modern psychiatrist's couch somewhere in middle-class, post-Protestant America. Such an effort to force Hamlet into the procrustean bed of a petty bourgeois profile yields an impoverished drama. Gone is the rich complexity of motive, plot, and language which distinguish Shakespeare's creation.

Gone is Wilson's cautionary interpretative stricture that "it is idle to embark upon dramatic interpretation of a play until one is sure what the characters are talking about...and what Shakespeare intended² to write" (12). Gone is Wilson's wisdom in insisting that "Hamlet is full of obscurities which have never been rightly explained," and his warning that those who dismiss these mysteries with facile explanations drawn from contemporary theoretical strictures that blind critics to historical realities, "sin against a primary canon of criticism" (15). But most absent of all is Hamlet's own literary and aristocratic personality, condemned to the margins of the stage

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in favor of a doubtful performance by a failed butcher's son.

The literary works which, according to Wilson's generation of critics, infuse Hamlet's personality with its own peculiar blend of aristocratic indecision and literary delinquency, are not mentioned in the essay. I refer in particular to Castiglione's *Courtier* and also *Cardanus' Comfort*, which Hardin Craig, among others, designated as the book Hamlet is intended to be holding in his hand at II.ii (198-202).

Also not mentioned in this essay is the well-developed tradition attesting to the allegorical characterization of William Cecil, Lord High Treasurer of England, as Polonius. This scholarship goes back to George Russell French (1869), who noted that

...except for names derived from historical sources nearly all Shakespeare's dramatis personæ are intended to have some resemblance to characters in his own day...the identity of language (in Polonius' advice to Laertes) is so close to Burleigh's advice to Robert that Shakespeare could not have hit upon it unless he had been acquainted with Burleigh's parental advice (cited in Miller, 430).

But instead of reflecting on the historical implications of such political satire in Shakespeare characterizations—by no means limited to Hamlet or to William Cecil—and what they suggest about the historical contours of contemporary Shakespeare scholarship, these writers psychoanalyze Hamlet until he, like Shakespeare, disappears altogether. They leave an impoverished and fragmentary drama lacking in narrative coherence or psychological plausibility. Like Shakespeare, our "new Hamlet" has a missing personality.

He is not plagued by religious doubts. He does not reflect on the ontological riddles of his "antic disposition." For him, art does not hold up the mirror to nature. It springs full blown, like Athena leaping from the brow of Zeus, from the imaginative projections of his critics and censors. As a representative of the rising middle class—object hunger aside—Hamlet's creator is quite well adjusted:

The son's response to John Shakespeare's spiritual last will may be writ large, however, in the almost complete absence, from his works, of religious resolutions of central dynamic stresses...the point of view his drama adopts never, in our judgment, involves religious eschatology (25).

While Hamlet's father haunts his son with Catholic conviction, "cut off in the blossoms of my sin, *Unbousled, unaneled*,³ no reckoning made, but sent to my account with all my imperfections on my head" (1.5.77), these

authors read a Shakespeare canon which "never...involves religious eschatology"! Shakespeare's denouement could not be more apparent.

Other essays in this book are more plausible, and consequently less provocative, than Barber and Wheeler's. Unfortunately, the historical and literary problems raised by the general editorial thrust of the book force an omission of any adequate treatment of numerous interesting questions raised in other essays. I will note a few brief highlights.

Shirlee Nelson Garner's essay on the "Myth of Women's Deception" isolates a number of important themes that recur in the Shakespeare canon concerning the apparent infidelity of female characters. She sees in Shakespeare's personality a developmental tendency, though never fully resolved, towards overcoming an initial isolation from, and distrust of, women. As he matured, Shakespeare became "able to understand men's psychic needs more clearly, [and] to portray women characters as more whole..." (150).

William Kerrigan discovers that Shakespeare's experience as an actor and a dramatist influenced his conception of strong characters as "plotters, schemers, disguisers..." for whom "illeism, self-reference in the third person, is a recurrent feature of their rhetoric" (175).

In what is perhaps the most persuasive and interesting essay in the book, Janet Adelman, exploring the importance of the theme of the "bed trick" in Shakespearean drama, links Garner's emphasis on the feminine imago to Kerrigan's focus on disguise. She concludes that the prominence of the bed trick in several Shakespeare plays "suggests the centrality of these issues [i.e., the way in which sexual power is conferred on the "ghostly" father through the "bed trick"] in Shakespeare's imagination." Adelman's psychological portrait of Shakespeare as a man plagued by doubts about parental legitimacy, far from gaining credence through the use of hypothetical biographical materials (such as those employed by Barber and Wheeler), does not mention the man from Stratford.

The titles of other essays, however, such as David Willbern's "What is Shakespeare?" and Barbara Freedman's "Misrecognizing Shakespeare," suggest a major contradiction that the editors fail to assess. How can a personality which is casually declared "missing" be so easily misrecognized? Willbern urges a fusion of the concepts of author and actor to explain Shakespeare's supreme genius through a literary unified field theory of "auctorship."

Citing lines long regarded as a non-Shakespearean editorial interpolation, Willbern asserts that Shakespeare "embodied the perfect merger of 'author's pen' and 'actors voice' (*Troilus and Cressida*, Pro. 24)" (230). Because of his historical and literary importance, Willbern asserts, Shakespeare's personality lends itself to monolithic idealization and flagrant mis-

recognition. The Shakespeare who, in a burst of narcissistic compensation in sonnet 121, writes “I am that I am,” is apotheosized in this essay. Deploying Lacan and Foucault, Willbern finds the author Shakespeare, whom Ben Jonson loved and admired “this side [of] idolatry,” has become the “primal patriarchal agent of authorship...a transcendent anonymity” (229) who can only be captured in the net of a new theoretical model promulgated in the University. Shakespeare is missing from the theater and missing from history. One thing that is certainly not missing in this book, however, is elaborate theoretical posturing. One gains the distinct impression that such posturing is designed—at least in some of the essays—to deflect attention from the embarrassing lack of documentation of Shakespeare’s life, which was recently underscored by Terry Eagleton’s (1991) observation that “we know as much about the historical Shakespeare as we do about the yeti.”

The contributors’ awareness of the history of Shakespeare scholarship, however, is an embarrassment. While Freedman conjectures at length on the psychological motives of Oxfordian critics, for example, she joins Willbern in glossing the historical record to put readers off the scent of real evidence. Instead of citing Freud on the subject of his Oxfordian convictions, Freedman cites Norman Holland (1966, 58)—and the citation, moreover, is erroneous.

This repetition of an initial error in essays more than twenty years apart, when the correct citation is widely available in any issue of the *Collected Works*, raises basic questions of methodology and the ethics of representation which must be addressed in evaluating the book’s role as an intentional intervention in contemporary discourse. In attempting in his classic 1966 book, *Shakespeare and Psychoanalysis*, to explain away Freud’s Oxfordian theory as an outgrowth of Freud’s unresolved transference, Holland altered the meaning of Freud’s original statement:

Freud noted, for example, in his Goethe prize essay the importance for all of us of affective relations with great men but noted, too, that such feelings—as toward a father—will be ambivalent: we will admire and emulate, but we will also resent. And *Freud’s phrasing* in his *last published words on authorship*, “ein grosser Unbekannter,” suggest that his own feelings toward Shakespeare were not devoid of such filial ambivalence. (Holland 1966, 58; emphasis added).

The quotation at issue may be found in the footnote on page 96 in the 1949 authorized translation of the *Outline of Psychoanalysis*, though Holland cites from the original German edition of 1940. As translated by Strachey in the authorized English edition, Freud’s “last published words” on the Earl

of Oxford read as follows:

The name "William Shakespeare" is most probably a pseudonym behind which lies concealed a great unknown. Edward de Vere, Earl of Oxford, a man who has been regarded as the author of Shakespeare's works, lost a beloved and admired father while he was still a boy, and completely repudiated his mother, who contracted a new marriage soon after her husband's death (Strachey trans., 96: note).

Freud expressed similar views over many years; his comments, assembled and edited by Ruth Loyd Miller (1975, vol. II, 264-273), along with copies of letters by his correspondents on the subject—prominently Arnold Zweig—are easily accessible to those interested in psychoanalytic criticism of Freud's views. Although Freud often kept his opinions in reserve, for reasons which can only be described as strategic, he was not a casual or uninformed Oxfordian. During the 1930s, Freud continued to read new books by other Oxfordians, such as Canon Gerald Rendall's *Shakespeare's Sonnets and Edward de Vere* (1930), a book he recommended (see Miller 1975, 268) for the fresh psychoanalytic light it shed on the Sonnets.

Although he tailored his public comments to underwrite the success of Ernst Jones' *Oedipus and Hamlet* (Feldman 1953), and to preserve the integrity of the psychoanalytic movement in its formative phases, Freud patiently and privately sustained his Oxfordian convictions over many years. Freud's correspondence with Arnold Zweig (Miller 1975) casts an intriguing light on the intersubjective dynamics of the authorship controversy. Zweig, confused by Freud's strict adherence to a historical methodology, concluded with a confused description of Oxford's influence on the Stratford Bard—between whom there is no historical evidence of contact. Oxford's influence, thought Zweig, must be considered

a decisive landmark for Shakespeare, more decisive than Goethe's entry into Schiller's orbit...certainly Oxford had a profound influence on Sh., indeed regenerated him as it were...he is made to vibrate...Even Shakespeare's aristocratic element is "begot" in this way...not inborn but implanted in him (Miller 1975, 270).

Freud responded to Zweig's disassociative projections with the genteel tolerance of Socrates on a couch with Alcibiades. Bronson Feldman, the only neo-Freudian critic to consider, rather than evade or actively suppress, the implications of Freud's position was, perhaps understandably, less forgiving:

Freud's opinions were greeted by his disciples with a silence that

would have been deadly had it not been so ridiculous. It is indeed edifying to observe the most voluble followers of the great critic of human nature presenting a spectacle of what he called “the aversion to learning anything new so characteristic of the scientist” (Feldman 1955, 116).

Freud’s last *unpublished* words on the subject appear in a 1938 letter to Looney, in which Freud expressed his high regard for “the author of a remarkable book, to which I owe my conviction about Shakespeare’s identity, as far as my judgment in the matter goes...” (Miller 1975, 273).

Since 1938, an accumulation of evidence, put forward most comprehensively by Charlton Ogburn Jr., Ruth Loyd Miller, and William Plumer Fowler, has borne out Looney’s concluding prophecy that “future enquiry is destined to furnish but an accumulating support to the solution here proposed” (cited in Fowler 1986, xix).

During the 1950s, Bronson Feldman (1953a, 1953b, 1955a, 1955b, 1956), elaborating on Freud’s psychoanalytic interest in the “great unknown,” Edward de Vere, became the only psychoanalytic critic to reflect perceptively on the politics of Freud’s adherence to the Oxfordian thesis, against the wishes of some of his most prominent followers and at the risk of jeopardizing the science of the mind which it was his central objective to establish (Feldman 1953a). Unlike other writers on this subject, Feldman’s historical sensibility and candor commend his articles to any student of the authorship controversy with an interest in the historical foreground of the present controversy. “We lay stone on stone,” Freud wrote to Robert Fleiss. But the Stratfordian mythos, wrote Feldman, proceeds to “transmute thought metaphysically, risking the absurd” (1966, 149). Shakespearean orthodoxy, Feldman insisted, has laid *its* foundations in the quicksands of metaphysical and logical absurdities and then tried to patch the cracks in the concrete with misrepresentations of the historical record.

It is disheartening to realize that Freud, like Shakespeare, has been removed from this hastily conceived and inadequately self-critical collection of essays by distinguished neo-Freudians. The genealogy of footnotes suggests that this absence is not a mistake but the result of an attempt—whether calculated or merely unconscious seems moot—to blunt the significance of Freud’s views.

True, Freud’s apostasy invokes historical, psychological, and epistemological questions that raise the specter of cognitive disequilibrium for the patrons of modern institutional power. His own interest in the transference between Oxford and King Lear (see Miller 1975, 268-269) suggests that Freud was able to see himself as a father who had something to pass on to his children: his Shakespeare was not the *sui generis*, Walter Mitty author

portrayed in the pages of this book. He was a raw human being—an impetuous, rebellious, brilliant, eccentric, generous but above all, *alienated* man—one commensurate with his literary creation.

In Freud's view, there was a domain of history—figured in the narratives of authentic lives—that could not be reduced to assumptions about infantile psychology, elided through editorial hubris, or contained by clinical labels deployed as spontaneous defenses against legitimate counterfactual claims about the texture of historical or literary worlds. The “old historicist” Professor Abel Lefranc (1918) agreed:

J'ai la conviction que toute personne dont le jugement est
reste libre en ce qui concerne le problème shakespearien,
connaîtra que les ancienne positions de la doctrine
traditionnelle ne sauraient être maintenues.⁴

Notes

¹ This statement, which continues, “since the publication of J. T. Looney's volume *Shakespeare Identified* (1920), I am almost convinced that in fact Edward de Vere, Earl of Oxford, is concealed behind this pseudonym,” was removed, with Freud's reluctant permission, from the 1935 English edition of *Autobiographical Study*. As Strachey notes, however, in footnote 1, p. 62-63 of the *Standard Edition* of the text, Freud remarked acidly that the offending phrase could remain in the American edition, because “the same sort of narcissistic defense need not be feared over there...”

² Although many contemporary critics correctly regard intentionality as a problematic concept, emphasizing the need to situate the intending ego within a dynamic historical and psychological field, I do not believe we can simply dispense with the concept. As Knapp and Michaels (1982, 1987) suggest, some notion of intentionality—whether localized in the author or in the wider play of the metastructural imperatives of society or history—is presupposed by all critical acts. Recent Renaissance critics—Patterson (1984) and Marcus (1988), for instance—express a cautious renewal of interest in the author's intentions.

³ Technical terms denoting Roman Catholic last rites. As Mutschmann and Wenterdsdorf (1952, 221-222) properly recognize, Shakespeare “lays great weight on receiving the sacrament of confession before death,” a rite necessary for the salvation of the soul in Shakespeare's theology.

⁴ “I have the same conviction as anyone whose judgment is still free in those matters concerning the Shakespearean problem, knowing that the ancient attitudes of the traditional doctrine can no longer be maintained.”

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