

Reviews

Harold Bloom and His Discontents

The Western Canon: The Books and Schools of the Ages
by Harold Bloom (Yale University Press, 1994)

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Back in the 1920s, the novelist Ben Hecht and his perpetually impecunious friend Maxwell Bodenheim, the poet, agreed to stage a literary debate for pay. Hecht and Bodenheim mounted the podium in front of a gathered crowd of literary devotees in Chicago. Mr. Hecht announced the subject of the debate: "People who attend literary debates are fools." Mr. Bodenheim stated that he would uphold the affirmative, pointed to the attentive audience and declared, "I rest my case." Mr. Hecht conceded and they rapidly vacated the premises to eat and drink well on the fee they had collected.

I found myself yearning for those simpler and gaudier, not to say more honest times, while wading through Harold Bloom's self-important, immodestly entitled and thick book: *The Western Canon: The Books and Schools of the Ages* (1994). This yearning became most poignant when Bloom diverted the main stream of his narrative to explain away Sigmund Freud's opinions on the Shakespeare authorship question. The betrayal of a master by a disciple is never a pretty sight. But when the disciple resorts to misrepresentations of fact and ponderous jokes at his master's expense, you seem to be witnessing that decline in literature, criticism and scholarship that Bloom pretends to oppose.

Harold Bloom has established for himself a pleasant and profitable line of criticism. He accuses authors of the critic's occupational disease—anxieties over literary influence. Even his name for his imaginary or, if you prefer, rhetorical condition shows his debt to Freud.

More than that, though, Bloom is not only anxious about literary influence. He is also apparently terrified of competition. All those other schools of criticism that have recently sprung up like mushrooms are gaining adherents and he lays about him with resounding phrases to exorcise their hold on people—New Historicists and Feminists are written off as the School of Resentment and he hopes to deliver them a severe blow by linking them with zanies who do not even exist so far as the academic world is concerned, those poor befuddled "partisans for the idea of Sir Francis Bacon or the Earl of Oxford as the true author of *Lear*."

No critic these days says in print what he thinks. That would be simple-minded, naive and unprofessional. Instead, critics engage in rhetorical strategies that forward their scholarly enterprises. In short, they are con men, forgive me, con persons, shaking the plum tree. Bloom's attempt to preserve his pet plum tree by attacking his competition leads him into one difficulty. Sigmund Freud, his master, his mentor, was one of those zanies who thought Edward de Vere, the seventeenth Earl of Oxford, wrote the plays and poems attributed to William Shakespeare.

What to do? No problem. Bloom can publicly ridicule his master and forward his own brand of criticism by plucking out the root of Freud's aberration and declaring it to be (surprise, surprise) "literary influence and its anxieties."

But why must Freud's view of Shakespeare be aberrant? Only because Bloom does not share it. He does not refute the Oxfordian theory of authorship or even raise serious doubts about it. He merely declares the theory "crazy," not a technical term Freud reached for with frequency.

Bloom's case for the craziness of the Oxfordian theory rests on two points.

First, the name of the man responsible for the theory was J. Thomas Looney. You might think someone named Bloom would take a pass on reviling writers because of their names. But no. Bloom shows how much higher his regard for evidence is than Freud's by indulging in elephantine and juvenile jokes—"the Looney hypothesis," "Freud's Looney fantasy," "nothing could be loonier," and so on.

Second, as Bloom repeatedly puts it, "It did not matter that the Earl of Oxford was dead before *Lear* was composed..." We know the earl died in 1604. We do not know when *Lear* was written. Its date is a matter of faith. And Bloom wholeheartedly places his faith in the traditional dating of the plays, worked up and revised repeatedly for the past one hundred years by scholars who must try to fit the writing of the plays to the dates of the supposed author's life.

While we know when some of the plays were first performed or published, all we can say with certainty is they must have been written sometime before those dates. The dating of the writing of *Lear* is sheer guess work—guess work which, to the faithful like Bloom, becomes knowledge, hard irrefutable fact.

Bloom has the mendacity to pretend that Looney sought to solve the problem posed by the dates of composition of the plays by arguing that the late plays were finished by Oxford's friends after his death. Looney made no such claim. He simply concluded that the scholarly fabrication of the dates of composition for the plays was wrong, mistaken. Humanity's strength rests, he like Freud realized, in its ability to learn from its mistakes. Bloom's shrill illusion of infallibility would seem silly by comparison if it was not an attempt to doom the race to ignorance.

For a scholar to transform fiction into fact in order to publicly ridicule a thinker like Freud calls for no Freudian explanation. Freud had the audacity to challenge the authority of Harold Bloom and his fellow English professors. And that is why Bloom has to go out of his way to attack him, unfunny jokes, misrepresentations of fact, and all.

Still, there is much to be learned from this display of rhetoric posing as criticism and of slipshod debating tactics posing as scholarship. The life of the mind is not being attacked by barbarians at the gates, despite Bloom's lamentations to the contrary. It is instead daily betrayed by those well within the gates who draw their pay for ostensibly defending it. No wonder taxpayers are easily convinced by politicians that they should stop funding the scam. It would be less harmful and more entertaining if Bloom had the high spirits and honesty to point at his audience, declare them fools, take the money, and run.