

Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human

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"The indispensable critic on the indispensable writer." -Geoffrey O'Brien, New York Review of Books

A landmark achievement as expansive, erudite, and passionate as its renowned author, this book is the culmination of a lifetime of reading, writing about, and teaching Shakespeare.

Preeminent literary critic-and ultimate authority on the western literary tradition, Harold Bloom leads us through a comprehensive reading of every one of the dramatist's plays, brilliantly illuminating each work with unrivaled warmth, wit and insight. At the same time, Bloom presents one of the boldest theses of Shakespearean scholarship: that Shakespeare not only invented the English language, but also created human nature as we know it today.

"Personality, in our sense, is a Shakespearean invention, and is not only Shakespeare's greatest originality but also the authentic cause of his perpetual pervasiveness." So Harold Bloom opines in his outrageously ambitious Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human. This is a titanic claim. But then this is a titanic book, wrought by a latter-day critical colossus-- and before Bloom is done with us, he has made us wonder whether his vision of Shakespeare's influence on the whole of our lives might not be simply the sober truth. Shakespeare is a feast of arguments and insights, written with engaging frankness and affecting immediacy. Bloom ranges through the Bard's plays in the probable order of their composition, relating play to play and character to character, maintaining all the while a shrewd grasp of Shakespeare's own burgeoning sensibility.

It is a long and fascinating itinerary, and one littered with thousands of sharp insights. Listen to Bloom on Romeo and Juliet: "The Nurse and Mercutio, both of them audience favorites, are nevertheless bad news, in different but complementary ways." On The Merchant of Venice: "To reduce him to contemporary theatrical terms, Shylock would be an Arthur Miller protagonist displaced into a Cole Porter musical, Willy Loman wandering about in Kiss Me Kate." On As You Like It: "Rosalind is unique in Shakespeare, perhaps indeed in Western drama, because it is so difficult to achieve a perspective upon her that she herself does not anticipate and share." Bloom even offers some belated vocational counseling to Falstaff, identifying him as an Elizabethan Mr. Chips: "Falstaff is more than skeptical, but he is too much of a teacher (his true vocation, more than highwayman) to follow skepticism out to its nihilistic borders, as Hamlet does."

In the end, it doesn't matter very much whether we agree with all or any of these ideas. What does matter is that Bloom's capacious book sends us hurrying back to some of the central texts of our civilization. "The ultimate use of Shakespeare," the author asserts, "is to let him teach you to think too well, to whatever truth you can sustain without perishing." Bloom himself has made excellent use of his hero's instruction, and now he teaches us all to do the same. --Daniel Hintzsche

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work with unrivaled warmth, wit, and insight. At the same time, Bloom presents one of the boldest theses of Shakespearean scholarship -- that Shakespeare not only reinvented the English language, but also created human nature as we know it today.

Other Books

Shakespeare and the History of Soliloquies, Provides the first systematic and comprehensive account of the conventions governing soliloquies in Western drama from ancient times to the twentieth century. Over the course of theatrical history, there have been several kinds of soliloquies. Shakespeare's soliloquies are not only the most interesting and the most famous, but also the most misunderstood, and several chapters examine them in detail. The present study is based on a painstaking analysis of the actual practices of dramatists from each age of theatrical history. This investigation has uncovered evidence that refutes long-standing commonplaces about soliloquies in general, about Shakespeare's soliloquies in particular, and especially about the to be, or not to be episode. 'Shakespeare and the history of Soliloquies' casts new lights on historical changes in the artistic representation of human beings and, because representations cannot be entirely disentangled from perception, on historical changes in the ways human beings have perceived themselves.

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