

After finishing his wide-ranging *Invention of the Human*, Harold Bloom, the brilliant and blustering professor, critic, and self-appointed Shakespeare prophet, was bothered by what he felt was a scanty treatment of *Hamlet*. No wonder—who has ever said all they feel about *Hamlet*, the most varied and multiple of all Shakespeare’s plays? In *Hamlet: Poem Unlimited*, Bloom wisely foregoes a laundry list of insights and ideas for a paean to Hamlet’s genius and his impact on literature to come. “*Hamlet* is a great play” may not exactly be a radical position to take, but Bloom’s deep, knowing love of this work serves as a bracing reminder.

Though Bloom’s meditations on *Hamlet* tend to the general (and to the forward-looking), he does posit a few theories, each defended with his characteristically bombastic style. Of those “critics [who] have asserted that Hamlet finds qualities in Horatio that are absent from himself,” he says they are “plainly mistaken.” His hero Hamlet is “so various that he contains every quality, while Horatio, totally colorless, has none to speak of” (harsh words to those like myself, who love Horatio for his great heart, if not for his superior intellect). He argues that Hamlet may have doubted his own paternity, fearing himself Claudius’ son. He states absolutely that Ophelia committed suicide, in opposition to those critics who suggest accident or even foul play. He laughs off Freudian Oedipal readings of Hamlet and Gertrude. He says that Hamlet never pondered suicide: his “to be or not to be” was rather “the grandest of consciousnesses overhears its own cognitive music,” a mind meditating on its power to challenge mortality. At times, he speaks in a voice both riddling and resolved, a sort of Delphic oracle: “[Hamlet] is his own Iago as well as his own Falstaff,” he declares somewhat cryptically. But he is refreshingly less concerned with defending his play from the leagues of new critics, cultural analysts, and victim theorists than he was in *The Invention of the Human*: perhaps he has come to see that the play is simply too resilient to be much damaged by anyone’s fashionable pet projects.

Instead, Bloom returns to his main argument from *The Invention of the Human*: that Shakespeare did not merely capture human behavior as we now know it, but invented it—he created modern consciousness. For any other artist, this might seem a grandiose claim, but you don’t have to be a “bardologist” (as Bloom refers to his near-religion of Shakespeare) to see that Hamlet is a new kind of man. He stands alone as literature’s most fully realized character and its most full and persuasive creation—he is a model for our humanity. Bloom refers to him as the “New Adam” (and likens the Gravedigger, Hamlet’s only near-match, to the “Old Adam”). Bloom sees Hamlet as the new King David, the Bible’s own “new man.” “What we have called Western Romanticism,” Bloom concludes, “is the last embellishment of Hamlet’s great shadow, cast off to become a thousand other selves.”

While Bloom may mightily resist the efforts of faddish scholars to “reclaim” *Hamlet* for one of many competing causes (Ophelia as feminist victim, Elsinore as capitalist paradigm), he makes a strong case for Hamlet as ironic postmodernist. What Bloom refers to as Hamlet’s *theatricality* we might as easily call his self-conscious irony. Bloom quotes the critic and rhetorician Richard Lanham: “Human flesh is sullied with self-consciousness, with theatricality.” Where have we heard this lately? In the likes of Dave Eggers and others, who look into the face of real despair and ask, what is there left to feel that isn’t a cliché, a rip-off version of a theatrical emotion, a postcard or an email forward? What can we feel honestly, and how can we possibly express it now that everything has been said? For Hamlet, the question is all the more pressing because his vast intellect is so totally out of proportion to the meanness of his task, to a revenge killing that he cannot deign to commit. Bloom explains, “the disproportion between agent and act could have been masked only by theatricalism.” His response is solitude, indifference, and irony,

for he “longs for a mighty opposite, and discovers he has to be his own. He inaugurates the situation in which each of us has to be our own worst enemy.”

Hamlet is too large for this play, for the claustrophobic kingdom he cannot leave (even after he returns, born again, from the sea). “Hamlet knows he deserves the prime role in a cosmological drama,” Bloom writes, “[one] which Shakespeare was not quite ready to compose.” We might ask, is Bloom ready to tackle it? *Hamlet* is replete with meaning—it encompasses the world bound in its intricate nutshell. It is, therefore, a feast for critics, and Bloom helps himself heartily. But the desolation of *Lear* exists outside of meaning, and silence is the preferred response. Bloom is fond of *Hamlet* because the play is so generative: it builds the mental space we now inhabit. But if *Hamlet* creates a universe; *Lear* tears one apart, and I for one would like to hear what Bloom would have to say to that.