

I have at last had the time to read the 750 pages of Harold Bloom's 'Shakespeare's Invention Of The Human' (Fourth Estate London 1999). As he puts it , not only is Shakespeare a cultural phenomenon, he is 'universally judged to be a more adequate representer of the universe of fact than anyone else, before him or since '.(p.16).

Play by play Bloom builds up that justification for the towering figure of the author. Oxfordians find little to criticise in that conclusion, but they will have some serious criticisms. Bloom is quite content to take on board the usual chronology with minor tweakings : correctly he disparages the Ur-Hamlet fiction and places the date of writing of Hamlet (first version) to 1589-93. He spends a great deal of space discussing the influence of Marlowe and how his author has to liberate himself from that influence. It never occurs to him that it is Marlowe who is influenced by 'Shakespeare'.

Bloom is very conscious of 'Shakespeare's' influence on Freud, and Freud's influence on Shakespeare studies : Freud is ' nothing but belated William Shakespeare' (p.487). Bloom is aware that Freud was a staunch Oxfordian, but Oxford's claim has no effect on Bloom (pp.371 and 487). It is interesting ( and perhaps even slightly pathetic) that Bloom's mind is so closed that he cannot to investigate the logic of 'Shakespeare's ' most recent incarnation.

Perhaps the most interesting argument is contained on page 734 :-

'There is a fashion among current academic writers on Shakespeare that attempts to explain away his uniqueness as a cultural conspiracy, an imposition of British imperialism, and so a weapon of the West against the East. Allied to this fashion is an even sillier contention : that Shakespeare is no better or no worse a playwright than Thomas Middleton or John Webster. After this we are taken over the verge into lunacy : Middleton wrote Macbeth, Sir Francis Bacon or the Earl of Oxford wrote all of Shakespeare, or whole committees of dramatists wrote Shakespeare, commencing with Marlowe and concluding with John Fletcher. Though academic feminism, Marxism, Lacanianism, Foucaultianism, Derrideanism, and so on are more respectable(in the academies) than the Baconians and Oxfordians, it is still the same phenomenon, and contributes nothing to a critical appreciation of Shakespeare.. This book commenced by turning away from almost all current Anglo-American writing about, and teaching of, Shakespeare; I mentioned it as rarely as possible, because it cannot aid any open and honest reader or playgoer in the quest to know Shakespeare better.'

By 'it' in the penultimate sentence Bloom refers to 'the fashion', allied to even sillier contentions taking one 'over the verge into lunacy'. That Oxfordians are part of an attempt to explain away 'Shakespeare's uniqueness' is a fundamental misconception : we are the last people who wish to do that. Because we reject any heavy Marlovian influence, in one sense we place 'Shakespeare' on an even higher pedestal than the orthodox.

John Dover Wilson makes all Shakespeare students choose between a secular miracle with neither sufficient education or experiences of life and the rejection of Shakespeare as the author. Bloom like Wilson prefers the secular miracle, a nonsense which grates against his whole thesis.