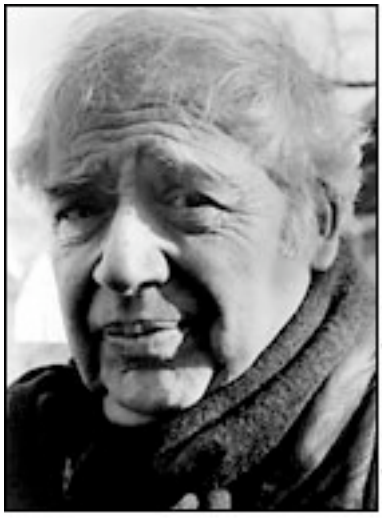
THE Tragicall Hiſtorie of HAMLET, *Prince of Denmarke.*

By William Shakeſpeare.

Newly imprinted and enlarged to almoſt as much againe as it was, according to the true and perfect Coppie.

AT LONDON,
Printed by I. R. for N. L. and are to be ſold at his ſhoppe vnder Saint Dunſtons Church in Fleetſtreet. 1605.



Harold Bloom

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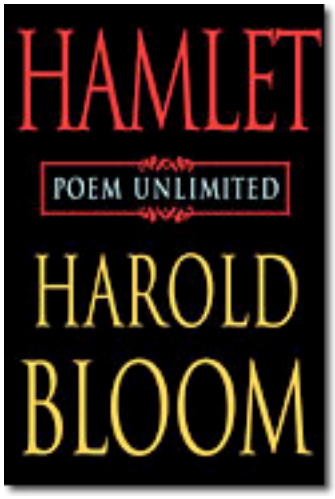
RANTING AGAINST CANT

Harold Bloom, a staunch defender of the Western literary tradition, returns to Shakespeare, "the true multicultural author."

For the past half century, the critic Harold Bloom has stood as something of a lone warrior in the literary world. In the 1950s, he battled T. S. Eliot's New Criticism, then the prevailing trend in literature classrooms. In the 1970s, he sparred with the Deconstructionists, a group of mostly European intellectuals who believed that language was essentially devoid of meaning. In the 1990s, after publishing his book *The Western Canon*, Bloom found himself facing off against literary feminists and multiculturalists. Most recently, Bloom incensed thousands of Harry Potter fans by expressing unambiguous disdain for the boy wizard in the op-ed pages of *The Wall Street Journal.*

Depending on one's ideology, Bloom can be perceived in one of two ways: as a Don Quixote tilting at the whirring blades of social progress or as a noble Sir Lancelot, defending a literary kingdom whose nobility includes Homer, Milton, and Dante. In this second paradigm, Bloom's King Arthur is undoubtedly William Shakespeare, the writer to whom he reverently refers as "my mortal god."



Bloom's newest book, *Hamlet: Poem Unlimited*, is essentially a love letter to Shakespeare and his most famous creation. The book was born out of Bloom's dissatisfaction with his own 1999 work, *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human*. After devoting a lengthy chapter to *Hamlet*'s themes and origins, Bloom realized that most of his true feelings about the play had not made it into print. To remedy this mistake, he wrote *Poem Unlimited*, a slim volume that strips away history and theory to reveal Bloom's most personal responses to his favorite work of literature.

At seventy-three, Bloom lives with his wife, Jeanne, near the campus of Yale University, where he is the Sterling Professor of Humanities. He leads a proudly anachronistic existence. A highly prolific writer (he has written nineteen books of his own and penned introductions for over 350 others), Bloom abhors e-mail and fax machines. He still listens to records on a turntable and wears white shirts with red suspenders. Like an affectionate grandfather, he addresses everyone as "my dear"—a publisher on the telephone, a visiting graduate student, the mailman. But for all his old-fashioned geniality, Bloom remains a powerful warrior on the literary field, always ready to raise his lance in the name of the Western tradition.

I spoke with him at his home in New Haven, Connecticut.

—Jennie Rothenberg

There's a line in the first chapter of your book *Hamlet: Poem Unlimited* that seems to encapsulate your approach toward literature: "I think it wise to confront both the play and the prince with awe and wonder, because they know more than we do." As a literary critic, how are you able to analyze a text with this kind of humility instead of assuming a dry, superior tone as some other critics do?

Superior? To William *Shakespeare*? You know, I've been at it for so long, so long, dear. I'll be seventy-three this July. This last year has been my fiftieth in a row teaching at Yale. But I started out very early. I was already a ferocious reader of the great poets and

the great writers when I was hardly big enough to get the books home from the library. My three kindly older sisters would carry them for me.

If you spend a lifetime reading and teaching and writing, I would think that the proper attitude to take toward Shakespeare, toward Dante, toward Cervantes, toward Geoffrey Chaucer, toward Tolstoy, toward Plato—the great figures—is indeed awe, wonder, gratitude, deep appreciation. I can't really understand any other stance in relation to them. I mean, they have formed our minds. And *Hamlet* is the most special of special cases. I've been accused of "bardolotry" so much that I've made a joke out of it. As I am something of a dinosaur, I've named myself Bloom Brontosaurus Bardolator. It's not such a bad thing to be.

This attitude of reverence is what sets you apart from many of your colleagues. You don't seem to belong to any particular school of literary criticism.

Well, it's such a complex thing. I left the English department twenty-six years ago. I just divorced them and became, as I like to put it, Professor of Absolutely Nothing. To a rather considerable extent, literary studies have been replaced by that incredible absurdity called cultural studies which, as far as I can tell, are neither cultural nor are they studies. But there has always been an arrogance, I think, of the semi-learned.

You know, the term "philology" originally meant indeed a love of learning—a love of the word, a love of literature. I think the more profoundly people love and understand literature, the less likely they are to be supercilious, to feel that somehow they know more than the poems, stories, novels, and epics actually know.

And, of course, we have this nonsense called Theory with a capital T, mostly imported from the French and now having evilly taken root in the English-speaking world. And that, I suppose, also has encouraged absurd attitudes toward what we used to call imaginative literature.

When you say "theory," are you dating this back to New Criticism? When you were a student, you famously resisted that movement—you felt it was too cerebral and analytical. Your early books glorified the Romantic poets and went against almost everything T. S. Eliot and the other New Critics taught about literature.

Well, you know, I've always been in an odd position. When I was a youngster starting out as a graduate student, and as a young teacher here at Yale, the so-called New Criticism was the prevailing orthodoxy. It was exemplified here at Yale by someone who eventually became one of my closest friends, though we didn't start out that way—the novelist Robert Penn Warren.

Then, after fighting the New Criticism so endlessly, I suddenly found myself fighting the Deconstructionists, another group of people who were and are my personal friends. Except for one—I don't talk to Derrida anymore, for all sorts of complicated personal reasons that I wouldn't want to bring up. But I continue to badly miss Paul de Man, whom I deeply love as a person, though we always fought and couldn't agree on anything.

Deconstructionism, in a sense, destroyed all parameters in the world of literary criticism. It broke literature and language down into random signs that have no natural connection to one another. Where has the study of literature gone from there?

Well, we are now in the grip of this dreadful third phase. I've so talked myself to exhaustion with a sort of rant against cant that I'm reluctant to say much about it. Throughout the English-speaking world, the wave of French theory was replaced by the terrible mélange that I increasingly have come to call the School of Resentment—the so-called multiculturalists and feminists who tell us we are to value a literary work because of the ethnic background or the gender of the author.

Feminism as a stance calling for equal rights, equal education, equal pay—no rational, halfway decent human being could possibly disagree with this. But what is called feminism in the academies seems to be a very different phenomenon indeed. I have sometimes characterized these people as a Rabblement of Lemmings, dashing off the cliff and carrying their supposed subject down to destruction with them.

Yale on the whole has held out against that better than Harvard and Princeton have. This university has so long and strong a tradition of real philological studies, a deep love of imaginative literature, that it has held up fairly well. But last spring a very charming young lady who was one of my research assistants came in here shaking her head. She said, "Harold, I'm rather stunned. I've just gone to my undergraduate seminar in American Studies." I shivered, because of all the Yale departments that once would have been

called humanistic, the one that has now given over completely to nonsense is, in fact, American Studies. She said, "We just had a lecture on Walt Whitman. The professor spent the entire two hours explaining to us that Walt Whitman was a racist." In the face of that, my dear, I almost lose my capacity for outrage, shock, or indignation. Walt Whitman a racist? It is simply lunatic.

Why do you think there's such a fascination with finding political and social motivations behind a text? Do you think it comes from a genuine desire to understand all the structures that shape human identity? Or is it just that everything else about literature has been said before?

My child, you would have as much insight into that as I do. These are ideologues, dear. They don't care about poetry, they don't care about Walt Whitman. You know, if there is a single figure who stands as the New World's answer and complement to Milton and Goethe and Victor Hugo and the other great post-Renaissance figures, it would be Walt Whitman.

You mentioned Deconstructionism a moment ago. In an essay of yours, "The Breaking of Form," you once made an interesting comparison: "Language, in relation to poetry, can be conceived in two valid ways, as I have learned, slowly and reluctantly. Either one can believe in a magical theory of all language, as the Kabbalists, many poets, and Walter Benjamin did, or else one must yield to a thoroughgoing linguistic nihilism, which in its most refined form is the mode now called Deconstruction."

Oh, yes, I remember. In those years, Paul [de Man] and I were always debating one another in public. In private, we would take long walks together, or he would sit where you are sitting now and argue this, drinking a Belgian beer.

What struck me most was your next sentence: "But these two ways turn into one another at their outward limits."

Yes. I know the passage you are citing. I remember saying to Paul that I did not care whether one taught what he and Jacques [Derrida] were teaching—which was the absolute dearth of meaning, the permanent wandering about of language—or whether one had a linguistic theory that taught an absolute plenitude of meaning, as with Kabbalists such as my great mentor Gershom Scholem and my friend Moshe Idel. All that I cared about was the Absolute, as it were. Because in the end, the two turned into one another.

This is fascinating, but how would you explain the seeming paradox in what you're saying?

To me, it doesn't seem paradoxical at all. Isn't that strange? Essentially, what Kabbalah is always saying is that the Torah, and indeed any single Hebrew letter, contains within itself the total plenitude, which is what the Spanish Kabbalists called the Ein Sof, the "without an end," the divinity, God.

That seems to contradict one of the central tenets of Deconstructionism. Derrida and others said that language is always being deferred along a chain of meaning, referring itself to one signifier after another. Is the Absolute you're talking about the "transcendental signified" they said didn't exist?

No, I don't think so. It transcends any notion of what you can signify! The Ein Sof can't be called the transcendental signified because it's not a signified. It's not a sign among other signs at all.

And in the same way, even if you say meaning is always wandering, always in exile, always going from one apparent signifier to another, pragmatically, as William James put it, only a difference that makes a difference really *is* a difference. And pragmatically, there seems to me no difference between teaching an absolute dearth of meaning and an absolute plenitude.

When I read that line of yours about the two ways turning into one another, I thought of Dante's *Divine Comedy*—how the outer edge of paradise spins so quickly that it's standing still.

Yes, yes, that's right. It comes to the same mode of paradox in the end.

Do you think Dante had a direct experience of that Absolute level, what you might call Ein Sof? Maybe it's an author's experience of the Absolute that gives permanence to language, that makes some works last throughout the changing phases of history.

That could be, though we really don't know much about Dante. He is so autonomous a figure. It's one of the bad jokes of literary history to say that Dante is in fact versified Augustine or versified Aquinas. He's only versified Dante. He's been so powerful and so successful at it that the Catholic Church is very happy to claim

him as its own. But when you look into his work, it's shot through with all kinds of fascinating heresies. And what could be closer to a sort of—I will not say a gnosticism, but a sort of personal gnosis—than to take a woman with whom one is in love and say she is essential not only for one's own salvation but that she is, indeed, essential for everyone's salvation?

But then, Dante is, like Milton, like Plato I think, one of those imaginative makers so strong that they persuasively redefine the possibility of religion for us. The great exception, in that as in everything else, is always William Shakespeare, the most permanently enigmatic of writers.

Shakespeare is so enigmatic that there's been a lot of debate about whether he was even a single individual. I know you're very much opposed to those sorts of theories.

The other weekend, they actually were trying to get me down to New York to take part in a so-called debate on television as to whether the Earl of Oxford wrote Shakespeare. As I remarked rather nastily to them, the only answer to that is that the founder of the American Flat Earth Society died only recently. I also told them that I am not necessarily delighted but that I find it very *enlightening* that every month or so, there is a society in London that sends me its literature—unsolicited, of course. It's devoted entirely to demonstrating that all of the works of Lewis Carroll were written by Queen Victoria. That is just as likely as that the Earl of Oxford, or Christopher Marlowe, or Sir Francis Bacon, or who you will, wrote William Shakespeare.

You mentioned in your new book that *Hamlet* is the most experimental of all plays. Do you really think it's more experimental than, say, Ionesco's *The Bald Soprano,* where the characters end up just shouting vowels and consonants at each other onstage?

Oh, Ionesco is as nothing compared to *Hamlet*. In fact, the great experimental dramatists of the twentieth century and just before—Ibsen, Chekhov, Pirandello, Beckett—are essentially, as they keep admitting, trying to rewrite *Hamlet.* It's just not a challenge that anybody can really answer.

My dear friend Karen Coonrod was directing a production of *Hamlet* out in San Francisco a few years ago. She said she tried to work on my notion, which I'd been talking to her about for years. I really felt *Hamlet* still strikes me as the most avant-garde play, the

play in fact that nothing else can come close to. It violates any possible decorum or mode of representation, in a way really more singular and more enterprising than anything else ever has.

What do you think makes it so avant garde? Is it, as you write in your new book, that it's all taking place inside Hamlet's consciousness?

To some extent, indeed, because it is purely taking place in consciousness. But also because it's quite amazing what the audience is seeing. From Act II, scene ii, when the players enter, until Act III, scene ii, when the play Hamlet has retitled "The Mousetrap" comes to an end (because Claudius suddenly screams, "Give me some light!" and Hamlet breaks into a series of wild jigs and such things)—what are you actually watching? You get theatrical in-jokes, clearly based on Shakespeare's own life and his friendly rivalry with Ben Jonson. You get plays within plays within plays. You're not getting what a drama is supposed to give you, which is an imitation of an action or a representation of possible human beings. You're getting a fireworks display of one kind of inventiveness after another.

Your reading of the "To be or not to be" speech was quite unique. You insist that it's not a meditation on suicide. Instead, you said it's a kind of triumph in itself, an exaltation of the mind.

It is a testimony, indeed, to the power of the mind over a universe of death, symbolized by the sea, which is the great hidden metaphor.

How did you come to that conclusion?

There's nothing in the play to indicate at any moment that Hamlet is interested in killing himself. Just as frankly—and this is where that little book of mine breaks radically with the entire tradition—don't think for a moment, even when he stands above the praying Claudius, that Hamlet had the slightest intention of killing him. It's too paltry a deed for him! Claudius is such a small potato. It's unworthy of him.

No, the thing I think reviewers have liked least about that little book is my saying that there's a kind of war going on in it between Hamlet and Shakespeare. Hamlet is in effect demanding of Shakespeare, "Give me a play somewhat worthy of my magnificent intellectual consciousness and my presence! Give me a cosmological

drama. Put me in *King Lear*, or at least *Macbeth*! Instead, here I am at this rotten court, surrounded by, apart from my old chum Horatio, these paltry fellows." But that, too, is a kind of experimental element that violates the whole question of what's being represented in the play.

Look at it another way. I think I remark somewhere in the book that though *Hamlet* is called a tragedy, it isn't actually a tragedy. It's an apotheosis, a transfiguration, a kind of upward-breaking transcendence of the protagonist. It actually has more in common with the high comedies written just before and after it—*As You Like It* and *Twelfth Night*—than it does with *Julius Caesar* or *Othello.*

Why is Hamlet's death so strangely uplifting? It's a very hard thing to explain when you look at the facts. If that whole play were taking place in the house next door, the ending would be a horrific scene with screams and police sirens. Instead, you finish the play feeling so unbounded.

Ahh. Indeed, that is certainly one of the most central and beautiful mysteries of literature, why it is such an extraordinary release both for him and for the audience. I have not yet known how to answer that question. It's too large for me to give an answer.

Hamlet is so profound a character. He's really such bad news, though we find it so hard to accept that. We go on loving him. But in fact, he's not lovable. He doesn't love anyone, as far as I can tell. The whole tradition of interpretation of him is absurd, the idea that he's madly in love, not to say in lust, with that great magnet, his mama the sexy Gertrude. It's ridiculous! Here's the poor woman dying of poison onstage and crying out, "Ah, my dear Hamlet!" And he, as he dies, cries out, "Wretched queen, adieu!" Which is to say, "So much for you, kid!"

As for his supposed reverence for the ghost, at one point in that scene he actually refers to him as "this fellow in the cellarage" and at one point he says, "Well said, old mole! canst work i' the earth so fast?" We have no categories that are inclusive enough to subsume him. Which returns us to the initial point that you were making—how could we possibly get round Hamlet when he is, in fact, a lot smarter than we are?

Speaking of Hamlet not loving anyone, here's something you wrote about Ophelia—you said she had a beauty that was

"engendered by Hamlet's cruelty, indeed, by his failure to love." What kind of beauty could be engendered by cruelty?

Ah. She is as lovable in her way as, say, Desdemona or Juliet, which is to say very lovable indeed. In regard to her, the man is a vicious brute! He drives her to madness and suicide. He's responsible, before the play is over, for eight deaths, including his own. Yet somehow we don't hold it against him.

With a play like *Hamlet*...

The "like" is fascinating. There *is* no play like *Hamlet.*

So then, with *Hamlet* itself—how can this play ever really be performed? Have you ever seen a production of *Hamlet* that came close to capturing the play's magnitude?

I've seen only one *Hamlet* that immensely moved me. It was, of course, Sir John Gielgud. Somehow his gestures were not right for the part. But no actor could speak Shakespeare the way Gielgud could. If you just shut your eyes and listened, the cognitive music that was coming out of this man's mouth was quite overwhelming. Whether it was acting or something else, I don't know.

Charles Lamb, the marvelous Romantic critic, said it was far better to read Shakespeare than to see it on the stage. Goethe of course had said this before him. But obviously, there are things that can come out on the stage that cannot come out as you ponder it for yourself.

Most of what passes on the stage for Shakespeare is preposterous, but there *are* a few decent Shakespearean directors alive. My favorite is this marvelous Karen Coonrod who did a *King James* that I saw in New York years ago. Subsequently we have become close friends. Of the older British directors, John Barton is remarkable and so is Sir Peter Hall. And Trevor Nunn was quite a director in his day.

Some years ago down at the Henry Street Settlement Playhouse in New York there was a traveling company, mostly Australian actors. They were doing a kind of minimalist *Macbeth*. There were only seven or eight people. They didn't have costumes. They sat on benches when they were not actually doing the speaking. My wife Jeanne, who did not know the play well at that point, found it a mixed thing. I was enthralled. Obviously, there is something in the immediacy there that one misses in reading.

But we now have the dreadfulness of what are called "high concept" directors who are more interested in the height of their own concepts than they are in the height of Shakespeare's own concepts. So what can one do?

So you're not an advocate of doing *Hamlet* in an apartment in New York or *Twelfth Night* as a western?

No, not at all. But let me put it this way. I still remember being onstage a number of years ago, having a debate with probably the most distinguished living British critic, Sir Frank Kermode. He's not someone who's terribly fond of me, and I cannot say that I'm enormously fond of him. At one point, someone in the audience asked, "Professor Bloom, what do you think is the best film of Shakespeare you ever saw?"

I said, "Actually, the two Kurosawa movies—*Ran*, his version of *King Lear*, and *Throne of Blood*, his version of *Macbeth*." At which Sir Frank said triumphantly, "It's the usual thing with Harold. Shakespeare's language doesn't matter at all. Kurosawa doesn't know a word of English." I said, "That doubtless is true. But I felt that Kurosawa captured a sense of what I believe Lear and Macbeth are up to."

We spoke earlier a little bit about Eastern literature. Many of the ideas you raise in your new book—transcendence and the inward Self—seem to resonate more with the Eastern tradition than with the Western. You're known as one of the world's most preeminent experts on the Western tradition, but I wonder if you've ever been interested in literature from the East.

I remember that some years ago some very nice fellows who are the heads of the Buddhist Society of London came to see me after they read my book *The Western Canon*. They tried to explain to me how many of my notions are essentially Buddhistic. I told them what I'm going to say to you.

I don't know what it is. I of course don't read Sanskrit, so I cannot read these works in their original. I have very frequently read translations of them. I am very fascinated by the whole, what you might want to call, Western tradition of wisdom from the Bible and the Greeks to Shakespeare and beyond. But I just somehow never really understand what is going on in the Eastern tradition.

What about *The Bhagavad Gita*? Like Hamlet, Arjuna is also unable to act—he throws his weapons down on the battlefield and says he would rather die than kill his evil relatives. Then Lord Krishna teaches him the true nature of action and Being. Could Krishna's words have had any value for Hamlet as well?

I know the so-called Blessed Lord's Song very well, and I do find that a very striking passage. But I can't persuade myself that I really understand it.

Ultimately, I feel that Shakespeare is so comprehensive and huge a consciousness that he's inclusive not just of the Western tradition. Students and visiting scholars and friends who travel, people from all over the world, have told me about productions of Shakespeare in Indonesia, Japan, Bulgaria, and various African nations by no means Anglophonic. They tell me that the audiences, even when they are not themselves highly literate, are transfixed, because they somehow believe that Shakepeare has put them, their relatives, and their friends all upon the stage.

I used to say it as a kind of angry joke, because I loathe what is called multiculturalism, but Shakespeare is indeed the true multicultural author. I think my favorite sentence in my book about the Western canon is this: "If multiculturalism meant Cervantes, then who could possibly protest?" Of course it doesn't mean Cervantes, or Shakespeare. Perhaps all times are full of period pieces, like that wretched Harry Potter.

That's right—you caused quite a stir a few years ago with that piece you wrote about Harry Potter for *The Wall Street Journal.*

I was asked to write the piece, quite innocently, by the editor of the op-ed page of *The Wall Street Journal*. I asked, "What is Harry Potter?" He explained who Harry Potter was. I said, "It doesn't sound like my sort of thing." He said, "Harold, there are people like myself who think you are probably as notable a literary critic as the world now has. You really ought to say something about this."

So I went round to the Yale bookstore and purchased an inexpensive paperback copy of the first volume. I could not believe what was in front of me. What I particularly could not bear was that it was just one cliché after another. In fact, I kept a little checklist on an envelope next to me, and every time any individuals were going,

as you or I might say, to take a walk, they were going to "stretch their legs." At the fiftieth or sixtieth stretching of the legs, that was too much for me.

I wrote the piece, and it was published. It is not an exaggeration to say that all hell indeed broke loose. The editor called me ten days later and said, "Harold, we've never seen anything like this before. We have received over four hundred letters denouncing your piece on Harry Potter. We've received one favorable letter, but we think you must have written it." I said, "No, I assure you."

It never stopped. The damn piece was reprinted all over the world, in all languages. I will never hear the end of it. But of course, the Harry Potter series is rubbish. Like all rubbish, it will eventually be rubbed down. Time will obliterate it. What can one say?

You like to tell your students, "There is no method except yourself." What do you mean by that?

I believe that very passionately. My friend Paul de Man with whom, as I say, I used to argue endlessly, would tell me that after a lifetime of searching, he had found the method, the "Troot," as he put it—that Belgian pronunciation of "Truth." I would say, "No, dear Paul, there is no Truth. There is only the Self."

What theory did the great critics have? Critics like Dr. Samuel Johnson or William Hazlitt? Those who adopt a theory are simply imitating somebody else. I believe firmly that, in the end, all useful criticism is based upon experience. An experience of teaching, an experience of reading, one's experience of writing—and most of all, one's experience of living. Just as wisdom, in the end, is purely personal. There can be no method except the Self. 🕮

Jennie Rothenberg was recently a new media intern for *The Atlantic.*

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