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SHAKESPEARE

THE INVENTION OF THE HUMAN

HAROLD BLOOM

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ALWAYS LEARNING PEARSON

TO
JEANNE

That for which we find words is something already dead in our hearts. There is always a kind of contempt in the act of speaking.

Nietzsche, *The Twilight of the Idols*

Our wills and fates do so contrary run
That our devices still are overthrown,
Our thoughts are ours, their ends none of our own.

The Player King in *Hamlet*

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Since there cannot be a definitive Shakespeare, I have employed a variety of texts, sometimes silently repunctuating for myself. In general, I recommend the Arden Shakespeare, but frequently I have followed the Riverside or other editions. I have avoided the New Oxford Shakespeare, which perversely seeks, more often than not, to print the worst possible text, poetically speaking.

Some of the material in this book was delivered, in much earlier drafts, as the Mary Flexner lectures at Bryn Mawr College, in October 1990, and as the Tanner Lectures at Princeton University, in November 1995.

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H.B.

Timothy Dwight College
Yale University
April 1998

CHRONOLOGY

Arranging Shakespeare's plays in the order of their composition remains a disputable enterprise. This chronology, necessarily tentative, partly follows what is generally taken to be scholarly authority. Where I am skeptical of authority, I have provided brief annotations to account for my surmises.

Shakespeare was christened on April 26, 1564, at Stratford-on-Avon, and died there on April 23, 1616. We do not know when he first joined the London theatrical world, but I suspect it was as early as 1587. Probably in 1610, Shakespeare returned to live in Stratford, until his death. After 1613, when he composed *The Two Noble Kinsmen* (with John Fletcher), Shakespeare evidently gave up his career as dramatist.

My largest departure from most traditional Shakespeare scholarship is that I follow Peter Alexander's *Introduction to Shakespeare* (1964) in assigning the early *Hamlet* (written anytime from 1589 to 1593) to Shakespeare himself, and not to Thomas Kyd. I also dissent from the recent admission of *Edward III* (1592–95) into the Shakespeare canon, as I find nothing in the play representative of the dramatist who had written *Richard III*.

Henry VI, Part One	1589–90
Henry VI, Part Two	1590–91
Henry VI, Part Three	1590–91
Richard III	1592–93
The Two Gentlemen of Verona	1592–93

Most scholars date this 1594, but it is much less advanced than *The Comedy of Errors*, and seems to me Shakespeare's first extant comedy.

Hamlet (first version) 1589–93

This was added to the repertory of what became the Lord Chamberlain's Men when Shakespeare joined them in 1594. At the same time, *Titus Andronicus* and *The Taming of the Shrew* began to be performed by them. They never acted anything by Kyd.

Venus and Adonis	1592–93
The Comedy of Errors	1593
Sonnets	1593–1609

The earliest of the Sonnets may have been composed in 1589, which would mean that they cover twenty years of Shakespeare's life, ending a year before his semi-retirement to Stratford.

The Rape of Lucrece	1593–94
Titus Andronicus	1593–94
The Taming of the Shrew	1593–94
Love's Labour's Lost	1594–95

It is so great a leap from Shakespeare's earlier comedies to the great feast of language that is *Love's Labour's Lost* that I doubt this early a date, unless the 1597 revision for a court performance was rather more than what generally we mean by a "revision." There is no printed version before 1598.

King John 1594–96

Another great puzzle in dating; much of the verse is so archaic that it suggests the Shakespeare of 1589 or so. And yet Faulconbridge the Bastard is Shakespeare's first character who speaks with a voice entirely his own.

Richard II	1595
Romeo and Juliet	1595–96
A Midsummer Night's Dream	1595–96
The Merchant of Venice	1596–97
Henry IV, Part One	1596–97
The Merry Wives of Windsor	1597
Henry IV, Part Two	1598
Much Ado About Nothing	1598–99
Henry V	1599

Julius Caesar	1599
As You Like It	1599
Hamlet	1600–1601
The Phoenix and the Turtle	1601
Twelfth Night	1601–2
Troilus and Cressida	1601–2
All's Well That Ends Well	1602–3
Measure for Measure	1604
Othello	1604
King Lear	1605
Macbeth	1606
Antony and Cleopatra	1606
Coriolanus	1607–8
Timon of Athens	1607–8
Pericles	1607–8
Cymbeline	1609–10
The Winter's Tale	1610–11
The Tempest	1611
A Funeral Elegy	1612
Henry VIII	1612–13
The Two Noble Kinsmen	1613

TO THE READER

Literary character before Shakespeare is relatively unchanging; women and men are represented as aging and dying, but not as changing because their relationship to themselves, rather than to the gods or God, has changed. In Shakespeare, characters develop rather than unfold, and they develop because they reconceive themselves. Sometimes this comes about because they *overhear* themselves talking, whether to themselves or to others. Self-overhearing is their royal road to individuation, and no other writer, before or since Shakespeare, has accomplished so well the virtual miracle of creating utterly different yet self-consistent voices for his more than one hundred major characters and many hundreds of highly distinctive minor personages.

The more one reads and ponders the plays of Shakespeare, the more one realizes that the accurate stance toward them is one of awe. How he was possible, I cannot know, and after two decades of teaching little else, I find the enigma insoluble. This book, though it hopes to be useful to others, is a personal statement, the expression of a long (though hardly unique) passion, and the culmination of a life's work in reading, writing about, and teaching what I stubbornly still call imaginative literature. Bardolatry, the worship of Shakespeare, ought to be even more a secular religion than it already is. The plays remain the outward limit of human achievement: aesthetically, cognitively, in certain ways morally, even spiritually. They abide beyond the end of the mind's reach; we cannot catch

up to them. Shakespeare will go on explaining us, in part because he invented us, which is the central argument of this book. I have repeated that argument throughout, because it will seem strange to many.

I offer a fairly comprehensive interpretation of all Shakespeare's plays, addressed to common readers and theatergoers. Though there are living Shakespearean critics I admire (and draw on here, by name), I am disheartened by much that now passes as readings of Shakespeare, whether academic or journalistic. Essentially, I seek to extend a tradition of interpretation that includes Samuel Johnson, William Hazlitt, A. C. Bradley, and Harold Goddard, a tradition that is now mostly out of fashion. Shakespeare's characters are roles for actors, and also they are considerably more than that: their influence upon life has been very nearly as enormous as their effect upon post-Shakespearean literature. No world author rivals Shakespeare in the apparent creation of personality, and I employ "apparent" here with some reluctance. To catalogue Shakespeare's largest gifts is almost an absurdity: where begin, where end? He wrote the best poetry and the best prose in English, or perhaps in any Western language. That is inseparable from his cognitive strength; he thought more comprehensively and originally than any other writer. It is startling that a third achievement should overgo these, yet I join Johnsonian tradition in arguing, nearly four centuries after Shakespeare, that he went beyond all precedents (even Chaucer) and invented the human as we continue to know it. A more conservative way of stating this would seem to me a weak misreading of Shakespeare: it might contend that Shakespeare's originality was in the *representation* of cognition, personality, character. But there is an overflowing element in the plays, an excess beyond representation, that is closer to the metaphor we call "creation." The dominant Shakespearean characters—Falstaff, Hamlet, Rosalind, Iago, Lear, Macbeth, Cleopatra among them—are extraordinary instances not only of how meaning gets started, rather than repeated, but also of how new modes of consciousness come into being.

We can be reluctant to recognize how much of our culture *was* literary, particularly now that so many of the institutional purveyors of literature happily have joined in proclaiming its death. A substantial number of

Americans who believe they worship God actually worship three major literary characters: the Yahweh of the J Writer (earliest author of Genesis, Exodus, Numbers), the Jesus of the Gospel of Mark, and Allah of the Koran. I do not suggest that we substitute the worship of Hamlet, but Hamlet is the only secular rival to his greatest precursors in personality. Like them, he seems not to be just a literary or dramatic character. His total effect upon the world's culture is incalculable. After Jesus, Hamlet is the most cited figure in Western consciousness; no one prays to him, but no one evades him for long either. (He cannot be reduced to a role for an actor; one would have to begin by speaking of "roles for actors" anyway, since there are more Hamlets than actors to play them.) Overfamiliar yet always unknown, the enigma of Hamlet is emblematic of the greater enigma of Shakespeare himself: a vision that is everything and nothing, a person who was (according to Borges) everyone and no one, an art so infinite that it *contains* us, and will go on enclosing those likely to come after us.

With most of the plays, I have attempted to be as straightforward as the oddities of my own consciousness allowed, within the limits of strongly favoring character over action, and of emphasizing what I call "foregrounding" in preference to the backgrounding of historicists old and new. The concluding section, "Foregrounding," is meant to be read in connection with any of the plays whatsoever, and could be printed at any point in this book. I cannot assert that I am straightforward upon the two parts of *Henry IV,* where I have centered obsessively upon Falstaff, the mortal god of my imaginings. In writing about *Hamlet,* I have experimented by employing a circling procedure, testing the mysteries of the play and its protagonist by returning always to my hypothesis (following the late Peter Alexander) that the young Shakespeare himself, and not Thomas Kyd, wrote the earlier version of *Hamlet* that existed more than a decade before the *Hamlet* we know. With *King Lear,* I have traced the fortunes of the four most disturbing figures—the Fool, Edmund, Edgar, and Lear himself—in order to track the tragedy of this most tragic of all tragedies.

Hamlet, Freud's mentor, goes about inducing all he encounters to reveal themselves, while the prince (like Freud) evades his biographers. What Hamlet exerts upon his fellow characters is an epitome of the effect of

Shakespeare's plays upon their critics. I have struggled, to the limit of my abilities, to talk about Shakespeare and not about myself, but I am certain that the plays have flooded my consciousness, and that the plays read me better than I read them. I once wrote that Falstaff would not accept being bored by us, if he was to deign to represent us. That applies also to Falstaff's peers, whether benign like Rosalind and Edgar, frighteningly malign like Iago and Edmund, or transcending us utterly, like Hamlet, Macbeth, and Cleopatra. We are lived by drives we cannot command, and we are read by works we cannot resist. We need to exert ourselves and read Shakespeare as strenuously as we can, while knowing that his plays will read us more energetically still. They read us definitively.

SHAKESPEARE'S UNIVERSALISM

The answer to the question "Why Shakespeare?" must be "Who else is there?"

Romantic criticism, from Hazlitt through Pater and A. C. Bradley on to Harold Goddard, taught that what matters most in Shakespeare is shared by him more with Chaucer and with Dostoevsky than with his contemporaries Marlowe and Ben Jonson. Inner selves do not exactly abound in the works of the creators of Tamburlaine and of Sir Epicure Mammon. Providing contexts that Shakespeare shared with George Chapman or Thomas Middleton will never tell you why Shakespeare, rather than Chapman or Middleton, changed us. Of all critics, Dr. Johnson best conveys the singularity of Shakespeare. Dr. Johnson first saw and said where Shakespeare's eminence was located: in a diversity of persons. No one, before or since Shakespeare, made so many separate selves.

Thomas Carlyle, dyspeptic Victorian prophet, must now be the least favored of all Shakespeare critics who once were respected. And yet the most useful single sentence about Shakespeare is his: "If called to define Shakespeare's faculty, I should say superiority of Intellect, and think I had included all under that." Carlyle was merely accurate; there are great poets who are not thinkers, like Tennyson and Walt Whitman, and great poets of shocking conceptual originality, like Blake and Emily Dickinson. But no Western writer, or any Eastern author I am able to read, is equal to Shakespeare as an intellect, and among writers I would include the principal

philosophers, the religious sages, and the psychologists from Montaigne through Nietzsche to Freud.

This judgment, whether Carlyle's or mine, scarcely seems Bardolatry to me; perhaps it only repeats T. S. Eliot's observation that all we can hope for is to be wrong about Shakespeare in a new way. I propose only that we cease to be wrong about him by stopping trying to be right. I have read and taught Shakespeare almost daily for these past twelve years, and am certain that I see him only darkly. His intellect is superior to mine: why should I not learn to interpret him by gauging that superiority, which after all is the only answer to "Why Shakespeare?" Our supposed advances in cultural anthropology or in other modes of "Theory" are not advances upon *him*.

In learning, intellect, and personality, Samuel Johnson still seems to me first among all Western literary critics. His writings on Shakespeare necessarily have a unique value: the foremost of interpreters commenting upon the largest of all authors cannot fail to be of permanent use and interest. For Johnson, the essence of poetry was *invention*, and only Homer could be Shakespeare's rival in originality. Invention, in Johnson's sense as in ours, is a process of finding, or of finding out. We owe Shakespeare everything, Johnson says, and means that Shakespeare has taught us to understand human nature. Johnson does not go so far as to say that Shakespeare invented us, but he does intimate the true tenor of Shakespearean mimesis: "Imitations produce pain or pleasure, not because they are mistaken for realities, but because they bring realities to mind." An experiential critic above all, Johnson knew that realities change, indeed *are* change. What Shakespeare invents are ways of representing human changes, alterations not only caused by flaws and by decay but effected by the will as well, and by the will's temporal vulnerabilities. One way of defining Johnson's vitality as a critic is to note the consistent power of his inferences: he is always sufficiently *inside* Shakespeare's plays to judge them as he judges human life, without ever forgetting that Shakespeare's function is to bring life to mind, to make us aware of what we could not find without Shakespeare. Johnson knows that Shakespeare is not life, that Falstaff and Hamlet are larger than life, but Johnson knows also that Falstaff and

Hamlet have altered life. Shakespeare, according to Johnson, justly imitates *essential* human nature, which is a universal and not a social phenomenon. A. D. Nuttall, in his admirably Johnsonian *A New Mimesis* (1983), suggested that Shakespeare, like Chaucer, "implicitly contested the transcendentalist conception of reality." Johnson, firmly Christian, would not allow himself to say that, but he clearly understood it, and his uneasiness underlies his shock at the murder of Cordelia at the end of *King Lear.*

Only the Bible has a circumference that is everywhere, like Shakespeare's, and most people who read the Bible regard it as divinely inspired, if not indeed supernaturally composed. The Bible's center is God, or perhaps the vision or idea of God, whose location necessarily is unfixed. Shakespeare's works have been termed the secular Scripture, or more simply the fixed center of the Western canon. What the Bible and Shakespeare have in common actually is rather less than most people suppose, and I myself suspect that the common element is only a certain universalism, global and multicultural. Universalism is now not much in fashion, except in religious institutions and those they strongly influence. Yet I hardly see how one can begin to consider Shakespeare without finding some way to account for his pervasive presence in the most unlikely contexts: here, there, and everywhere at once. He is a system of northern lights, an aurora borealis visible where most of us will never go. Libraries and playhouses (and cinemas) cannot contain him; he has become a spirit or "spell of light," almost too vast to apprehend. High Romantic Bardolatry, now so much disdained in our self-defiled academies, is merely the most normative of the faiths that worship him.

I am not concerned, in this book, with how this happened, but with why it continues. If any author has become a mortal god, it must be Shakespeare. Who can dispute his good eminence, to which merit alone raised him? Poets and scholars revere Dante; James Joyce and T. S. Eliot would have liked to prefer him to Shakespeare, yet could not. Common readers, and thankfully we still possess them, rarely can read Dante; yet they can read and attend Shakespeare. His few peers—Homer, the Yahwist, Dante, Chaucer, Cervantes, Tolstoy, perhaps Dickens—remind us that the representation of human character and personality remains always the supreme

literary value, whether in drama, lyric, or narrative. I am naïve enough to read incessantly because I cannot, on my own, get to know enough people profoundly enough. Shakespeare's own playgoers preferred Falstaff and Hamlet to all his other characters, and so do we, because Fat Jack and the Prince of Denmark manifest the most comprehensive consciousnesses in all of literature, larger than those of the biblical J Writer's Yahweh, of the Gospel of Mark's Jesus, of Dante the Pilgrim and Chaucer the Pilgrim, of Don Quixote and Esther Summerson, of Proust's narrator and Leopold Bloom. Perhaps indeed it is Falstaff and Hamlet, rather than Shakespeare, who are mortal gods, or perhaps the greatest of wits and the greatest of intellects between them divinized their creator.

What do Falstaff and Hamlet most closely share? If the question can be answered, we might get inside the man Shakespeare, whose personal mystery, for us, is that he seems not at all mysterious to us. Setting mere morality aside, Falstaff and Hamlet palpably are superior to everyone else whom they, and we, encounter in their plays. This superiority is cognitive, linguistic, and imaginative, but most vitally it is a matter of personality. Falstaff and Hamlet are the greatest of charismatics: they embody the Blessing, in its prime Yahwistic sense of "more life into a time without boundaries" (to appropriate from myself). Heroic vitalists are not larger than life; they are life's largeness. Shakespeare, who seems never to have made heroic or vitalistic gestures in his daily life, produced Falstaff and Hamlet as art's tribute to nature. More even than all the other Shakespearean prodigies—Rosalind, Shylock, Iago, Lear, Macbeth, Cleopatra—Falstaff and Hamlet are the invention of the human, the inauguration of personality as we have come to recognize it.

The idea of Western character, of the self as a moral agent, has many sources: Homer and Plato, Aristotle and Sophocles, the Bible and St. Augustine, Dante and Kant, and all you might care to add. 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. Insofar as we ourselves value, and deplore, our own personalities, we are the heirs of Falstaff and of Hamlet, and of all the other persons who throng Shakespeare's theater of what might be called the colors of the spirit.

How skeptical Shakespeare himself may have been of the value of personality, we cannot know. For Hamlet, the self is an abyss, the chaos of virtual nothingness. For Falstaff, the self is everything. Perhaps Hamlet, in Act V, transcends his own nihilism; we cannot be certain, in that ambiguous slaughter that reduces the court at Elsinore to the fop Osric, a few extras, and the inside outsider, Horatio. Is Hamlet self-divested of all his ironies at the end? Why does he give his dying vote to the bully boy Fortinbras, who wastes soldiers' lives in a battle for a barren bit of ground scarcely wide enough to bury their corpses? Falstaff, rejected and destroyed, remains an image of exuberance. His sublime personality, a vast value for us, has not saved him from the hell of betrayed and misplaced affection, and yet our final vision of him, related by Mistress Quickly in *Henry V*, remains a supreme value, evoking the Twenty-third Psalm and a child at play with flowers. It seems odd to observe that Shakespeare gives his two greatest personalities the oxymoron we call "a good death," but how else could we phrase it?

Are there *personalities* (in our sense) in the plays of any of Shakespeare's rivals? Marlowe deliberately kept to cartoons, even in Barabas, wickedest of Jews, and Ben Jonson as deliberately confined himself to ideograms, even in Volpone, whose final punishment so saddens us. I have a great taste for John Webster, but his heroines and villains alike vanish when juxtaposed to those of Shakespeare. Scholars attempt to impress upon us the dramatic virtues of George Chapman and of Thomas Middleton, but no one suggests that either of them could endow a role with human inwardness. It provokes considerable resistance from scholars when I say that Shakespeare invented us, but it would be a statement of a different order if anyone were to assert that our personalities would be different if Jonson and Marlowe had never written. Shakespeare's wonderful joke was to have his Ancient Pistol, Falstaff's follower in *Henry IV, Part Two*, identify himself with Marlowe's Tamburlaine; much slyer was Shakespeare's ironic yet frightening portrait of Marlowe as Edmund, the brilliantly seductive villain of *King Lear*. Malvolio in *Twelfth Night* is both a parodistic portrait of Ben Jonson and a personality so humanly persuasive as to remind the playgoer, unforgettably, that Jonson has no fully human beings in his own plays.

Shakespeare, not only witty in himself but the cause of wit in other men, absorbed his rivals in order to hint that their own extraordinary personalities far surpassed *their* creations, but not what Shakespeare could make of them. And yet Edmund's nihilistic intellect, like Iago's, is dwarfed by Hamlet's, and Malvolio's uneasily comic splendor is a teardrop alongside the cosmological ocean of Falstaff's laughter. We perhaps are too attentive to Shakespeare's theatrical metaphors, to his overt self-awareness as an actor-playwright. His models must have come more frequently from other spheres than his own, yet he may not have been "imitating life" but creating it, in most of his finest work.

What made his art of characterization possible? How can you create beings who are "free artists of themselves," as Hegel called Shakespeare's personages? Since Shakespeare, the best answer might be: "By an imitation of Shakespeare." It cannot be said that Shakespeare imitated Chaucer and the Bible in the sense that he imitated Marlowe and Ovid. He took hints from Chaucer, and they were more important than his Marlovian and Ovidian origins, at least once he had reached the creation of Falstaff. There are traces aplenty of fresh human personalities in Shakespeare before Falstaff: Faulconbridge the Bastard in *King John*, Mercutio in *Romeo and Juliet*, Bottom in *A Midsummer's Night's Dream*. And there is Shylock, at once a fabulous monster, the Jew incarnate, and also a troubling human uneasily joined with the monster in an uncanny blend. But there is a difference in kind between even these and Hamlet, and only a difference in degree between Falstaff and Hamlet. Inwardness becomes the heart of light and of darkness in ways more radical than literature previously could sustain.

Shakespeare's uncanny power in the rendering of personality is perhaps beyond explanation. Why do his personages seem so *real* to us, and how could he contrive that illusion so persuasively? Historical (and historicized) considerations have not aided us much in the answering of such questions. Ideals, both societal and individual, were perhaps more prevalent in Shakespeare's world than they appear to be in ours. Leeds Barroll notes that Renaissance ideals, whether Christian or philosophical or occult, tended to emphasize our need to join something personal that yet was larger than ourselves, God or a spirit. A certain strain or anxiety ensued,

and Shakespeare became the greatest master at exploiting the void between persons and the personal ideal. Did his invention of what we recognize as "personality" result from that exploitation? Certainly we hear Shakespeare's influence upon his disciple John Webster, when Webster's Flamineo, dying at the close of *The White Devil*, cries out:

> While we look up to heaven we confound
> Knowledge with knowledge.

In Webster, even at his best, we can hear the Shakespearean paradoxes ably repeated, but the speakers have no individuality. Who can tell us the personality differences, in *The White Devil*, between Flamineo and Lodovico? Looking up to heaven and confounding knowledge with knowledge do not save Flamineo and Lodovico from being names upon a page. Hamlet, perpetually arguing with himself, does not seem to owe his overwhelming reality to a confounding of personal and ideal knowledge. Rather, Shakespeare gives us a Hamlet who is an agent, rather than an effect, of clashing realizations. We are convinced of Hamlet's superior reality because Shakespeare has made Hamlet free by making him know the truth, truth too intolerable for us to endure. A Shakespearean audience is like the gods in Homer: we look on and listen, and are not tempted to intervene. But we also are unlike the audience constituted by Homer's gods; being mortal, we too confound knowledge with knowledge. We cannot extract, from Shakespeare's era or from our own, social information that will explain his ability to create "forms more real than living men," as Shelley phrased it. Shakespeare's rival playwrights were subject to the same disjunctions between ideas of love, order, and the Eternal as he was, but they gave us eloquent caricatures, at best, rather than men and women.

We cannot know, by reading Shakespeare and seeing him played, whether he had any extrapoetic beliefs or disbeliefs. G. K. Chesterton, a wonderful literary critic, insisted that Shakespeare was a Catholic dramatist, and that Hamlet was more orthodox than skeptical. Both assertions seem to me quite unlikely, yet I do not know, and Chesterton did not know either. Christopher Marlowe had his ambiguities and Ben Jonson his

ambivalences, but sometimes we can hazard surmises as to their personal stances. By reading Shakespeare, I can gather that he did not like lawyers, preferred drinking to eating, and evidently lusted after both genders. But I certainly do not have a clue as to whether he favored Protestantism or Catholicism or neither, and I do not know whether he believed or disbelieved in God or in resurrection. His politics, like his religion, evades me, but I think he was too wary to have any. He sensibly was afraid of mobs and of uprisings, yet he was afraid of authority also. He aspired after gentility, rued having been an actor, and might seem to have valued *The Rape of Lucrece* over *King Lear,* a judgment in which he remains outrageously unique (except, perhaps, for Tolstoy).

Chesterton and Anthony Burgess both stressed Shakespeare's vitality; I would go a touch farther and call Shakespeare a vitalist, like his own Falstaff. Vitalism, which William Hazlitt called "gusto," may be the ultimate clue to Shakespeare's preternatural ability to endow his personages with personalities and with utterly individuated styles of speaking. I scarcely can believe that Shakespeare preferred Prince Hal to Falstaff, as most scholars opine. Hal is a Machiavel; Falstaff, like Ben Jonson himself (and like Shakespeare?), is rammed with life. So, of course, are the great Shakespearean murderous villains: Aaron the Moor, Richard III, Iago, Edmund, Macbeth. So indeed are the comic villains: Shylock, Malvolio, and Caliban. Exuberance, well-nigh apocalyptic in its fervor, is as marked in Shakespeare as it is in Rabelais, Blake, and Joyce. The man Shakespeare, affable and shrewd, was no more Falstaff than he was Hamlet, and yet something in his readers and playgoers perpetually associates the dramatist with both figures. Only Cleopatra and the strongest of the villains—Iago, Edmund, Macbeth—hold on in our memories with the staying force of Falstaff's insouciance and Hamlet's intellectual intensity.

In reading Shakespeare's plays, and to a certain extent in attending their performances, the merely sensible procedure is to immerse yourself in the text and its speakers, and allow your understanding to move outward from what you read, hear, and see to whatever contexts suggest themselves as relevant. That was the procedure from the times of Dr. Johnson and David Garrick, of William Hazlitt and Edmund Kean, through the eras

of A. C. Bradley and Henry Irving, of G. Wilson Knight and John Gielgud. Alas, sensible, even "natural" as this way was, it is now out of fashion, and has been replaced by arbitrary and ideologically imposed contextualization, the staple of our bad time. In "French Shakespeare" (as I shall go on calling it), the procedure is to begin with a political stance all your own, far out and away from Shakespeare's plays, and then to locate some marginal bit of English Renaissance social history that seems to sustain your stance. Social fragment in hand, you move in from outside upon the poor play, and find some connection, however established, between your supposed social fact and Shakespeare's words. It would cheer me to be persuaded that I am parodying the operations of the professors and directors of what I call "Resentment"—those critics who value theory over the literature itself—but I have given a plain account of the going thing, whether in the classroom or on the stage.

Substituting the name of "Shakespeare" for that of "Jesus," I am moved to cite William Blake:

> I am sure this Shakespeare will not do
> Either for Englishman or Jew.

What is inadequate about "French Shakespeare" is hardly that it is not "English Shakespeare," let alone Jewish, Christian, or Islamic Shakespeare: most simply, it is just not Shakespeare, who does not fit very easily into Foucault's "archives" and whose energies were not primarily "social." You can bring absolutely anything to Shakespeare and the plays will light it up, far more than what you bring will illuminate the plays. Though professional resenters insist that the aesthetic stance is itself an ideology, I scarcely agree, and I bring nothing but the aesthetic (in Walter Pater's and Oscar Wilde's language) to Shakespeare in this book. Or rather, he brings it to me, since Shakespeare educated Pater, Wilde, and the rest of us in the aesthetic, which, as Pater observed, is an affair of perceptions and sensations. Shakespeare teaches us how and what to perceive, and he also instructs us how and what to sense and then to experience as sensation. Seeking as he did to enlarge us, not as citizens or as Christians but as con-

sciousnesses, Shakespeare outdid all his preceptors as an entertainer. Our resenters, who can be described (without malice) as gender-and-power freaks, are not much moved by the plays as entertainment.

Though G. K. Chesterton liked to think that Shakespeare was a Catholic, at least in spirit, Chesterton was too good a critic to locate Shakespeare's universalism in Christianity. We might learn from that not to shape Shakespeare by our own cultural politics. Comparing Shakespeare with Dante, Chesterton emphasized Dante's spaciousness in dealing with Christian love and Christian liberty, whereas Shakespeare "was a pagan; in so far that he is at his greatest in describing great spirits in chains." Those "chains" manifestly are not political. They return us to universalism, to Hamlet above all, greatest of all spirits, thinking his way to the truth, of which he perishes. The ultimate use of Shakespeare is to let him teach you to think too well, to whatever truth you can sustain without perishing.

2

It is not an illusion that readers (and playgoers) find more vitality both in Shakespeare's words and in the characters who speak them than in any other author, perhaps in all other authors put together. Early modern English was shaped by Shakespeare: the *Oxford English Dictionary* is made in his image. Later modern human beings are still being shaped by Shakespeare, not as Englishmen, or as American women, but in modes increasingly postnational and postgender. He has become the first universal author, replacing the Bible in the secularized consciousness. Attempts to historicize his ascendancy continue to founder upon the uniqueness of his eminence, for the cultural factors critics find relevant to Shakespeare are precisely as relevant to Thomas Dekker and to George Chapman. Newfangled expositions of Shakespeare do not persuade us, because their implicit program involves diminishing the difference between Shakespeare and the likes of Chapman.

What does not work, pragmatically, is any critical or theatrical fashion that attempts to assimilate Shakespeare to contexts, whether historical or

here-and-now. Demystification is a weak technique to exercise upon the one writer who truly seems to have become himself only by representing other selves. I paraphrase Hazlitt upon Shakespeare; as the subtitle of this book indicates, I happily follow in Hazlitt's wake, seeking the Shakespearean difference, that which overcomes all demarcations between cultures, or within cultures. What allowed Shakespeare to be the supreme *magister ludi?* Nietzsche, like Montaigne a psychologist almost of Shakespeare's power, taught that pain is the authentic origin of human memory. Since Shakespeare is the most memorable of writers, there may be a valid sense in which the pain Shakespeare affords us is as significant as the pleasure. One need not be Dr. Johnson to dread reading, or attending a performance of, *King Lear,* particularly Act V, where Cordelia is murdered, and where Lear dies, holding her corpse in his arms. I myself dread *Othello* even more; its painfulness exceeds all measure, provided that we (and the play's director) grant to Othello his massive dignity and value that alone make his degradation so terrible.

I cannot solve the puzzle of the representation of Shylock or even of Prince Hal/King Henry V. Primal ambivalence, popularized by Sigmund Freud, remains central to Shakespeare, and to a scandalous extent was Shakespeare's own invention. Memorable pain, or memory engendered through pain, ensues from an ambivalence both cognitive and affective, an ambivalence that we associate most readily with Hamlet but that is prepared by Shylock. Perhaps Shylock began as a farcical villain—I once believed this, but now I rather doubt it. The play is Portia's, and not Shylock's, but Shylock is the first of Shakespeare's internalized hero-villains, as contrasted with such externalized forerunners as Aaron the Moor and Richard III. I take it that Prince Hal/Henry V is the next abyss of inwardness after Shylock, and so another hero-villain, a pious and patriotic Machiavel, but the piety and the kingly quality are modifiers, while the hypocrisy is the substantive. Even so, the tenacious and justice-seeking Shylock essentially is a would-be slaughterer, and Shakespeare painfully persuades us that Portia, another delightful hypocrite, prevents an atrocity through her shrewdness. One would hope that *The Merchant of Venice* is painful even for Gentiles, though the hope may be illusory.

What is not illusory is the frightening power of Shylock's will, his demand to have his bond. One surely can speak of the frightening power of Hal/Henry V's will, his demand to have his throne, and France, and absolute sway over everyone, including their hearts and minds. Hamlet's greatness, his transcending of the hero-villain's role, has much to do with his rejection of the will, including the will to avenge, a project he evades by negation, in him a revisionary mode that reduces every context to theater. Shakespeare's theatrical genius is less Iago than Hamlet. Iago is nothing if not critical, but he is, at most, a great criminal-aesthete, and his insight fails him utterly in regard to Emilia, his own wife. Hamlet is much the freer artist, whose insight cannot fail, and who converts his mousetrap into Theater of the World. Where Shylock is an obsessive, and Hal/Henry V an ingrate who fails to see Falstaff's uniqueness, and even Iago never quite gets beyond a sense of the injured self (his own passed-over military virtue), Hamlet consciously takes on the burden of the theater's mystery as augmented by Shakespeare's strength. Hamlet, too, ceases to represent himself and becomes something other than a single self—a something that is a universal figure and not a picnic of selves. Shakespeare became unique by representing other humans; Hamlet is the difference that Shakespeare achieved. I am not suggesting that Hamlet's beautiful disinterestedness in Act V ever was or became one of Shakespeare's personal qualities, but rather that Hamlet's final stance personifies Shakespeare's Negative Capability, as John Keats termed it. At the end, Hamlet is no longer a real personage condemned to suffer inside a play, and the wrong play at that. The personage and the play dissolve into each other, until we have only the cognitive music of "let be" and "Let it be."

3

It is difficult to describe Shakespeare's modes of representation without resorting to oxymorons, since most of these modes are founded upon seeming contradictions. A "naturalistic unreality" suggests itself, to meet Wittgenstein's annoyed comment that life is *not* like Shakespeare. Owen Barfield replied to Wittgenstein in advance (1928):

> . . . there is a very real sense, humiliating as it may seem, in which what we generally venture to call *our* feelings are really Shakespeare's "meaning."

Life itself has become a naturalistic unreality, partly, because of Shakespeare's prevalence. To have invented our feelings is to have gone beyond psychologizing us: Shakespeare made us theatrical, even if we never attend a performance or read a play. After Hamlet literally has stopped the play—to joke about the War of the Theaters, to command the Player King to enact the absurd scene in which Aeneas recounts Priam's slaughter, to admonish the players to a little discipline—we more than ever regard Hamlet as *one of us*, somehow dropped into a role in a play, and the wrong play at that. The prince alone is real; the others, and all the action, constitute theater.

Can we conceive of ourselves without Shakespeare? By "ourselves" I do not mean only actors, directors, teachers, critics, but also you and everyone you know. Our education, in the English-speaking world, but in many other nations as well, has been Shakespearean. Even now, when our education has faltered, and Shakespeare is battered and truncated by our fashionable ideologues, the ideologues themselves are caricatures of Shakespearean energies. Their supposed "politics" reflect the passions of *his* characters, and insofar as they themselves possess any social energies, their secret sense of the societal is oddly Shakespearean. I myself would prefer them to be Machiavels and resenters on the Marlovian model of Barabas, Jew of Malta, but alas, their actual ideological paradigms are Iago and Edmund.

Do Shakespeare's modes of representation *in themselves* betray any ideological turn, whether Christian, skeptical, hermetic, or whatever? The question, difficult to frame, remains urgent in its implications: Is Shakespeare, in his plays, ultimately a celebrant of life, beyond tragedy, or is he pragmatically nihilistic? Since I myself am a heretical transcendentalist, gnostic in orientation, I would be happiest with a Shakespeare who seemed to hold on to at least a secular transcendence, a vision of the sublime. That seems not altogether true; the authentic Shakespearean litany chants

variations upon the word "nothing," and the uncanniness of nihilism haunts almost every play, even the great, relatively unmixed comedies. As a playwright, Shakespeare seems too wise to believe *anything*, and while he seems to know not less than everything, he is careful to keep that knowing several steps short of transcendence. Since his eloquence is comprehensive, and his dramatic concern almost unfaltering, one cannot assign precedence even to the plays' apparent nihilism, and to their clear sense of nature's indifference, alike, to human codes and to human suffering. Still, the nihilism has a peculiar reverberation. We remember Leontes in *The Winter's Tale* hardly at all for his closing repentance—"Both your pardons, / That e'er I put between your holy looks / My ill suspicion"—but for his great paean of "nothings":

> Is this nothing?
> Why then the world and all that's in't, is nothing,
> The covering sky is nothing, Bohemia nothing,
> My wife is nothing, nor nothing have these nothings,
> If this be nothing.

His nihilizing madness matters to us, and his restored sanity does not, since true poetry indeed is of the Devil's party, in William Blake's dialectical sense of the Devil. Nahum Tate's sanitized *King Lear*, with its happy ending of Cordelia married to Edgar, and Lear benignly beaming upon his daughter and his godson, cheered up Dr. Johnson but deprives us of the *kenoma*, the sensible emptiness or waste land in which the actual play by William Shakespeare concludes.

4

Few among us are qualified to testify as to whether God is dead, or alive, or wandering somewhere in exile (the possibility I tend to favor). Some authors indeed are dead, but not William Shakespeare. As for dramatic characters, I never know how to take the assurances (and remonstrances) I receive from Shakespeare's current critics, who tell me that Falstaff,

Hamlet, Rosalind, Cleopatra, and Iago are roles for actors and actresses but not "real people." Impressed as I (sometimes) am by these admonitions, I struggle always with the palpable evidence that my chastisers not only are rather less interesting than Falstaff and Cleopatra, but also are less persuasively alive than Shakespearean figures, who are (to steal from Ben Jonson) "rammed with life." When I was a child, and saw Ralph Richardson play Falstaff, I was so profoundly affected that I could never see Richardson again, on stage or on screen, without identifying him with Falstaff, despite this actor's extraordinary and varied genius. The reality of Falstaff has never left me, and a half century later was the starting point for this book. If a poor player struts and frets his hour upon the stage, and then is heard no more, we can say that a great player reverberates for a lifetime, most particularly if he acts not only a strong role, but a character deeper than life, a wit unmatched by anyone merely real whom we will ever know.

We ought to get these matters the right way round; *we* are not here to make moral judgments concerning Falstaff. Shakespeare perpsectivizes his dramas so that, measure for measure, we are judged even as we attempt to judge. If your Falstaff is a roistering coward, a wastrel confidence man, an uncourted jester to Prince Hal, well, then, we know something of you, but we know no more about Falstaff. If your Cleopatra is an aging whore, and her Antony a would-be Alexander in his dotage, then we know a touch more about you and rather less about them than we should. Hamlet's players hold the mirror up to nature, but Shakespeare's is a mirror within a mirror, and both are mirrors with many voices. Falstaff, Hamlet, Cleopatra, and the rest are not images of voice (as lyric poets can be), and they do not speak either for Shakespeare or for nature. An art virtually unlimited, Shakespearean representation offers us neither nature nor a second nature, neither cosmos nor heterocosm. "The art itself is nature" (*The Winter's Tale*) is a wonderfully ambiguous declaration. If I am right in finding true Shakespearean character first in Faulconbridge the Bastard in *King John* and last in *The Tempest*, that still sets aside superb plays with a very different sort of characterization, ranging from the perplexed triad of *Troilus and Cressida*, *All's Well That Ends Well*, and *Measure for Measure* on to the

hieratic figures of *The Two Noble Kinsmen*. That is to say, Shakespearean characterization is finally so varied that we cannot call any one mode of it "true."

5

Pragmatically there is little difference between speaking of "Hamlet as a character" and "Hamlet as a role for an actor." Yet, mostly because of the peculiarities of modern criticism, the time has come around when it seems salutory to speak again of "literary and dramatic character" in order better to comprehend Shakespeare's men and women. Very little is gained by reminding us that Hamlet is made up of and by words, that he is "just" a grouping of marks upon a page. "Character" means both a letter of the alphabet, and also ethos, a person's habitual way of life. Literary and dramatic character is an imitation of human character, or so we once thought, on the premise that words were as much like people as they were like things. Words of course refer to other words, but their impact upon us emanates, as Martin Price says, from the empiric realm where we live, and where we attribute values and meanings, to our ideas of persons. Such attributions are a kind of fact, and so are our impressions that some literary and dramatic characters reinforce our ideas of persons and some do not.

There are two contradictory ways to account for Shakespeare's eminence. If, for you, literature is primarily language, then the primacy of Shakespeare is only a cultural phenomenon, produced by sociopolitical urgencies. In this view, Shakespeare did not write Shakespeare—his plays were written by the social, political, and economic energies of his age. But so was everything else, then and now, because certain more or less recent Parisian speculators have convinced many (if not most) academic critics that there are no authors anyway.

The other way of exploring Shakespeare's continued supremacy is rather more empirical: he has been universally judged to be a more adequate representer of the universe of fact than anyone else, before him or since. This judgment has been dominant since at least the mid–eighteenth century; it has been staled by repetition, yet it remains merely true, banal

as resentful theorists find it to be. We keep returning to Shakespeare because we need him; no one else gives us so much of the world most of us take to be fact. But in the book that follows, I will not just begin with the assumption that Shakespeare palpably was much the best writer we ever will know. Shakespeare's originality in the representation of character will be demonstrated throughout, as will the extent to which we all of us were, to a shocking degree, pragmatically reinvented by Shakespeare. Our ideas as to what makes the self authentically human owe more to Shakespeare than ought to be possible, but then he has become a Scripture, not to be read as many of us read the Bible or the Koran or Joseph Smith's Doctrines and Covenants, but also not to be read as we read Cervantes or Dickens or Walt Whitman. *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare* could as soon be called *The Book of Reality*, fantastic as so much of Shakespeare deliberately intends to be. I have written elsewhere that Shakespeare is not only in himself the Western canon; he has become the universal canon, perhaps the only one that can survive the current debasement of our teaching institutions, here and abroad. Every other great writer may fall away, to be replaced by the anti-elitist swamp of Cultural Studies. Shakespeare will abide, even if he were to be expelled by the academics, in itself most unlikely. He extensively informs the language we speak, his principal characters have become our mythology, and he, rather than his involuntary follower Freud, is our psychologist. His persuasiveness has its unfortuante aspects; *The Merchant of Venice* may have been more of an incitement to anti-Semitism than *The Protocols of the Learned Elders of Zion*, though less than the Gospel of John. We pay a price for what we gain from Shakespeare.

11

A MIDSUMMER NIGHT'S DREAM

In the midst of the winter of 1595–96, Shakespeare visualized an ideal summer, and he composed *A Midsummer Night's Dream,* probably on commission for a noble marriage, where first it was played. He had written *Richard II* and *Romeo and Juliet* during 1595; just ahead would come *The Merchant of Venice* and Falstaff's advent in *Henry IV, Part One.* Nothing by Shakespeare before *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is its equal, and in some respects nothing by him afterward surpasses it. It is his first undoubted masterwork, without flaw, and one of his dozen or so plays of overwhelming originality and power. Unfortunately, every production of it that I have been able to attend has been a brutal disaster, with the exception of Peter Hall's motion picture of 1968, happily available on videotape. Only *The Tempest* is as much distorted in recent stagings as *A Midsummer Night's Dream* has been and is likely to go on being. The worst I recall are Peter Brook's (1970) and Alvin Epstein's (a Yale hilarity of 1975), but I cannot be the only lover of the play who rejects the prevailing notion that sexual violence and bestiality are at the center of this humane and wise drama.

Sexual politics is too much in fashion for me just to shudder and pass by; *A Midsummer Night's Dream* will reassert itself, at a better time than this, but I have much to say on behalf of Bottom, Shakespeare's most engaging character before Falstaff. Bottom, as the play's text comically makes clear, has considerably less sexual interest in Titania than she does in him, or than many recent critics and directors have in her. Shakespeare, here and elsewhere, is bawdy but not prurient; Bottom is amiably innocent, and not very bawdy. Sex-and-violence exalters really should look elsewhere; *Titus Andronicus* would be a fine start. If Shakespeare had desired to write an orgiastic ritual, with Bottom as "this Bacchic ass of Saturnalia and carnival" (Jan Kott), we would have a different comedy. What we do have is a gentle, mild, good-natured Bottom, who is rather more inclined to the company of the elves—Peaseblossom, Cobweb, Moth, and Mustardseed—than to the madly infatuated Titania. In an age of critical and theatrical absurdity, I may yet live to be told that Bottom's interest in the little folk represents a potential for child abuse, which would be no sillier than the ongoing accounts of *A Midsummer Night's Dream.*

It is a curious link between *The Tempest, Love's Labour's Lost,* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream* that these are the three plays, out of thirty-nine, where Shakespeare does not follow a primary source. Even *The Merry Wives of Windsor,* which has no definite source, takes a clear starting point from Ovid. *The Tempest* is essentially plotless, and almost nothing happens in *Love's Labour's Lost,* but Shakespeare uniquely took pains to work out a fairly elaborate and outrageous plot for *A Midsummer Night's Dream.* Inventing plot was not a Shakespearean gift; it was the one dramatic talent that nature had denied him. I think he prided himself on creating and intertwining the four different worlds of character in the *Dream.* Theseus and Hippolyta belong to ancient myth and legend. The lovers—Hermia, Helena, Lysander, and Demetrius—are of no definite time or place, since all young people in love notoriously dwell in a common element. The fairies—Titania, Oberon, Puck, and Bottom's four chums—emerge from literary folklore and its magic. And finally, the "mechanicals" are English rustic artisans—the sublime Bottom, Peter Quince, Flute, Snout, Snug, and Starveling—and so come out of Shakespeare's own countryside, where he grew up.

This mélange is so diverse that a defense of it becomes the hidden reference in the wonderfully absurd exchanges between Theseus and Hippolyta concerning the music of the hounds in Act IV, Scene i, lines 103–27, which I will consider in some detail later. "So musical a discord, such sweet thunder" has been widely and correctly taken as this play's description of itself. Chesterton, who sometimes thought the *Dream* the greatest of all

Shakespeare's plays, found its "supreme literary merit" to be "a merit of design."

As an epithalamium, the *Dream* ends with three weddings, and the reconciliation of Oberon and Titania. But we might not know that all this was an extended and elaborate marriage song if the scholars did not tell us, and from the title on we do know that it is (at least in part) a dream. Whose dream? One answer is: Bottom's dream or his weaving, because he *is* the protagonist (and the greatest glory) of the play. Puck's epilogue, however, calls it the audience's dream, and we do not know precisely how to receive Puck's apologia. Bottom is universal enough (like Joyce's Poldy Bloom or Earwicker) to weave a common dream for all of us, except insofar as we are Pucks rather than Bottoms. How are we meant to understand the play's title? C. L. Barber pointed out Dr. Johnson's error in believing that "the rite of May" must take place on May Day, since the young went Maying when the impulse moved them. We are neither at May Day nor at Midsummer Eve, and so the title probably should be read as *any* night at all in midsummer. There is a casual, throwaway gesture in the title: this could be anyone's dream or any night in midsummer, when the world is largest.

Bottom is Shakespeare's Everyman, a true original, a clown rather than a fool or jester. He is a wise clown, though he smilingly denies his palpable wisdom, as if his innocent vanity did not extend to such pretension. One delights in Falstaff (unless one is an academic moralist), but one loves Bottom, though necessarily he is the lesser figure of the two. No one in Shakespeare, not even Hamlet or Rosalind, Iago or Edmund, is more intelligent than Falstaff. Bottom is as shrewd as he is kind, but he is not a wit, and Falstaff is Monarch of Wit. Every exigency finds Bottom round and ready: his response is always admirable. The Puck-induced metamorphosis is a mere externality: the inner Bottom is unfazed and immutable. Shakespeare foregrounds Bottom by showing us that he is the favorite of his fellow mechanicals: they acclaim him as "bully Bottom," and we learn to agree with them.

Like Dogberry after him, Bottom is an ancestor of Sheridan's Mrs. Malaprop, and uses certain words without knowing what they signify. Though he is thus sometimes inaccurate at the circumference, he is always sound

at the core, which is what Bottom the Weaver's name means, the center of the skein upon which the weaver's wool is wound. There are folkloric magical associations attendant upon weaving, and Puck's choice of Bottom for enchantment is therefore not as arbitrary as first it seems. Whether or not Bottom (very briefly) becomes the carnal lover of the Fairy Queen Shakespeare leaves ambiguous or elliptical, probably because it is unimportant compared with Bottom's uniqueness in the *Dream*: he alone sees and converses with the fairy folk. The childlike fourfold of Peaseblossom, Moth, Cobweb, and Mustardseed are as charmed by Bottom as he is by them. They recognize themselves in the amiable weaver, and he beholds much that is already his own in them. "On the loftiest of the world's thrones we still are sitting on our own Bottom," Montaigne taught Shakespeare and the rest of us in his greatest essay, "Of Experience." Bottom the natural man is also the transcendental Bottom, who is just as happily at home with Cobweb and Peaseblossom as he is with Snug and Peter Quince. For him there is no musical discord or confusion in the overlapping realms of the *Dream*. It is absurd to condescend to Bottom: he is at once a sublime clown and a great visionary.

2

There is no darkness in Bottom, even when he is caught up in an enchanted condition. Puck, his antithesis, is an ambivalent figure, a mischief maker at best, and something weirder also, though the play (and Oberon) confine him to harmlessness, and indeed bring benignity out of his antics. Puck's alternate name in both the play and in popular lore is Robin Goodfellow, more a prankster than a wicked sprite, though to call him "Goodfellow" suggests a need to placate him. The word *puck* or *pook* originally meant a demon out for mischief or a wicked man, and Robin Goodfellow was once a popular name for the Devil. Yet throughout the *Dream* he plays Ariel to Oberon's Prospero, and so is under firmly benign control. At the end of the play, Bottom is restored to his external guise, the lovers pair off sensibly, and Oberon and Titania resume their union. "But we are spirits of another sort," Oberon remarks, and even Puck is therefore benevolent in the *Dream*.

The Puck–Bottom contrast helps define the world of the *Dream*. Bottom, the best sort of natural man, is subject to the pranks of Puck, helpless to avoid them, and unable to escape their influence without Oberon's order of release: though the *Dream* is a romantic comedy, and not an allegory, part of its power is to suggest that Bottom and Puck are invariable components of the human. One of the etymological meanings of "bottom" is the ground or the earth, and perhaps people can be divided into the earthy and the puckish, and are so divided within themselves. And yet Bottom is human, and Puck is not; since he has no human feelings, Puck has no precise human meaning.

Bottom is an early Shakespearean instance of how meaning gets started, rather than merely repeated: as in the greater Falstaff, Shakespearean meaning comes from excess, overflow, florabundance. Bottom's consciousness, unlike Falstaff's and Hamlet's, is not infinite; we learn its circumferences, and some of them are silly. But Bottom is heroically sound in the goodness of his heart, his bravery, his ability to remain himself in any circumstance, his refusal to panic or even be startled. Like Launce and the Bastard Faulconbridge, Bottom is a triumphant early instance of Shakespeare's invention of the human. All of them are on the road to Falstaff, who will surpass them even in their exuberance of being, and vastly is beyond them as a source for meaning. Falstaff, the ultimate anarchist, is as dangerous as he is fascinating, both life-enhancing and potentially destructive. Bottom is a superb comic, and a very good man, as benign as any in Shakespeare.

3

Doubtless Shakespeare remembered that in Edmund Spenser's *The Faerie Queene* Oberon was the benevolent father of Gloriana, who in the allegory of Spenser's great epic represented Queen Elizabeth herself. Scholars believe it likely that Elizabeth was present at the initial performance of the *Dream*, where necessarily she would have been the Guest of Honor at the wedding. *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, like *Love's Labour's Lost*, *The Tempest*, and *Henry VIII*, abounds in pageantry. This aspect of the *Dream* is wonderfully

analyzed in C. L. Barber's *Shakespeare's Festive Comedy*, and has little to do with my prime emphasis on the Shakespearean invention of character and personality. As an aristocratic entertainment, the *Dream* bestows relatively little of its energies upon making Theseus and Hippolyta, Oberon and Titania, and the four young lovers lost in the woods into idiosyncratic and distinct personages. Bottom and the uncanny Puck are protagonists, and are portrayed in detail. Everyone else—even the other colorful Mechanicals—are subdued to the emblematic quality that pageantry tends to require. Still, Shakespeare seems to have looked beyond the play's initial occasion to its other function as a work for the public stage, and there are small, sometimes very subtle touches of characterization that transcend the function of an aristocratic epithalamium. Hermia has considerably more personality than Helena, while Lysander and Demetrius are interchangeable, a Shakespearean irony that suggests the arbitrariness of young love, from the perspective of everyone except the lover. But then all love is ironical in the *Dream*: Hippolyta, though apparently resigned, is a captive bride, a partly tamed Amazon, while Oberon and Titania are so accustomed to mutual sexual betrayal that their actual rift has nothing to do with passion but concerns the protocol of just who has charge of a changeling human child, a little boy currently under Titania's care. Though the greatness of the *Dream* begins and ends in Bottom, who makes his first appearance in the play's second scene, and in Puck, who begins Act II, we are not transported by the sublime language unique to this drama until Oberon and Titania first confront each other:

> *Obe.* Ill met by moonlight, proud Titania.
> *Tita.* What, jealous Oberon? Fairies, skip hence; I have forsworn his
> bed and company.
> *Obe.* Tarry, rash wanton; am not I thy lord?
> *Tita.* Then I must be thy lady; but I know
> When thou hast stol'n away from fairy land,
> And in the shape of Corin, sat all day
> Playing on pipes of corn, and versing love
> To amorous Phillida. Why art thou here,

Come from the farthest step of India,
But that, forsooth, the bouncing Amazon,
Your buskin'd mistress and your warrior love,
To Theseus must be wedded, and you come
To give their bed joy and prosperity?

Obe. How canst thou thus, for shame, Titania,
Glance at my credit with Hippolyta,
Knowing I know thy love to Theseus?
Didst not thou lead him through the glimmering night
From Perigouna, whom he ravished;
And make him with fair Aegles break his faith,
With Ariadne and Antiopa?

[II.i.60–80]

In Plutarch's *Life of Theseus*, read by Shakespeare in Sir Thomas North's rsion, Theseus is credited with many "ravishments," cheerfully itemized re by Oberon, who assigns Titania the role of bawd, guiding the Athe- ın hero to his conquests, herself doubtless included. Though Titania ll retort that "These are the forgeries of jealousy," they are just as per- ısive as her visions of Oberon "versing love / To amorous Phillida," and ioying "the bouncing Amazon," Hippolyta. The Theseus of the *Dream* pears to have retired from his womanizings into rational respectability, th its attendant moral obtuseness. Hippolyta, though championed as a :tim by feminist critics, shows little aversion to being wooed by the ord and seems content to dwindle into Athenian domesticity after her ɔloits with Oberon, though she retains a vision all her own, as will be :n. What Titania magnificently goes on to tell us is that discord be- een herself and Oberon is a disaster for both the natural and the human ılm:

Tita. These are the forgeries of jealousy:
And never, since the middle summer's spring,
Met we on hill, in dale, forest or mead,
By paved fountain, or by rushy brook,

Or in the beached margent of the sea,
To dance our ringlets to the whistling wind,
But with thy brawls thou hast disturb'd our sport.
Therefore the winds, piping to us in vain,
As in revenge have suck'd up from the sea
Contagious fogs; which, falling in the land,
Hath every pelting river made so proud
That they have overborne their continents.
The ox hath therefore stretch'd his yoke in vain,
The ploughman lost his sweat, and the green corn
Hath rotted ere his youth attain'd a beard;
The fold stands empty in the drowned field,
And crows are fatted with the murrion flock;
The nine-men's-morris is fill'd up with mud,
And the quaint mazes in the wanton green
For lack of tread are undistinguishable.
The human mortals want their winter cheer:
No night is now with hymn or carol blest.
Therefore the moon, the governess of floods,
Pale in her anger, washes all the air,
That rheumatic diseases do abound.
And thorough this distemperature we see
The seasons alter: hoary-headed frosts
Fall in the fresh lap of the crimson rose;
And on old Hiems' thin and icy crown,
An odorous chaplet of sweet summer buds
Is, as in mockery, set; the spring, the summer,
The childing autumn, angry winter, change
Their wonted liveries; and the mazed world,
By their increase, now knows not which is which.
And this same progeny of evils comes
From our debate, from our dissension;
We are their parents and original.

[II.i.81–117]

No previous poetry by Shakespeare achieved this extraordinary qual-
y; he finds here one of his many authentic voices, the paean of natural
ment. Power in the *Dream* is magical rather than political; Theseus is ig-
orant when he assigns power to the paternal, or to masculine sexuality.
)ur contemporary heirs of the materialist metaphysics of Iago, Thersites,
nd Edmund see Oberon as only another assertion of masculine authority,
ut they need to ponder Titania's lamentation. Oberon is superior in trick-
y, since he controls Puck, and he will win Titania back to what he con-
ders his kind of amity. But is that a reassertion of male dominance, or
f something much subtler? The issue between the fairy queen and king
a custody dispute: "I do but beg a little changeling boy / To be my
enchman"—that is, Oberon's page of honor in his court. Rather than the
nbounded prurience that many critics insist upon, I see nothing but an in-
ocent assertion of sovereignty in Oberon's whim, or in Titania's poignant
nd beautiful refusal to yield up the child:

> Set your heart at rest:
> The fairy land buys not the child of me.
> His mother was a votress of my order;
> And in the spiced Indian air, by night,
> Full often hath she gossip'd by my side;
> And sat with me on Neptune's yellow sands,
> Marking th'embarked traders on the flood:
> When we have laugh'd to see the sails conceive
> And grow big-bellied with the wanton wind;
> Which she, with pretty and with swimming gait
> Following (her womb then rich with my young squire),
> Would imitate, and sail upon the land
> To fetch me trifles, and return again
> As from a voyage rich with merchandise.
> But she, being mortal, of that boy did die;
> And for her sake do I rear up her boy;
> And for her sake I will not part with him.
>
> [II.i.121–37]

Ruth Nevo accurately observes that Titania has so assimilated her votaries to herself that the changeling child has become her own, in a relationship that firmly excludes Oberon. To make the boy his henchman would be an assertion of adoption, like Prospero's initial stance toward Caliban, and Oberon will utilize Puck to achieve this object. But why should Oberon, who is not jealous of Theseus, and is willing to be cuckolded by Titania's enchantment, feel so fiercely in regard to the changeling's custody? Shakespeare will not tell us, and so we must interpret this ellipsis for ourselves.

One clear implication is that Oberon and Titania have no male child of their own; Oberon being immortal need not worry about an heir, but evidently he has paternal aspirations that his henchman Puck cannot satisfy. It may also be relevant that the changeling boy's father was an Indian king, and that tradition traces Oberon's royal lineage to an Indian emperor. What matters most appears to be Titania's refusal to allow Oberon any share in her adoption of the child. Perhaps David Wiles is correct in arguing that Oberon desires to parallel the pattern of Elizabethan aristocratic marriages, where the procreation of a male heir was the highest object, though Elizabeth herself as Virgin Queen undoes the tradition, and Elizabeth is the ultimate patroness of the *Dream*.

I think the quarrel between Titania and Oberon is subtler, and turns on the question of the links between mortals and immortals in the play. Theseus's and Hippolyta's amours with the fairies are safely in the past, and Oberon and Titania, however estranged from each other, have arrived in the wood near Athens to bless the wedding of their former lovers. Bottom, one of the least likely of mortals, will sojourn briefly among the fairies, but his metamorphosis, when it comes, is merely outward. The Indian child is a true changeling; he will live out his life among the immortals. That is anything but irrelevant to Oberon: he and his subjects have their mysteries, jealously guarded from mortals. To exclude Oberon from the child's company is therefore not just a challenge to male authority; it is a wrong done to Oberon, and one that he must reverse and subsume in the name of the legitimacy in leadership that he shares with Titania. As Oberon says, it is an "injury."

To torment Titania away from her resolution, Oberon invokes what becomes the most beautiful of Shakespeare's visions in the play:

Obe. Thou remembʼrest
Since once I sat upon a promontory,
And heard a mermaid on a dolphin's back
Uttering such dulcet and harmonious breath
That the rude sea grew civil at her song
And certain stars shot madly from their spheres
To hear the sea maid's music?
Puck. I remember.
Obe. That very time I saw (but thou couldst not),
Flying between the cold moon and the earth,
Cupid all arm'd: a certain aim he took
At a fair vestal, throned by the west,
And loos'd his love-shaft smartly from his bow
As it should pierce a hundred thousand hearts.
But I might see young Cupid's fiery shaft
Quench'd in the chaste beams of the watery moon;
And the imperial votress passed on,
In maiden meditation, fancy-free.
Yet mark'd I where the bolt of Cupid fell:
It fell upon a little western flower,
Before milk-white, now purple with love's wound:
And maidens call it 'love-in-idleness'.
Fetch me that flower; the herb I show'd thee once.
The juice of it, on sleeping eyelids laid,
Will make or man or woman madly dote
Upon the next live creature that it sees.
Fetch me this herb, and be thou here again
Ere the leviathan can swim a league.
Puck. I'll put a girdle round about the earth
In forty minutes.
Obe. Having once this juice,

I'll watch Titania when she is asleep,
And drop the liquor of it in her eyes:
The next thing then she waking looks upon
(Be it on lion, bear, or wolf, or bull,
On meddling monkey, or on busy ape)
She shall pursue it with the soul of love.
And ere I take this charm from off her sight
(As I can take it with another herb)
I'll make her render up her page to me.

[II.i.148–85]

The flower love-in-idleness is the pansy; the "fair vestal, throned by the west" is Queen Elizabeth I, and one function of this fairy vision is to constitute Shakespeare's largest and most direct tribute to his monarch during her lifetime. She passes on, and remains fancy-free; the arrow of Cupid, unable to wound the Virgin Queen, instead converts the pansy into a universal love charm. It is as though Elizabeth's choice of chastity opens up a cosmos of erotic possibilities for others, but at the high cost of accident and arbitrariness replacing her reasoned choice. Love at first sight, exalted in *Romeo and Juliet,* is pictured here as calamity. The ironic possibilities of the love elixir are first intimated when, in one of the play's most exquisite passages, Oberon plots the ensnarement of Titania:

I know a bank where the wild thyme blows,
Where oxlips and the nodding violet grows,
Quite over-canopied with luscious woodbine,
With sweet musk-roses, and with eglantine.
There sleeps Titania sometime of the night,
Lull'd in these flowers with dances and delight;
And there the snake throws her enamell'd skin,
Weed wide enough to wrap a fairy in;
And with the juice of this I'll streak her eyes,
And make her full of hateful fantasies.

[II.i.249–58]

The contrast between those first six lines and the four that come after grants us an aesthetic *frisson*; the transition is from Keats and Tennyson to Browning and the early T. S. Eliot, as Oberon modulates from sensuous naturalism to grotesque gusto. Shakespeare thus prepares the way for the play's great turning point in Act III, Scene i, where Puck transforms Bottom, and Titania wakens with the great outcry, "What angel wakes me from my flowery bed?" The angel is the imperturbable Bottom, who is sublimely undismayed that his amiable countenance has metamorphosed into an ass head.

This wonderfully comic scene deserves pondering: Who among us could sustain so weird a calamity with so equable a spirit? One feels that Bottom could have undergone the fate of Kafka's Gregor Samsa with only moderate chagrin. He enters almost on cue, chanting, "If I were fair, Thisbe, I were only thine," scattering his fellows. Presumably discouraged at his inability to frighten Bottom, the frustrated Puck chases after the Mechanicals, taking on many fearsome guises. Our bully Bottom responds to Peter Quince's "Bless thee, Bottom, bless thee! Thou art translated," by cheerfully singing a ditty hinting at cuckoldry, thus preparing us for a comic dialogue that even Shakespeare was never to surpass:

Tita. I pray thee, gentle mortal, sing again:
Mine ear is much enamour'd of thy note;
So is mine eye enthralled to thy shape;
And thy fair virtue's force perforce doth move me
On the first view to say, to swear, I love thee.
Bot. Methinks, mistress, you should have little reason for that. And yet, to say the truth, reason and love keep little company together nowadays. The more the pity that some honest neighbours will not make them friends. Nay, I can gleek upon occasion.
Tita. Thou art as wise as thou art beautiful.
Bot. Not so neither; but if I had wit enough to get out of this wood, I have enough to serve my own turn.
Tita. Out of this wood do not desire to go:
Thou shalt remain here, whether thou wilt or no.
[III.i.132–46]

Even C. L. Barber somewhat underestimates Bottom, when he says that Titania and Bottom are "fancy against fact," since "enchantment against Truth" is more accurate. Bottom is unfailingly courteous, courageous, kind, and sweet-tempered, and he humors the beautiful queen whom he clearly knows to be quite mad. The ironies here are fully in Bottom's control, and are kept gentle by his tact. Nothing else in the *Dream* is as pithy an account of its erotic confusions: "reason and love keep little company together nowadays." Bottom too can "gleek" (jest) upon occasion, which is the only other possibility, should poor Titania prove to be sane. Neither wise nor beautiful, Bottom sensibly wishes to get out of the wood, but he does not seem particularly alarmed when Titania tells him he is a prisoner. Her proud assertion of rank and self is hilarious in its absurd confidence that she can purge Bottom's "mortal grossness" and transform him into another "airy spirit," as though he could be another changeling like the Indian boy:

Tita. I am a spirit of no common rate;
The summer still doth tend upon my state;
And I do love thee: therefore go with me.
I'll give thee fairies to attend on thee;
And they shall fetch thee jewels from the deep,
And sing, while thou on pressed flowers dost sleep:
And I will purge thy mortal grossness so,
That thou shalt like an airy spirit go.
Peaseblossom! Cobweb! Moth! And Mustardseed!
[III.i.147–55]

Bottom, amiable enough to the infatuated Titania, is truly charmed by the four elves, and they by Bottom, who would be one of them even without benefit of Puckish translation:

Peas. Ready.
Cob. And I.
Moth. And I.
Mus. And I.
All. Where shall we go?

Tita. Be kind and courteous to this gentleman;
Hop in his walks, and gambol in his eyes;
Feed him with apricocks and dewberries,
With purple grapes, green figs, and mulberries;
The honey-bags steal from the humble-bees,
And for night-tapers crop their waxen thighs,
And light them at the fiery glow-worms' eyes,
To have my love to bed, and to arise;
And pluck the wings from painted butterflies
To fan the moonbeams from his sleeping eyes.
Nod to him, elves, and do him courtesies.

Peas. Hail, mortal!

Cob. Hail!

Moth. Hail!

Mus. Hail!

Bot. I cry your worships mercy, heartily. I beseech your worship's name?

Cob. Cobweb.

Bot. I shall desire you of more acquaintance, good Master Cobweb: if I cut my finger, I shall make bold with you. Your name, honest gentleman?

Peas. Peaseblossom.

Bot. I pray you, commend me to Mistress Squash, your mother, and to Master Peascod, your father. Good Master Peaseblossom, I shall desire you of more acquaintance too. Your name, I beseech you sir?

Mus. Mustardseed.

Bot. Good Master Mustardseed, I know your patience well. That same cowardly giant-like ox-beef hath devoured many a gentleman of your house: I promise you, your kindred hath made my eyes water ere now. I desire you of more acquaintance, good Master Mustardseed.

[III.i.156–89]

Though Titania will follow this colloquy of innocents by ordering the elves to lead Bottom to her bower, it remains ambiguous exactly what

transpires there amidst the nodding violet, luscious woodbine, and sweet musk roses. If you are not Jan Kott or Peter Brook, does it matter? Does one remember the play for "orgiastic bestiality" or for Peaseblossom, Cobweb, Moth, and Mustardseed? Undoubtedly played by children then, as they are now, these elves are adept at stealing from honeybees and butterflies, a precarious art emblematic of the entire *Dream*. Bottom's grave courtesy to them and their cheerful attentiveness to him help establish an affinity that suggests what is profoundly childlike (not childish, not bestial) about Bottom. The problem with reacting to resenters is that I sometimes hear the voice of my late mentor, Frederick A. Pottle, of Yale, admonishing me: "Mr. Bloom, stop beating dead woodchucks!" I will do so, and am content to cite Empson on Kott:

> I take my stand beside the other old buffers here. Kott is ridiculously indifferent to the Letter of the play and labors to befoul its spirit.

Fairies in general (Puck in particular) are likely to miss one target and hit another. Instructed by Oberon to divert Demetrius's passion from Hermia to Helena, Puck errs and transforms Lysander into Helena's pursuer. When Puck gets it right at second try, the foursome become more absurd than ever, with Helena, believing herself mocked, fleeing both suitors, while Hermia languishes in a state of amazement. Act III concludes with all four exhausted lovers being put to sleep by Puck, who carefully rearranges Lysander's affections to their original object, Hermia, while keeping Demetrius enthralled by Helena. This raises the happy irony that the play will never resolve: Does it make any difference at all who marries whom? Shakespeare's pragmatic answer is: Not much, whether in this comedy or another, since all marriages seem in Shakespeare to be headed for unhappiness. Shakespeare seems always to hold what I call the "black box" theory of object choice. The airliner goes down, and we seek out the black box to learn the cause of the catastrophe, but our black boxes are unfindable, and our marital disasters are as arbitrary as our successes. Perhaps this should be called "Puck's Law": who can say whether Demetrius-Helena or Lysander-Hermia will prove the better match? Act III of the *Dream* brushes aside any such question, ending as it does with Puck singing:

Jack shall have Jill,
Nought shall go ill.

[III.ii.461–62]

4

Everyone should collect favorite acts in Shakespeare; one of mine would be Act IV of the *Dream,* where wonder crowds wonder and eloquence overflows, as Shakespeare manifests his creative exuberance without pause. The orgiastic reading is prophetically dismissed by the first scene, where Titania sits the amiable Bottom down upon a flowery bed, caresses his cheeks, sticks musk roses in his head, and kisses his ears. This scarcely arouses Bottom to lust:

Bot. Where's Peaseblossom?
Peas. Ready.
Bot. Scratch my head, Peaseblossom. Where's Mounsieur Cobweb?
Cob. Ready.
Bot. Mounsieur Cobweb, good mounsieur, get you your weapons in your hand, and kill me a red-hipped humble-bee on the top of a thistle; and good mounsieur, bring me the honey-bag. Do not fret yourself too much in the action, mounsieur; and good mounsieur, have a care the honey-bag break not; I would be loath to have you overflowen with a honey-bag, signior. Where's Mounsieur Mustardseed?
Mus. Ready.
Bot. Give me your neaf, Mounsieur Mustardseed. Pray you, leave your courtesy, good mounsieur.
Mus. What's your will?
Bot. Nothing, good mounsieur, but to help Cavalery Cobweb to scratch. I must to the barber's, mounsieur, for methinks I am marvellous hairy about the face; and I am such a tender ass, if my hair do but tickle me, I must scratch.
Tita. What, wilt thou hear some music, my sweet love?

Bot. I have a reasonable good ear in music. Let's have the tongs and the bones.
Tita. Or say, sweet love, what thou desir'st to eat?
Bot. Truly, a peck of provender; I could munch your good dry oats. Methinks I have a great desire to a bottle of hay: good hay, sweet hay, hath no fellow.

[IV.i.5–33]

What hath Puck wrought: for Titania, a considerable indignity, no doubt, but for Bottom a friendship with four elves. Since Bottom is getting drowsy, we can understand his mixing up Cobweb with Peaseblossom, but he is otherwise much himself, even if his eating habits perforce are altered. He falls asleep, entwined with the rapt Titania, in a charmingly innocent embrace. Oberon informs us that, since she has surrendered the changeling boy to him, all is forgiven so that Puck can cure her enchantment, and in passing, Bottom's, though the weaver resolutely goes on sleeping. Shakespeare's touch here is astonishingly light; metamorphoses are represented by the dance of reconciliation that restores the marriage of Oberon and Titania:

Come my queen, take hands with me,
And rock the ground whereon these sleepers be.

[IV.i.84–85]

The four lovers and Bottom stay fast asleep even as Theseus, Hippolyta, and their train make a boisterous entry with a dialogue that is Shakespeare's bravura defense of his art of fusion in this play:

The. Go one of you, find out the forester;
For now our observation is perform'd,
And since we have the vaward of the day,
My love shall hear the music of my hounds.
Uncouple in the western valley; let them go;
Dispatch I say, and find the forester. [*Exit an Attendant.*]

We will, fair queen, up to the mountain's top,
And mark the musical confusion
Of hounds and echo in conjunction.

Hip. I was with Hercules and Cadmus once,
When in a wood of Crete they bay'd the bear
With hounds of Sparta; never did I hear
Such gallant chiding; for, besides the groves,
The skies, the fountains, every region near
Seem'd all one mutual cry; I never heard
So musical a discord, such sweet thunder.

The. My hounds are bred out of the Spartan kind,
So flew'd, so sanded; and their heads are hung
With ears that sweep away the morning dew;
Crook-knee'd and dewlapp'd like Thessalian bulls;
Slow in pursuit, but match'd in mouth like bells,
Each under each: a cry more tuneable
Was never holla'd to, nor cheer'd with horn,
In Crete, in Sparta, nor in Thessaly.
Judge when you hear. But soft, what nymphs are these?

[IV.i.102–26]

The musical discord holds together four different modes of representation: Theseus and Hippolyta, from classical legend; the four young lovers, from every place and every time; Bottom and his fellow English rustics; the fairies, who in themselves are madly eclectic. Titania is Ovid's alternate name for Diana, while Oberon comes out of Celtic romance, and Puck or Robin Goodfellow is English folklore. In their delightfully insane dialogue, Theseus and Hippolyta join in celebrating the wonderful nonsense of the Spartan hounds, bred only for their baying, so that they are "slow in pursuit." Shakespeare celebrates the "sweet thunder" of his comic extravagance, which like Theseus's hounds is in no particular hurry to get anywhere, and which still has superb surprises for us. I pass over the awakening of the four lovers (Demetrius now in love with Helena) to come at the finest speech Shakespeare had yet written, Bottom's sublime reverie upon waking up:

Bot. When my cue comes, call me and I will answer. My next is 'Most fair Pyramus'. Heigh-ho! Peter Quince? Flute, the bellows-mender? Snout, the tinker? Starveling? God's my life! Stolen hence, and left me asleep! I have had a most rare vision. I have had a dream, past the wit of man to say what dream it was. Man is but an ass if he go about to expound this dream. Methought I was—there is no man can tell what. Methought I was—and methought I had—but man is but a patched fool if he will offer to say what methought I had. The eye of man hath not heard, the ear of man hath not seen, man's hand is not able to taste, his tongue to conceive, nor his heart to report, what my dream was. I will get Peter Quince to write a ballad of this dream: it shall be called 'Bottom's Dream', because it hath no bottom; and I will sing it in the latter end of a play, before the Duke. Peradventure, to make it the more gracious, I shall sing it at her death.

[IV.i.199–217]

"The Spirite searcheth . . . the botome of Goddes secretes," is the Geneva Bible's rendering of 1 Corinthians 2:9–10. Bottom's parody of 1 Corinthians 2:9 is audacious, and allows Shakespeare to anticipate William Blake's Romantic vision, with its repudiation of the Pauline split between flesh and spirit, though Bottom seems to have heard the text preached to him in the Bishops' Bible version:

> The eye hath not seene, and the eare hath not heard, neyther have entered into the heart of man, the things which God hath purposed . . .

For Bottom, "the eye . . . hath not heard, the ear . . . hath not seen, [the] hand is not able to taste, his tongue to conceive, nor his heart to report" the truths of his bottomless dream. Like William Blake after him, Bottom suggests an apocalyptic, unfallen man, whose awakened senses fuse in a synesthetic unity. It is difficult not to find in Bottom, in this his sublimest moment, an ancestor not just of Blake's Albion but of Joyce's Earwicker, the universal dreamer of *Finnegans Wake*. Bottom's greatness—Shakespeare upon

his heights—emerges most strongly in what could be called "Bottom's Vision," a mysterious triumph he is to enjoy before Theseus as audience, where the "play" cannot be the mere travesty, the play-within-the-play *Pyramus and Thisbe*:

> I will get Peter Quince to write a ballad of this dream: it shall be called 'Bottom's Dream', because it hath no bottom; and I will sing it in the latter end of a play, before the Duke. Peradventure, to make it the more gracious, I shall sing it at her death.

Whose death? Since we do not know the visionary drama playing out n Bottom's consciousness, we cannot answer the question, except to say :hat it is neither Titania nor Thisbe. When, in the next scene, sweet bully 3ottom returns joyously to his friends, he will not speak in these tones. Shakespeare, though, has not forgotten this "more gracious" aspect of Bot-om, and subtly opposes it to the famous speech of Theseus that opens Act √. Hippolyta muses on the strangeness of the story told by the four young overs, and Theseus opposes his skepticism to her wonder.

The. More strange than true. I never may believe
These antique fables, nor these fairy toys.
Lovers and madmen have such seething brains,
Such shaping fantasies, that apprehend
More than cool reason ever comprehends.
The lunatic, the lover, and the poet
Are of imagination all compact:
One sees more devils than vast hell can hold;
That is the madman: the lover, all as frantic,
Sees Helen's beauty in a brow of Egypt:
The poet's eye, in a fine frenzy rolling,
Doth glance from heaven to earth, from earth to heaven;
And as imagination bodies forth
The forms of things unknown, the poet's pen
Turns them to shapes, and gives to airy nothing

A local habitation and a name.
Such tricks hath strong imagination,
That if it would but apprehend some joy,
It comprehends some bringer of that joy:
Or, in the night, imagining some fear,
How easy is a bush suppos'd a bear!

[V.i.2–22]

Theseus himself could be called, not unkindly, "highly unimaginative," but there are two voices here, and one perhaps is Shakespeare's own, half-distancing itself from its own art, though declining also to yield completely to the patronizing Theseus. When Shakespeare writes these lines, the lover sees Helen's beauty in a gypsy girl's brow, and yet the prophetic consciousness somewhere in Shakespeare anticipates Antony seeing Helen's beauty in Cleopatra. "Imagination," to Shakespeare's contemporaries, was "fantasy," a powerful but suspect faculty of the mind. Sir Francis Bacon neatly stated this ambiguity:

> Neither is the Imagination simply and only a messenger; but is invested with or at leastwise usurpeth no small authority in itself, besides the duty of the message.

"Usurpeth" is the key word there; the mind for Bacon is the legitimate authority, and imagination should be content to be the mind's messenger, and to assert no authority for itself. Theseus is more a Baconian than a Shakespearean, but Hippolyta breaks away from Theseus's dogmatism:

But all the story of the night told over,
And all their minds transfigur'd so together,
More witnesseth than fancy's images,
And grows to something of great constancy;
But howsoever, strange and admirable.

[V.i.23–27]

You could give Hippolyta's lines a rather minimal interpretation, stressing that she herself distrusts "fancy's images," but that seems to me a woeful reading. For Theseus, poetry is a furor, and the poet a trickster; Hippolyta opens to a greater resonance, to transfiguration that affects more than one mind at once. The lovers are her metaphor for the Shakespearean audience, and it is ourselves, therefore, who grow into "something of great constancy," and so are re-formed, strangely and admirably. Hippolyta's majestic gravity is an implicit rebuke to Theseus's scoffing at the poet's "fine frenzy." Critics rightly have expanded their apprehension of Shakespeare's "story of the night" beyond the *Dream*, marvelous as the play is. "No, I assure you; the wall is down that parted their fathers" is Bottom's final resonance in the play, and transcends Theseus's patronizing understanding. "The best in this kind are but shadows," Theseus says of all plays and playing—and while we might accept this from Macbeth, we cannot accept it from the dull Duke of Athens. Puck, in the Epilogue, only seems to agree with Theseus when he chants that "we shadows" are "but a dream," since the dream is this great play itself. The poet who dreamed Bottom was about to achieve a great dream of reality, Sir John Falstaff, who would have no interest in humoring Theseus.

12

THE MERCHANT OF VENICE

One would have to be blind, deaf, and dumb not to recognize that Shakespeare's grand, equivocal comedy *The Merchant of Venice* is nevertheless a profoundly anti-Semitic work. Yet every time I have taught the play, many of my most sensitive and intelligent students become very unhappy when I begin with that observation. Nor do they accept my statements that Shylock is a comic villain and that Portia would cease to be sympathetic if Shylock were allowed to be a figure of overwhelming pathos. That Shakespeare himself was personally anti-Semitic we reasonably can doubt, but Shylock is one of those Shakespearean figures who seem to break clean away from their plays' confines. There is an extraordinary energy in Shylock's prose and poetry, a force both cognitive and passional, which palpably is in excess of the play's comic requirements. More even than Marlowe's Barabas, Jew of Malta, Shylock is a villain both farcical and scary, though time has worn away both qualities. Shakespeare's England did not exactly have a Jewish "problem" or "question" in our later modern terms; only about a hundred or two hundred Jews, presumably most of them converts to Christianity, lived in London. The Jews had been more or less expelled from England in 1290, three centuries before, and were not to be more or less readmitted until Cromwell made his revolution. The unfortunate Dr. Lopez, Queen Elizabeth's physician, was hanged, drawn, and quartered (possibly with Shakespeare among the mob looking on), having been more or less framed by the Earl of Essex and so