

The Mind According to Shakespeare: Psychoanalysis in the Bard's Writing

by Marvin Bennett Krims

Westport, CT: Praeger, 2006, 218 pp.

For anyone interested in psychoanalysis and Shakespeare, this book is a delightful read. After a series of analyses of a selection of characters in Shakespeare's plays, Krims makes a foray into that increasingly attractive and popular realm among analysts of reported self-analysis. In reading Shakespeare at this moment in his life, he states, *Much Ado about Nothing* "was therapeutic in the strictly psychoanalytic sense of the word for I had learned something new and helpful about myself, something I had not known before. The text had analyzed me!" (p. xv).

In this collection of mainly previously published papers, Krims writes throughout in an engaging, straightforward, non-technical style. For those interested in the process and rationale for applying psychoanalysis to literature, he presents a persuasive, carefully worked out set of principles: "Although we cannot apply the psychoanalytic *method* to texts as we do with real people, we can apply psychoanalytic *theory*—the body of knowledge derived from the psychoanalytic method—to enhance our understanding of texts." He also says that although we do not have the free associations of the characters or authors, "if we accept that unconscious processes are dynamically active, and that authors' intuition enables them to represent the mind in all its depth and complexity, then it follows that unconscious processes must also be represented somewhere in the sequence of words that authors mark down on the page. . . . If we employ close reading of the text—we reduce the danger of personally motivated diversions derailing scholarly literary criticism" (p. xvii). Finally, Krims acknowledges that he works in the tradition of literary criticism introduced by Norman Holland, one of the first and most extensive psychoanalytic writers in the field of Shakespeare studies. This is the psychological form of what is designated reader-response criticism (Tyson, 2006), in which the important meanings of a text are to be found in an analysis of the effects on the reader.

In the sequence of analyses, Krims follows an order that roughly traces the course of human development, beginning with Volumnia and the mother-child relation; the penultimate essay focuses on King Lear and issues of aging. In between, in the analyses of two characters, the author explores the issue of dealing with aggression, especially in children and adolescents; in the next two, he deals with the integration and consoli-

dation of gender identity; and in another two analyses, he considers the effects of childhood trauma on adult personality.

Krims works on these plays as only a psychoanalytically informed, and I would say, a wise and generous, clinician could do. For example, in spite of the large literature describing Volumnia as a horrific mother who deliberately creates an equally horrific son, Coriolanus, Krims is able to work with his own “counter-transference” to this antagonistic, militaristic woman, and to become aware of her “quieter qualities.” References to these qualities are present in the text, and they may well have been employed in an attempt to influence her son. Krims leads us to the astute observation and implication that Coriolanus was probably a difficult, at least hyperactive and aggressive, child, whose innate temperament was reinforced by only a few of his mother’s attitudes, which produced the “churlish and uncivil” man he was. In exploring Prince Hal’s adolescent aggression and delinquency, Krims suggests that the prince may have been in part identifying with his Oedipal father, King Henry IV, who had himself usurped the throne. He makes the further point that Hal’s aggression continued, somewhat constrained by the law, as he matured, into his own effective monarchical leadership of his people in continental wars.

Krims uses the hatred he discovers in *The Taming of the Shrew* to explore how “cruelty and violence are enacted in a wide variety of settings, from the secluded privacy of homes of dysfunctional couples . . . to the international sphere where entire national groups become consumed in horrific acts of war” (p. 39). In discussing our reader-response to this—as some say—misogynist tale, he guides us to become aware of our own private delectatious responses and to similarly prejudiced stories, thus widening our understanding of our own personal sadism or our apparently justified cruel retaliatory responses.

In “Hotspur’s Fear of Femininity,” Krims explores the “paradoxical quality of phallocentricity,” and in “Frailty, Thy Name Is Hamlet,” he uses the theory of the negative Oedipal complex to postulate Hamlet’s latent homosexuality as a factor in delaying his response to his ghostly father’s exhortations to take revenge on his behalf.

Krims also discusses the effects on Romeo of a childhood trauma, which he constructs from the text, “that would then interact with the deadly cultural imperatives of Verona and propel him along his self-destructive path” (p. 77). In his textual study of the apparent changeability of Cressida’s character, he demonstrates that she did not change, she just seemed to change as a result of “what happens in real life when our perception of our lover becomes distorted by unconscious problems left over from childhood”

(p. 90). He uses this analysis, as well, to illustrate what psychoanalysis discovers in what can be the vast result of the narcissistic injury experienced by a child who is excluded from his or her parents' intimacy.

In what is obviously an ongoing labour of love, Krims goes on to analyze several other plays and a sonnet with a similar application of a wide variety of psychoanalytic theoretical concepts. This has the effect of teaching those who are incompletely informed about psychoanalytic theory how this theory can be applied to Shakespeare, and it is validating for those of us for whom it is a daily resource and tool. He uses a wide range of references from literary criticism and the psychoanalytic literature, and as Shakespeare does, works in stories of the Greek and Roman deities. There is an occasional particularly felicitous phrase, like "each caught in a vicious—and viscous—web of the other's aggression." As we attempt to do in psychoanalytic thinking, Krims manages several times to reframe stubborn oppositions into their syntheses.

In the last two essays Krims gives, first, an illuminating account of his own style of analysis using a fictional account of his responses to a request for analysis, via a correspondence by letter. The request comes from a distressed Beatrice, the wife in that ever-bickering couple, Benedict and Beatrice, in *Much Ado about Nothing*. In the second essay, following an acknowledgement that the topics he chose to work on must relate to his own conscious and unconscious preoccupations, Krims writes a detailed account of relevant aspects of his own history and the beliefs he held that he thinks have been affected by his reading of Shakespeare. Giving specific examples, he uses Shakespeare's texts to discover previously unstudied attitudes and conflicts in himself; he interprets them, shows us how he uses the new knowledge in his life, and presumably, in his psychoanalytic practice. In an inspiring way, he urges others—both analysts and any serious reader of literature—to do likewise. Of course Shakespeare's plays, with their layered, ambiguous, compelling meanings and sources, lend themselves particularly well to this activity. Krims identifies himself as an "independent scholar" of Shakespeare, which itself is an inspiration to those of us working in this particular field of applied psychoanalysis.

REFERENCE

Tyson, L. (2006). *Critical theory today: A user-friendly guide*. London: Routledge.

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