

William McKenzie and T. Choli-Papadopoulou, eds. *Shakespeare and I*. Shakespeare Now! London: Continuum, 2012. xvi + 286 pp. \$34.95. ISBN: 978-1-4411-3718-0.

I can hear the groans of scholarship already. The overdramatic series title (Shakespeare NOW!) and even the melodramatic book title (*Shakespeare and I*) had me groaning as well. Nothing is more cringeworthy than the quasi-creative efforts that result when scholarship is mixed with “life-writings” (17). The worst kept secret in Shakespearean studies is that navel-gazing New Historicist approaches are on the way out. What remains to be seen is if first-person life-writing can take its place and then, to what end? In this collection of essays, editors William McKenzie and Theodora Papadopoulou push back against the dry objectivism of contemporary Shakespearean criticism by encouraging, even demanding, contributors to call out their very selves in their writing. Is this an attempt to make Shakespeare matter once and for all, or merely another academic fad, more representative of a critical cul-de-sac than any true academic thoroughfare?

Time will serve to tell, I think. Meanwhile, what we have in these thirteen essays are remarkable explorations of self, identity, meaning, and, yes, scholarship, wholly enticing and reverberative. However many papers McKenzie and Papadopoulou solicited for this edition, I can assure you, dear reader, they have selected the very best.

A notable example is Julia Reinhard Lupton’s high-energy, up-tempo “internalization” of Shakespeare through the fictional persona of Mrs. Polonius

("Mrs. Polonius and I"). Lupton, no doubt a personal and professional multitasking wizard, does not scoff at the chance of exposing herself: rather, she effectively verbalizes the real human anxieties felt at the prospect of self-exposure: "Above and beyond the labour of making ready lurks the terror of self-revelation" (155). Yet the trajectory of her prose marks not concealment, but a willingness to allow the "trivial" things in her life ("shopping, cooking, cleaning, setting the table" [155]) to be read. Mrs. Polonius could be a female fishmonger or an "alpha-bitch" (158); Shakespeare's genius, and Lupton's here, is in the effective "parcelling of attention" (150) between competing interests, whether stage or household; interpretation is left to the reader.

Philippa Berry, moreover, "raid[s] the more nuanced lexicon of ancient Greece" (178) to describe the mysterious power and hold that Shakespeare's work has over us. The result is "Hierophantic Shakespeare," a hierophant being a "soul-guide" (189) — a worthy title for Shakespeare, though Berry is making the case for the hierophantic quality of his works. The critic, she implies, must then isolate the ways in which she moves through states of consciousness, ultimately exposing her own "innate soul-harmony" (188). Certainly Berry achieves this in her powerful close reading of *The Merchant of Venice*. Yet despite her careful linguistic maneuvering, one cannot help being left with a pop-sociological distaste after her specific appeals to a Greek "*energeia*" (182) and the "primordial force of attraction" (181). I could not but think of Rhonda Byrne's *The Secret*, a highly watered-down version of what Berry is ultimately detailing, perhaps, though Byrne's secret is exposed not via Shakespeare, but a type of spiritual narcissism that, for whatever reason, seems highly inelegant when juxtaposed against Shakespeare. In our culture of pop-psychology and instant (spiritual) gratification, that is, how long, or how deep, do we mine not only our language, but other languages, to register something like true hierophantic knowledge?

The novelty of this collection is that it sidesteps such concerns (as the dodges they ultimately are) completely. Harold Bloom says that we don't read Shakespeare, he reads us. Allowing him to read us — asserting that the last word is not ours, can never be ours, but only Shakespeare's — risks, of course, a type of banal Bardolatry. But a commitment to the idea that meaning, for better or for worse, is necessarily to be found within the Shakespearean corpus is also liberating — liberating because such commitment allows us to seek out and "construct" (11) the meanings we crave rather than work tirelessly to document all the ways meaning has been made already, hence to renege on the opportunity to make a text meaningful for us in "the present" (7). *Shakespeare and I* is the fifth monograph in the "second-wave" of the Shakespeare NOW! series, edited by Ewan Fernie and Simon Palfrey, both of whom contribute stunningly lucid confessionals — la crème, perhaps, of this genre of writing. With thirteen titles in total, Shakespeare NOW! continues to usher in a brave new world of Shakespearean criticism. More o' that, I say.

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