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Shakespeare's Individualism by Peter Holbrook (review)

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Shakespeare's Individualism. By PETER HOLBROOK. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010. Pp. x + 246. \$104.00 cloth.

Reviewed by PAUL A. KOTTMAN

"To thine own self be true," Polonius tells Laertes (69). I have always imagined that Shakespeare, like Hamlet himself, saw Polonius as a pompous fool, one who substitutes moralistic truisms for wisdom when advising his son. A certain amount of eye rolling does not seem an inappropriate response to Polonius's long-winded counsel. In *Shakespeare's Individualism*, however, Peter Holbrook takes Polonius's advice to be "probably as close as most people get to a 'Shakespearean philosophy'" (69). In a chapter that quotes Polonius's counsel in its title, Holbrook suggests that the line, "taken in isolation," has been seen as an expression of the values of "authenticity and self-expression" that the West has taken "as an obligation" "since the Romantic Age" (86). Holbrook is not unaware that such an uncomplicated appeal of fidelity to "self" will appear "naïve" to "theoretically astute" "readers from the cultural Left," but he counters with an unabashed sincerity redolent of Jean-Jacques Rousseau: "Given the tremendous bureaucratic and managerial forces today ranged against autonomy we now need to draw on whatever cultural resources are available to affirm the value of individuality" (69).

Weaving condensed analyses of scenes from virtually every play Shakespeare wrote, including the sonnets and poems, with *leitmotif*-style references to Montaigne, Nietzsche, Isaiah Berlin, Emerson, and a dizzying array of critics and philosophers, Holbrook argues that "Shakespeare is committed to fundamentally modern values: freedom, individuality, self-realization, authenticity" (23). This commitment is crucial to both Shakespeare's modernity and our own, "for good or ill" (41).¹

The "individualism" invoked by Holbrook—freedom, self-realization, and authenticity—cobble together various versions of a self-assured "I," which launches herself into the world in search of her own self-fulfillment. Because Holbrook refers, among others, to Hegel as a key writer on "the right of subjective freedom" (68), I invoke Hegel's tripartite portrait gallery of modern individuality as a helpful synthesis of Holbrook's expansive "individualism." As Jean Hyppolite wrote, "The desire for immediate enjoyment, the heart's protest against the established order, virtue in revolt against the course of the world."² In the first portrait,

¹ Aware of the "rich history" of associating Shakespeare's "association" with "freedom, individuality and authenticity" (229), the book invokes Shakespeare's reception by the British and German Romantics, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Ivan Turgenev, Isaiah Berlin, William Hazlitt, André Gide, and many others. Holbrook's primary aim is not to establish the association but to remind us of it, and to assemble passages from Shakespeare's drama that defend and define "the authentic individual will" (228).

² I borrow Jean Hyppolite's handy paraphrase; see *Genesis and Structure of Hegel's Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. Samuel Cherniak and John Heckman (Evanston, IL: Northwestern UP, 1974), 280. The correspondent sections of the *Phenomenology of Spirit* in which Hegel discusses individuality are "Pleasure and Necessity," "The Law of the Heart and the Frenzy of Self-Conceit," and "Virtue and the Way of the World." See G. W. F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A. V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1977), 217–35.

the individual resembles a pure desire that projects itself into a world of other individuals, seeking especially the happiness of sexual love (Holbrook gives us the examples of Hermia's pursuit of Lysander in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and Jessica's flight in *The Merchant of Venice*, among others). In the second, the individual resembles one who follows without hesitation the promptings of his heart, seeing them as inherently "good" and "right," if he has not been corrupted by society. As in Rousseau, if each one follows his own inclinations, then all should flourish; Holbrook reads *Romeo and Juliet* as providing this kind of Rousseau-inflected uplift. Of course, in following my heart, I quickly learn that the urgings of other hearts oppose me, and so find conflict and division where I thought I would find acceptance. As Holbrook says, "Cordelia insists upon speaking in her own voice rather than another's" (15). So, in the third portrait, the virtuous self bumps up against the panoply of self-interested practices in modern society, which Hegel calls the "way of the world."³ At which point, of course, the way of the world "wins," and we are left with a kind of libertarian world view, to which Holbrook subscribes and to which he thinks Shakespeare is committed; that is, a Reagan-like belief in naked impulses to self-realization and individual liberty, which for Holbrook accounts for Shakespeare's "immoralism" (172), as observed by A. C. Bradley in his interpretation of *Macbeth* and other tragedies.

In short, Holbrook's analyses invariably lead to the classic impasse of liberalism: either individuals doing their own thing is compatible with construction of a livable society, or it is not—in which case, we must accept that "Shakespeare's individualism limits his ethical commitments" (35). "Freedom, individuality and authenticity may be vulnerable to critique from the view-point of ethical or social theory . . . but they are also now well-nigh incontestable, simply the groundwork of our world" for which Shakespeare "did not provide a philosophical defence . . . but . . . did bequeath a poetical one" (238). "This commitment to liberty and individuality," writes Holbrook, "is the main reason we should read [Shakespeare] today" (228). Such is Holbrook's loaded conclusion, the stakes of which I cannot fully unpack in the short space of this review. Here I can only sketch out why, *pace* Hegel, I do not find Holbrook's supporting assertions convincing, in order to then briefly explain how I see his book as a reflection of certain contemporary anxieties in Shakespeare studies.

It is difficult to dispute the claim that Shakespeare depicts modern individuals, human beings who seem closer to postromantic moderns than to duty-bound heroes like Oedipus or Antigone. Indeed, Holbrook is in full agreement with Hegel when the latter writes that Shakespearean drama "takes for its proper subject matter . . . the subjective inner life of the character who is not, as in classical tragedy, a purely individual embodiment of ethical powers" (like family duty or civic authority).⁴ But Holbrook wants this claim to stand in for a conclusion, whereas Hegel is simply making an observation that frames the *problem* of moder-

³ See Hegel, "Virtue and the Way of the World," in *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, 228–35.

⁴ G. W. F. Hegel, "Dramatic Poetry," from *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*, in *Philosophers on Shakespeare*, ed. Paul A. Kottman (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2009), 57–85, esp. "Dramatic Poetry," 73.

nity, which Shakespeare grasps and depicts better than any other artist (at least in Hegel's view).

Put simply, by appealing to the very same fact upon which Shakespearean drama is constructed, Hegel offers a trenchant critique of the "individualism" exalted by Holbrook: when human beings act, our actions never merely express our individual intentions, authentic desires, aims or passions—rather, our actions invariably throw us into the "sphere of the real world and its particular concerns."⁵ This much is as true for Hamlet as it was for Antigone, since dramas show how our actions always implicate us in a broader social world and by the same token show how the fate of a social world itself unfolds through our individual actions. If our worldly ties are not transformed by what we do, then no drama would be possible, and particular (individual, authentic) agents would not come to light as such.

So, Holbrook's individualism on its own cannot fully explain modern life or Shakespeare's depiction of it, because what matters—for Shakespeare as for Hegel, inasmuch as both are concerned with drama, with the stakes of actions—is how individual words and deeds cohere and form a shared practical world. What makes the "subjective inner life" of Shakespeare's characters compelling is not their self-interested motives or "authentic desires; what must strike us is how their words and deeds imply and inflect a network of inheritable practices (kinship ties, civic relations, economic bonds, military duties).

Because Holbrook misses this point, his book also fails to capture what Hegel identifies as the heart of Shakespeare's radical modernity. Since, as Hegel says, the particular, individual "interest" and "aims" of Shakespeare's characters are never entirely absorbable by "the concrete spheres of family, church, state" and so on, the upshot of their dramatic interactions cannot be fully explained by the practical world their actions inflect.⁶ For instance, because Antony and Cleopatra's aims are not immediately those of Rome or Egypt their fates still beg explanation, even after the consequences of their actions for Rome and Egypt come to light. What we perceive in Shakespeare, as distinct from classical tragedy, is an uncanny split between the subjective fate of individuals (Antony and Cleopatra's joy and suffering) and the objective social outcome (as depicted, say, in Caesar's conquest of Egypt), even as we also see that subjective-individual fates cannot be realized without a correspondent objective-social-historical horizon.

With this in mind, it becomes clearer how Holbrook's book reflects deep anxieties in contemporary Shakespeare studies. On the one hand, new historicism and cultural materialism have trained a generation of scholars to see in Shakespeare's plays the objective concerns of the culture from which the plays spring, rather than the subjective fates of modern individuals who, to stick with Hegel's phrasing, "come to ruin because of [a] decisive adherence to themselves."⁷ On the other hand,

⁵ Hegel, "Dramatic Poetry," 73.

⁶ Hegel, "Dramatic Poetry," 73. In Hegel's words, the "aims" of Shakespeare's characters "are broadly and variously particularized and in such detail that what is truly substantial can often glimmer through them in only a very dim way" ("Dramatic Poetry," 73).

⁷ Hegel, "Dramatic Poetry," 11.

a historicist approach to drama only convinces if the fates of individual characters appear immediately absorbable by the concerns of the social world to which they belong, as in Attic tragedy.⁸ So inasmuch as Shakespeare stages the irreducibility of the woe and weal of individual human beings to the fate of the society to which they belong (whether “Denmark,” “Venice,” or Elizabethan-Jacobean society), a historicist approach to Shakespearean drama, if not to modern life *tout court*, cannot but fail to fully satisfy.

By returning our attention to the tremendous power of Shakespeare over the post-Romantic view of “individualism,” Holbrook succeeds in reminding us of an unresolved anxiety about Shakespeare and his (or our) modernity: namely, it is not clear that a shared social context can wholly explain or reflect the meaning of any of our individual actions. But because Holbrook does not adequately elucidate this basic problem, the “individualism” that his book advocates seems, finally, as empty as the shapes of modern individuality which Hegel dispatched. Nonetheless, the romantic anxiety from which Holbrook’s book springs—an abiding sense that we cannot simply historicize Shakespeare (or ourselves) because our shared practical world fails to completely account for our individual experiences, sufferings, and joys—is not misplaced. The ongoing depth of this anxiety makes Shakespeare even more urgent, and contemporary, than either Holbrook or the historicists have grasped.

Ecocriticism and Shakespeare: Reading Ecophobia. By SIMON C. ESTOK.
New York: Palgrave, 2011. Illus. Pp. x + 182. \$80.00 cloth.

Ecocritical Shakespeare. Edited by DAN BRAYTON and LYNNE BRUCKNER. Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2011. Illus. Pp. xxiv + 280.
\$99.95 cloth.

Reviewed by REBECCA ANN BACH

Simon C. Estok’s monograph *Ecocriticism and Shakespeare* makes a case for the term “ecophobia,” a term that he hopes will help Shakespeareans to see connections between ecocriticism, feminist criticism, sexuality studies, and studies of racism and anti-Semitism (2–3). He promises in the introduction that “the pages that follow will offer nuanced and developed close-readings of Shakespearean drama” through an approach that “encompasses feminism, queer theory, critical racial

⁸ Not coincidentally, the most elegant and convincing defense of a historicist approach to drama of which I am aware is given by the venerable classicist Jean-Pierre Vernant. See Vernant’s succinct discussion of *Antigone* and historicist scholarship in “Greek Tragedy: Problems of Interpretation,” in *The Structuralist Controversy: The Languages of Criticism and the Sciences of Man*, ed. Richard Macksey and Eugenio Donato (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1970), 273–89. Precisely because the fate of *Antigone* is also the fate of the social world to which she belongs (as Hegel of course knew), one cannot but read Sophocles’ play as overdetermined by the cultural context in which it was first produced and performed.