Shakespeare's Hamlet and the Controversies of Self (review)

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petition and male bonding achieved at the expense of a middle-class woman. Duncan-Jones invites us to link it with the Cambridge students who idolize “Sweet Master Shakespeare” in The First Part of the Return from Parnassus, with the homoerotic and misogynistic speaker in Shakespeare’s Sonnets (1609), and with Shakespeare’s newfound young male associates, including the satirist John Marston; the lawyer and man-about-town Thomas Greene; the playwright, publican, and brothel-keeper George Wilkins; and the first of King James’s English minions, William Herbert, “Mr. W. H.” The violent Wilkins, a vicious woman-beater, is the real shocker here. He first appears in Shakespeare’s story as a fellow lodger at the Mountjoys’ house, which seems innocent enough until Duncan-Jones reveals that Marie Mountjoy had an affair with a mercer in Swan Alley, while her husband, Christopher Mountjoy, was eventually excommunicated from the French Church because of “his unruly and unregulated life” (207).

Her final chapter brings the motif of Shakespeare’s mean-spirited financial dealings to its dispiriting conclusion. The newly rich Master Shakespeare had already been cited for hoarding grain in the bad harvests of 1596–98. Toward the end of his life he refused to join the fight against William Combe, who proposed to enclose common land in Stratford. Duncan-Jones further shows that Shakespeare never contributed to charity, either in Stratford or in London—and such benefactions were expected from a man of his means. The appropriate contrast is with the actor Edward Alleyn, who endowed many charitable foundations in his own neighborhood of Dulwich. In his will Shakespeare bequeathed £10 to the poor and £13 to his lawyer. He left his wife Anne his second-best bed but not the one in which he died. The harsh words on his gravestone (“... curst be he that moves my bones”) ensured that he and Anne would remain separated in death, as they had been in life. His final testament is replete with “names omitted and ... names struck out” (271). Duncan-Jones surmises that he was syphilitic and (more plausibly) drunk, angry, and embittered on his deathbed.

In sonnets 123 through 125, which Duncan-Jones calls “the clearest statement Shakespeare ever made of his political and religious position,” the speaker makes a virtue of necessity (216) and renounces the courtly offices from which he is excluded by birth: “Were’t ought to me I bore the canopy?” (125.1, quoted in Duncan-Jones, 216 and 217). Yet Shakespeare’s stoicism failed him in the end. Ungentle Shakespeare goes a long way toward explaining that failure. Katherine Duncan-Jones shines light into dark corners and brings skeletons out of the closet. Her courageous biography is partisan, idiosyncratic, and unforgettable. Anyone seriously interested in Shakespeare should read it.

Shakespeare’s Hamlet and the Controversies of Self. By JOHN LEE.

Reviewed by CATHERINE BELSEY

“Does Prince Hamlet have a self-constituting sense of self?” asks John Lee at the beginning of this book (1), and in the third section of it he offers a reading of Shakespeare’s play to find an alternative to the Cartesian concept of interiority. Drawing on “personal construct theory,” as this was defined by George A. Kelly in 1955,
Lee argues that human beings take progressive control of their world by constructing interpretations of it that work. Personality is synonymous with these constructs, which may change when circumstances change, or as the previous construct proves inadequate. Kelly thus offers a dynamic model of the self. The psychologist tries to build up a lexicon of the client’s personal constructs; the client, in turn, may be asked to try out different roles to see how well they fit. Hamlet’s soliloquies can be seen as a succession of such constructs, giving the audience access to his “personality in process” (181). Lee also draws on Charles Taylor’s account in Sources of the Self (1989) of Montaigne’s depiction of an unstable, discontinuous self. The essays, Lee proposes, are constitutive for Montaigne, as the soliloquies are constitutive for Hamlet. Lee also argues for rhetoric as another, “Protean” source of self-constitution (223), which Hamlet finds unsatisfactory but cannot abandon.

In an astute explanation of the exchanges between Gertrude, Claudius, and Hamlet in 1.2, Lee points out that, while the hero’s mother and his uncle invoke an inherited set of commonplaces, externalized general truths about the normal relationship between nature, mourning, and the death of fathers, Hamlet thinks, on the basis of a different construct, in terms of “that Within,” a “fragile” landscape, “barely described” but “clearly valued” (195). Confronted by the Ghost, Hamlet is required to reconstitute his existing set of constructs, to make his own story. But he is not able to do it. “Hamlet can find no story to render satisfactorily intelligible his life. This is his tragedy” (206). At the end of the play, the prince is still promising to “tell,” but Death’s arrest denies him the opportunity.

The answer to the opening question would thus appear to be “no,” though Lee puzzlingly insists that Hamlet does have a self-constituting sense of self (2 and 209). As far as I can see, he adduces no evidence that Hamlet senses that he is constructing a personality in the soliloquies. While I enjoyed the reading of the play, I was unable fully to bring its conclusions together with its argument. I was also unclear about how Lee’s account, as he claims, “refutes the basic thrusts of the arguments of Cultural Materialists and New Historicists concerning English Renaissance literary subjectivity” (209), since it seems very much in line with them, though it draws on different authorities to make its case.

The second section of the book traces versions of Shakespearean character up to Hazlitt, of whom it gives an intelligent reading that I have not seen before. I was not sure why it stopped at Hazlitt. The first third of the book is devoted to an exposition of new historicism and cultural materialism themselves, especially in their relation to the “controversies of self” of Lee’s title. These controversies, he claims, “resemble a progression of rather shrill attacks and counter-attacks,” while his own aim is to make “debate . . . once again possible” (149 and 150).

The question of how we best go about ensuring the possibility of debate is an important and delicate one, I believe. We must differ: that is one of the main ways in which knowledge advances. And if we are to conduct debates, we need to find ways of treating each other’s interpretations with enough respect, which probably means paying them sufficient attention, to create an atmosphere in which we can disagree without implying that our interlocutors are either fools or knaves. It seems to me that in the course of the past twenty years we have moved closer to the recognition that there are different ways
of interpreting the same material, and that while it is perfectly possible just to get it wrong, it is also conceivable that there could be genuine grounds for difference.

What is disappointing in Lee’s book, then, is the mode in which he goes about establishing the grounds of debate. Here, for example, is what he says about cultural materialists in general:

> the argument of their attacks is rather narrow, and the questions they have raised few. This is a result both of the near-repetitive cohesiveness seen in their various treatments of *Hamlet*, and the unproductive nature of their argument, much of which turns out to be either a quasi-religious polemic, disguised in a confusion of terms, or a poor use of out-of-date histories, or out-of-date structuralist theories of cognitive development. Most of their arguments, in fact, serve no useful purpose other than to act as caveats.

(151)

It is difficult to see how to debate that, or his assertion that the way we write is “rather dull” (76).

In my view, however, the various propositions advanced here and elsewhere in Lee’s book about both new historicism and cultural materialism are not sufficiently attentive to the texts they cite to make debate possible. The problem begins with the labels. It is convenient to group accounts together if they seem to share a perspective, but this practice, however helpful, ought not then to justify the complaint that one “new historicist” fails to fulfill the agenda of another or, on the basis that one “cultural materialist” uses a specific term differently from another, to find them all confused. Neither of these labels identifies a “movement,” as Lee calls new historicism (7). There was no consensus about vocabulary. Nor, indeed, were there any agreements to adopt the labels: some of us, on the contrary, found with a degree of ambivalence that we had had greatness thrust upon us.

From the perspective of those of us who were there, it was our differences that were most apparent at the time. I was uneasy about the extent of Francis Barker’s commitment to Foucault; Jonathan Dollimore subscribed more enthusiastically than I did to the views of Raymond Williams. When I published *The Subject of Tragedy* in 1985, I saw it as taking issue with both of them, but silently, because in those days I was not sure how to stage a debate without appearing to accuse them of being either fools or knaves, which they certainly were not. Instead, I cited them where I could, to show that I took them seriously, and otherwise left it to readers to make their own choices.

At the local level, too, Lee is inclined to be cavalier in his readings. Supporting his proposition that cultural materialists set aside the importance of fidelity to the documents, he cites an essay of mine from 1983. I was arguing for the project of reading fictional texts to produce a politicized cultural history. E.M.W. Tillyard, F. R. Leavis, and T. S. Eliot, I suggested, had done exactly that, but without saying so. Not wanting to accuse them of falsifying the past as well, since part of my point was that the same material could be read in different ways, I wrote, on behalf of the project I was proposing, the sentence Lee extracts: “‘The claim is not that such a history, or such a reading of literary texts, is more accurate, but only that it is more radical’” (75). This, Lee says, means that I do not value accuracy and treat the text as a matter of indifference.

But nuances are not his strong point. To show the quasi-religious values of cultural materialism, he claims it condemns Stephen Greenblatt’s assumption that subversion is
contained by power “in terms of despair. Despair is, of course, the ultimate sin” (77). The only reference he gives here is to Richard Wilson’s sophisticated, historicizing introduction to New Historicism and Renaissance Drama, which records the differing possibilities of Foucault’s account of power for a generation that had lived through the aftermath of May 1968 as well as the election of Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher. I cannot find any mention of despair or sin.

Lee says that new historicists treat the anecdotes they invoke as representative, but “In so doing, they need only the barest criteria of relevance and none of coverage” (66). I am not persuaded that representativeness is an issue for the new historicists: they seem to me more concerned with what is capable of being said, thought, understood at a specific cultural moment, regardless of whether it is typical. But Lee goes on, “For a critical profession that measures success in terms of publication this is immensely attractive” (66). It may be, but the implied accusation is not.

Eager to ridicule, rather than reason, Shakespeare’s Hamlet and the Controversies of Self is a quarrelsome book; and when people quarrel, they often lose their judgment. Lee’s world is populated largely by knaves and fools. He even quarrels with Thomas Rymer, who in 1693 argued that Shakespeare’s characters were inconsistent. Rymer writes in A Short View of Tragedy about “Shakespeare’s own blundering Maggot of self-contradiction,” and Lee explains: “The lack of consistency is maggot-like in eating away and rendering corrupt all that surrounds it” (108). Grubs do, it is true, eat a great deal, and they also excrete a good deal in the space they leave behind, which may be what Lee means by “rendering corrupt all that surrounds it.” But a blundering maggot? A grub stumbling about and blindly bumping into things? The phrase does not say much for Rymer’s command of style. Perhaps, however, Lee is not aware that in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries a maggot was “a whimsical or perverse fancy.”¹ A “blundering maggot” is surely not a clumsy caterpillar but an obtuse or wilful tendency to make mistakes. Rymer might have missed something in Shakespeare, but he was not a fool.

Ironically, there are altogether too many blundering maggots in Lee’s own book. Criticism advances our understanding of only when it is adequately informed. Lee’s Foucault does not seem to resemble the one I have read; his Althusser is difficult for me to recognize. The book repeatedly alludes to “subject-persons,” failing, apparently, to grasp that a subject is not a person but that element of a person which speaks or otherwise signifies. The alignments are also unfamiliar to me: without explanation, Lee makes new historicists into Althusserians, in contrast to cultural materialists, who are traditional Marxists. (If I have a major reservation now about The Subject of Tragedy, it is that it was unduly influenced by Althusser.) He apparently regards Alan Sinfield as a second-generation cultural materialist, coming after Dollimore. And he takes to task for the weaknesses of new historicism Jean Howard’s essay on it, published in ELR in 1986.

I was so astonished by this last identification that I went back to the essay to check. It is, of course, a critique of new historicism for failing to reflect on its own theoretical premises and explain its terms. But the most striking features of it now are Howard’s generosity and her attention to the differences between critics. Perhaps Lee is baffled by courtesy.

I am surprised that such a slipshod piece of work should be published by Clarendon Press, which has produced some weighty scholarship in this field. Other publishers check with academic readers before they go to press. A good copy editor, too, would have tackled the book's somewhat shaky purchase on the conventions of English syntax.


Reviewed by Kristen Poole

We often look for the return of the newly dead. It is a phenomenon that Stephen Greenblatt describes as "not only the pain of sudden, irrevocable loss but also the strange, irrational expectation of recovery" (102). The dead, as Greenblatt notes, are expected on the other end of a ringing phone, or to walk through an opening door. In the modern Western world, glimpses of the dead are generally ignored, dismissed as a psychological tic. For generations of Europeans, however, encounters with the dead were accepted as a fact of life; the return of the dead reaffirmed the elaborate eschatological architectonics that structured the universe and the practices of the everyday. Generally speaking, the dead returned to warn of purgatorial torment and to beseech prayers that would hasten their purification and ultimate ascent to heaven. The doctrine of purgatory thus created an intergenerational chain of mutual obligation. The modern era, it could be argued, begins with the breaking of this chain. As belief in purgatory waned in the latter half of the sixteenth century (at least in England), the living found themselves unmoored from the dead—sons were no longer obligated to secure the redemption of their fathers, fathers could no longer depend on the prayers of their sons. This severance resulted in a strange emotional cocktail of liberation and alienation. The text that for many has epitomized (or, in some more extreme views, initiated) this modern condition is *Hamlet*, which Greenblatt sets out to position within this cultural nexus of eschatological transformations.

*Hamlet in Purgatory* presents something of a contrapuntal response to the questions of identity explored in *Renaissance Self-Fashioning*. The self of the earlier work is the antithesis to the purgatorial self, which is fashioned posthumously and only through the intervention of others. In the personal anecdote related at the end of *Self-Fashioning*, Greenblatt fiercely maintains the place of the self-fashioned subject. This seemingly autonomous Renaissance individual is at odds with a purgatorial notion of subjectivity dependent on collectivity and devoid of agency. Greenblatt describes how “the Renaissance figures we have considered understand that in our culture to abandon self-fashioning is to abandon the craving for freedom, and to let go of one’s stubborn hold on selfhood, even selfhood conceived as a fiction, is to die.”