

Response to "The Problem of Identity in Shakespeare"

Daniel Budd

Prairie Group

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I think it best to begin by confessing my ignorance of the vast amount of pious study and religious scholarship which has been undertaken in search of the historical Shakespeare. While an easier task than the one Christian scholars had in their search for a Jesus of this world, it nonetheless carries many similarities - the problem of identity certainly being one of them.

The reason for this similarity may be because these two mythologies, the Christian and the Shakespearian, along with our many others, are, in part at least, <sup>the</sup> / Quest for Identity in which the Soul has been engaged since the dawn of consciousness. Both utilize the root metaphors of collective humanity in order to attempt a lifting up and a deepening of the questions and bewilderments of the particular humanity of their time. And since they both touch upon the universal, they have been able to live in our history beyond the particular times of their genesis.

The Question being asked is this: "What is the identity of the human being in the world? Are we creatures of a guiding Providence, or not? Are we truly created in the Divine Image, or not?" The Christian answer is: "We are created in the Divine Image and under God's providence." Shakespeare gives us no answer, but rather varying scenarios of what it

might be like one way, and what it might be like the other. Both suggest interpretation, with the Christian being a bit more insistant upon which is the correct one, but the choice is still ours. Shakespeare is, I believe, a bit more clear about that.

Both mythologies have a cultural context from which their particular way of expressing their universal concerns arises. Gertrude Lindener-Stawski gives us a good summary of the world of William Shakespeare. My own historical/critical search took me to the Timetables of History to discover the movements of the Spirit in 1564, the year of the Bard's birth.

Joining him on Earth at that time were Christopher Marlowe, Pieter Brueghel the Younger, and Galileo Galilei. Leaving the scene were John Calvin, Michelangelo, and Ferdinand I (Holy Roman Emperor since 1556).

Elsewhere, the Spaniards were building Manila, the Counter Reformation was beginning in Poland, the horse-drawn coach was introduced in England, and John Hawkins was on his second voyage to the New World, having established a slave trade on his first.

The world was indeed a busy place.

Yet to come were John Donne, Ben Jonson, Johann Kepler, Jakob Böhme, as well as the first known mention of the tune Greensleeves and the first known life insurance in England. The latter may have been a response to the growth of Doubt and the growing probes into the possibility of Life's meaninglessness.

The world certainly continued to be a busy place.

Looking back it is easier to see Shakespeare within all this than he was ever aware. Yet the mirror-life of the individual soul and the collective world finds Shakespeare struggling with the very issues of identity with which his Age and the above mentioned people also struggled.

It was a time of upheaval, socially and psychically. Between Shakespeare and Galileo, to mention just two, human identity would never be quite the same.

G L-S notes this well. The Order of Things is interrelated: as we conceptualize the Universe, so do we conceptualize the Psyche (and, I am tempted to speculate, vice versa). She deals progressively with this struggle of identity in a Universe where the Earth was being displaced as the center of the collective vision, thus threatening humanity's centrality in the psychic/mythic order.

Chaos and meaning, providence and free will, all help determine identity and all find study in Shakespeare's plays. The progression seems to this writer as G L-S notes it: in the early plays, Providence guides all action; in the tragedies, autonomy is explored (I especially appreciated Hunter's comments on this in Shakespeare and the Mystery of God's Judgments); and in the last plays, Shakespeare comes "to terms with human limits and the frequent meaninglessness of events" (GL-S, p. 8).

Being alive is awesome, and offers no guarantees. Shakespeare settles on that, realizing that in the midst of seeming chaos and meaninglessness, the human virtues and strivings of "kindness, honor, responsibility, honesty, integrity, humility" make things at least bearable, and at the most astonishingly human.

GL-S's comprehensive examination of this I find convincing, if at times a bit difficult to follow. Her Peckian conclusion is well-taken, and I imagine the Bard in agreement. He gave us a 16th-17th century version of the same struggles of Moses and Job, Jesus and Paul, but left, as GL-S notes, no doctrine. These are amply provided to us by those who followed. Shakespeare leaves his scenes open to our comment and opportunity for learning. (How I wish Christendom had been more intentional in doing the same.)

He left for us, as he created for those who first saw them, examples of human identity and its struggle mythic in their proportions and in their ability to touch the soul. He shows us, as GL-S notes, "what we knew already so surely in our hearts", and what we just as surely still need to learn.

The problem of identity is always one for the living, and not necessarily for the answering.

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