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SHAKESPEARE

THE INVENTION *of the* HUMAN

HAROLD BLOOM

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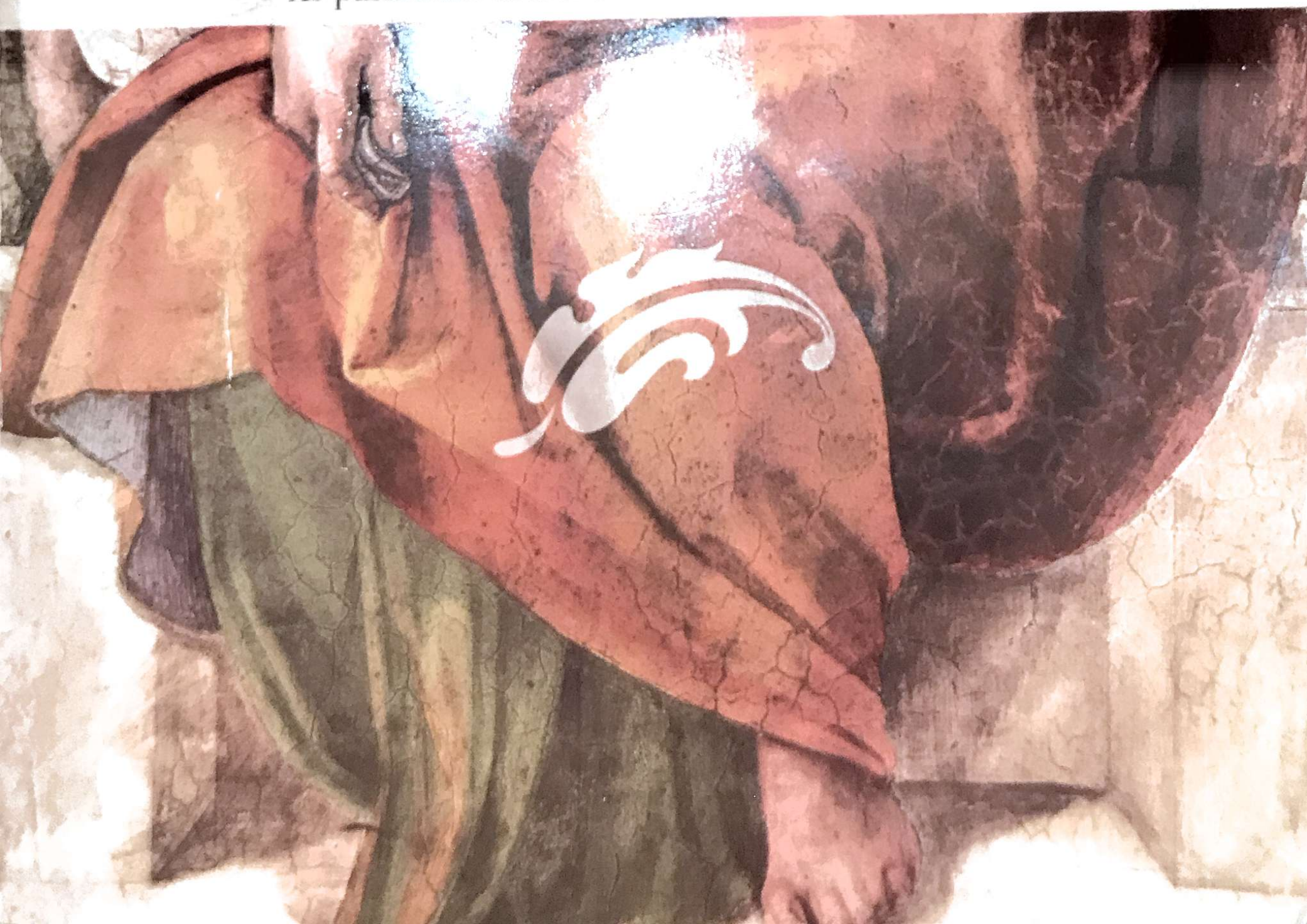

TO THE READER

Literary character before Shakespeare is relatively unchanging; women and men are represented as aging and dying, but not as changing because their relationship to themselves, rather than to the gods or God, has changed. In Shakespeare, characters develop rather than unfold, and they develop because they reconceive themselves. Sometimes this comes about because they *overhear* themselves talking, whether to themselves or to others. Self-overhearing is their royal road to individuation, and no other writer, before or since Shakespeare, has accomplished so well the virtual miracle of creating utterly different yet self-consistent voices for his more than one hundred major characters and many hundreds of highly distinctive minor personages.

We can be reluctant to recognize how much of our culture *was* literary, particularly now that so many of the institutional purveyors of literature happily have joined in proclaiming its death. A substantial number of

Americans who believe they worship God actually worship three major literary characters: the Yahweh of the J Writer (earliest author of Genesis, Exodus, Numbers), the Jesus of the Gospel of Mark, and Allah of the Koran. I do not suggest that we substitute the worship of Hamlet, but Hamlet is the only secular rival to his greatest precursors in personality. Like them, he seems not to be just a literary or dramatic character. His total effect upon the world's culture is incalculable. After Jesus, Hamlet is the most cited figure in Western consciousness; no one prays to him, but no one evades him for long either. (He cannot be reduced to a role for an actor; one would have to begin by speaking of "roles for actors" anyway, since there are more Hamlets than actors to play them.) Overfamiliar yet always unknown, the enigma of Hamlet is emblematic of the greater enigma of Shakespeare himself: a vision that is everything and nothing, a person who was (according to Borges) everyone and no one, an art so infinite that it *contains* us, and will go on enclosing those likely to come after us.

and Shakespeare became the greatest master at exploiting the void between persons and the personal ideal. Did his invention of what we recognize as "personality" result from that exploitation? Certainly we hear Shakespeare's influence upon his disciple John Webster, when Webster's Flamineo, dying at the close of *The White Devil*, cries out:

> While we look up to heaven we confound
> Knowledge with knowledge.

In Webster, even at his best, we can hear the Shakespearean paradoxes ably repeated, but the speakers have no individuality. Who can tell us the personality differences, in *The White Devil*, between Flamineo and Lodovico? Looking up to heaven and confounding knowledge with knowledge do not save Flamineo and Lodovico from being names upon a page. Hamlet, perpetually arguing with himself, does not seem to owe his overwhelming reality to a confounding of personal and ideal knowledge. Rather, Shakespeare gives us a Hamlet who is an agent, rather than an effect, of clashing realizations. We are convinced of Hamlet's superior reality because Shakespeare has made Hamlet free by making him know the truth, truth too intolerable for us to endure. A Shakespearean audience is like the gods in Homer: we look on and listen, and are not tempted to intervene. But we also are unlike the audience constituted by Homer's gods; being mortal, we too confound knowledge with knowledge. We cannot extract, from Shakespeare's era or from our own, social information that will explain his ability to create "forms more real than living men," as Shelley phrased it. Shakespeare's rival playwrights were subject to the same disjunctions between ideas of love, order, and the Eternal as he was, but they gave us eloquent caricatures, at best, rather than men and women.

tures, or within cultures. What allowed Shakespeare to be the supreme *magister ludi*? Nietzsche, like Montaigne a psychologist almost of Shakespeare's power, taught that pain is the authentic origin of human memory. Since Shakespeare is the most memorable of writers, there may be a valid sense in which the pain Shakespeare affords us is as significant as the pleasure. One need not be Dr. Johnson to dread reading, or attending a performance of, *King Lear*, particularly Act V, where Cordelia is murdered, and where Lear dies, holding her corpse in his arms. I myself dread *Othello* even more; its painfulness exceeds all measure, provided that we (and the play's director) grant to Othello his massive dignity and value that alone make his degradation so terrible.

Pragmatically there is little difference between speaking of "Hamlet as a character" and "Hamlet as a role for an actor." Yet, mostly because of the peculiarities of modern criticism, the time has come around when it seems salutory to speak again of "literary and dramatic character" in order better to comprehend Shakespeare's men and women. Very little is gained by reminding us that Hamlet is made up of and by words, that he is "just" a grouping of marks upon a page. "Character" means both a letter of the alphabet, and also ethos, a person's habitual way of life. Literary and dramatic character is an imitation of human character, or so we once thought, on the premise that words were as much like people as they were like things. Words of course refer to other words, but their impact upon us emanates, as Martin Price says, from the empiric realm where we live, and where we attribute values and meanings, to our ideas of persons. Such attributions are a kind of fact, and so are our impressions that some literary and dramatic characters reinforce our ideas of persons and some do not.

There are two contradictory ways to account for Shakespeare's eminence. If, for you, literature is primarily language, then the primacy of Shakespeare is only a cultural phenomenon, produced by sociopolitical urgencies. In this view, Shakespeare did not write Shakespeare—his plays were written by the social, political, and economic energies of his age. But so was everything else, then and now, because certain more or less recent Parisian speculators have convinced many (if not most) academic critics that there are no authors anyway.

The other way of exploring Shakespeare's continued supremacy is rather more empirical: he has been universally judged to be a more adequate representer of the universe of fact than anyone else, before him or since. This judgment has been dominant since at least the mid–eighteenth century; it has been staled by repetition, yet it remains merely true, banal

as resentful theorists find it to be. We keep returning to Shakespeare because we need him; no one else gives us so much of the world most of us take to be fact. But in the book that follows, I will not just begin with the assumption that Shakespeare palpably was much the best writer we ever will know. Shakespeare's originality in the representation of character will be demonstrated throughout, as will the extent to which we all of us were, to a shocking degree, pragmatically reinvented by Shakespeare. Our ideas as to what makes the self authentically human owe more to Shakespeare than ought to be possible, but then he has become a Scripture, not to be read as many of us read the Bible or the Koran or Joseph Smith's Doctrines and Covenants, but also not to be read as we read Cervantes or Dickens or Walt Whitman. *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare* could as soon be called *The Book of Reality*, fantastic as so much of Shakespeare deliberately intends to be. I have written elsewhere that Shakespeare is not only in himself the Western canon; he has become the universal canon, perhaps the only one that can survive the current debasement of our teaching institutions, here and abroad. Every other great writer may fall away, to be replaced by the anti-elitist swamp of Cultural Studies. Shakespeare will abide, even if he were to be expelled by the academics, in itself most unlikely. He extensively informs the language we speak, his principal characters have become our mythology, and he, rather than his involuntary follower Freud, is our psychologist. His persuasiveness has its unfortuante aspects; *The Merchant of Venice* may have been more of an incitement to anti-Semitism than *The Protocols of the Learned Elders of Zion*, though less than the Gospel of John. We pay a price for what we gain from Shakespeare.