Preface

It is of course highly contentious in our times to claim, as the essays on this website do, that Shakespeare propounds a systematic and convincing philosophy of attachment, based on his intuition that intimate, lasting relationships are the ultimate good. The very idea that there is a *summum bonum* which fulfils our deepest yearnings is likely to be seen as an ‘essentialist’ fallacy in an era in which only sexual desire and self-love, or the will to power, are generally accepted as innate drives. However, there are dissenting voices even in modern times: attachment theory draws on ethological evidence to question the reductive accounts of human nature which have prevailed since the Enlightenment, claiming that attachment constitutes a powerful system of behaviour in its own right, completely separate from the desire for food or sex.[[1]](#endnote-1) If this is true, lovers, friends and families who are open to its demands may know more about human nature than most philosophers, whether ancient or modern.[[2]](#endnote-2)

The approach taken in these essays also runs counter to the anti-rationalism of post-Enlightenment thought, which has culminated, not only in the fashionable view of texts as conduits for a chaotic multiplicity of codes, but, more significantly, in a pervasive historicism, which represents all pre-Hegelian thought as mere rationalisation of hegemonic self-interest. However, either historicism is itself subject to its own reduction of philosophy to ‘ideology,’ in which case of course it cannot claim to be true, or it sets itself up as the only exception to this rule, in which case its contention that the truth about history is only available to modern thinkers can of course be challenged in the same way as any other philosophical theory.[[3]](#endnote-3) The key issue here is again the modern tendency to deny that there are enduring elements in human nature other than self-interest and physical passion; an orthodoxy which leaves no more room for the innate curiosity which was traditionally thought to motivate the philosopher’s disinterested pursuit of truth than it does for devoted attachment.

It is almost equally contentious to suggest, as these essays also do, that Shakespeare carefully conceals his philosophical arguments from those who simply wish to be entertained. This theory is, however, much more plausible than might at first appear. It is well known that oral, or scribal culture, which persisted throughout the Renaissance, valued secrecy simply as the best way of preserving knowledge.[[4]](#endnote-4) Equally, there is no doubt that the orthodox critical view in this period was that serious literature is allegorical and that the purpose of allegory was to divide its audience, addressing different messages to different types of reader.[[5]](#endnote-5) Sir John Harrington is typical in suggesting that “fables” not only protect truth from “prophane wits” and aid memory, but also allow their creators to appeal simultaneously to contrasting types of interest, since superficial readers stick to the literal or the moral level, while the more philosophical enjoy exploring the underlying thought.[[6]](#endnote-6) Moreover, pre-Enlightenment philosophers in particular, it has been argued, are often concerned not only to avoid censorship and persecution,[[7]](#endnote-7) but actively to protect the ordinary citizen, in the belief that there is a permanent tension between their own natural curiosity and the conventional moral and religious beliefs which sustain political society.[[8]](#endnote-8)

Shakespeare’s own least reserved, and therefore perhaps most startling, pronouncement on this issue is to be found in sonnet 94, where he argues that thoughtful people should “not do the thing they most do show,” and, even when “moving others,” should themselves be “unmoved, cold, and to temptation slow,” partly in order to maintain their own autonomy–for only those who are “lords and owners of their faces” can “inherit heaven’s graces”–and partly to protect the community, for those who seek to promulgate their thoughts too enthusiastically may come to resemble “lilies that fester [which] smell far worse than weeds.”[[9]](#endnote-9)

What gives the plays their extraordinarily subtle suggestiveness is that Shakespeare is perfectly happy attending primarily to his own philosophical development, while offering indirect clues to his thought which are designed to allow his readers to overhear his meditations, as it were, if they are sufficiently interested. The advice given to readers in the preface to the first folio, which is to “reade him, therefore; and againe and againe,” according to their “divers capacities,” “and if then you doe not like him, surely you are in some manifest danger, not to understand him,”[[10]](#endnote-10) suggests that the plays demand a painstaking absorption from his more contemplative readers, which is implicitly distinguished from the fleeting entertainment which they offer audiences. Shakespeare’s educated contemporaries would have been much more routinely alert to the presence of hidden meanings than their modern counterparts, just as they would have found the elitism and self-sufficiency of his approach more congenial than readers who have been brought up in a liberal and egalitarian age.

The vividness of Shakespeare’s characterisation conceals his abstract thought, only revealing it to those who are willing to contemplate the ironies of the plot and the intricate network of comparisons and contrasts between the characters which his mature plays invariably create. The plays also hint at their underlying meaning through a variety of more local techniques, the most common of which include symbolism and recurrent leitmotifs or verbal echoes, contradictions or inconsistencies and the insertion of apparently inconsequential or purely flippant conversations -which are often more likely to express Shakespeare’s underlying thought than the more dramatic passages.

1. See, for instance, John Bowlby, *Attachment and Loss*, 3 vols. (1969; repr., London: Random House, 1998). [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Saul Bellow, *Ravelstein* (London: Penguin Books Ltd., 2000): 231. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Leo Strauss, *Natural Right and History* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1965): 28-34. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Elizabeth L. Eisenstein, *The Printing Press as an Agent of Change* (1979; repr., Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980): 270-72; F. A. Yates, *The Art of Memory* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1966). [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. John W. H. Atkins, *English Literary Criticism: The Renascence* (London: Methuen and Co., 1951): 349; Henry Reynolds, “Mythomystes,” in *Critical Essays of the Seventeenth Century. Volume 1: 1605-50*, ed. J. E. Spingarn (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1908): 144-77; Richard Stanyhurst, “Extracts from the Dedication and Preface of his Translation of *The Aeneid*; 1582,” in *Elizabethan Critical Essays*, ed. G. G. Smith, vol. 1 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1904): 136; Michael Murrin, *The Veil of Allegory. Some Notes Toward a Theory of Allegorical Rhetoric in the English Renaissance* (Chicago: Chicago Univ. Press, 1969): 122. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. “Preface to the translation of *Orlando Furioso;* *1591*,” in Smith, *Elizabethan Critical Essays*: 203. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. James Shapiro, *1599* (London: Faber and Faber, 2005): 142-44. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Leo Strauss, *Persecution and the Art of Writing* (Glencoe, Illinois: The Free Press, 1952): 16-21, 34-37. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. *The Riverside Shakespeare*, ed. G. Blakemore Evans et al. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1997): 1860. All references to the play are to this edition. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Blakemore Evans et al., *The Riverside Shakespeare*: 95. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)