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### Review Of "Lectures On Shakespeare" By W. H. Auden And Edited by A. Kirsch

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## George Washington University

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Review

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*Restoration Shakespeare* suffers from an insufficient grasp of staging methods and thus compares unfavorably with Jocelyn Powell's finely detailed *Restoration Theatre Production* (1984). Far from gaining depth or complexity, Murray's argument is simply repeated as each play is subjected to the same analysis and, in turn, each analysis leads to the same conclusion. Three examples will suffice: "images of light and dark presented to the audience's mind [in Thomas Otway's *The History and Fall of Caius Martius* (1680)] are reflected visually for them on the stage" (133–34); "[l]ike the earlier adapters [Nahum] Tate from the beginning clearly alters Shakespeare with his mind on drawing the audience's eyes, or minds' eyes, to a visually coherent scene" (149); and John Crowne's *Henry the Sixth, The First Part* "adds to its meaning by such invitations to its audience to use the mind's eye to envisage and to respond emotionally" (177). This one-size-fits-all approach does not really work, as the author herself implicitly concedes when she admits that her account of the "effect on the audience" of Davenant's *Macbeth* would largely hold true for the Shakespearean original (56). Ultimately, the needless hermeticism of this study reduces its appeal to scholars and students of Shakespeare's afterlife. While it is hard to disagree with the author's principal thesis—that dramatic poetry can serve an ocular function—it is equally hard to see why an entire monograph is needed to make the case.

*Lectures on Shakespeare.* By W. H. AUDEN. Reconstructed and edited  
by ARTHUR KIRSCH. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University  
Press, 2000. Pp. xxiv + 398. \$45.00 cloth; \$16.95 paper.

Reviewed by THOMAS H. BLACKBURN

A relatively youthful W. H. Auden looks out from the dust jacket of the present volume. His name occupies the author's place on that jacket, the binding, the title page, and in the Library of Congress details. In an uncanny sort of symmetry, however, Auden's authorship of the lectures resembles Shakespeare's shadowy presence in the plays that bear his name; in both instances the texts that we have are editorial constructions based on sources at least one remove from the unrecoverable original performance.

As Kirsch makes clear in the introduction, Auden left no manuscript of his lectures or of his notes for them. Kirsch has reconstructed the lectures primarily from notes taken by Alan Ansen during the fall of 1946 and spring of 1947 at the New School in New York. Ansen attended all but three of the lectures, became Auden's friend, and was for a time his secretary. Less complete notes from three other students provided material, especially for the lectures Ansen missed. The markings in Auden's copy of Kittredge's *Complete Works of Shakespeare* gave clues to quotations Auden may have included in the lectures, and Auden's later writings on Shakespeare, mainly in *The Dyer's Hand*, were also used as a resource. Kirsch makes careful and creative use of these supplementary materials, and the result is remarkably like Auden's voice in his critical essays. It is nonetheless difficult to say how this volume should most accurately be titled. A more exact if more awkward title might be something like: *W. H. Auden's Lectures on Shakespeare: Reconstructed and Edited from Alan Ansen's Notes*, with Kirsch cited as principal author.

The achievement, and the problems, of the reconstructive process followed may best be approached by comparing closely a passage from Ansen's notes with the parallel passage in Kirsch's text. With the kind permission of Mr. Ansen, I was able to obtain from the Berg Collection in the New York Public Library photocopies of Ansen's notes from the lectures on the Henry VI plays and *Macbeth*.<sup>1</sup> Ansen was clearly, as Kirsch describes him, an "attentive and intelligent" recorder. By any reasonable standard of student work, the notes seem to be remarkably full, though the words written by Ansen fall far short of the number Auden must have spoken in a lecture lasting at least an hour.<sup>2</sup> A substantial part of Kirsch's work consists simply of making fragments into sentences, providing reasonable transitions between sentences, and supplying the full text of quotations read or cited by Auden. Other parts of the editing, however, involve interpretive conjectures that make us aware that reconstruction here really amounts to the construction of a text whose original cannot be recovered. Compare the following two passages from the lecture on the Henry VI plays, the first from a photocopy of Ansen's original notes and the second from Kirsch (10–12):

Gloster wants to kill Margaret but prevented, kills Henry. Gloster's soliloquy 3 *Henry VI*:III.ii (not the last one: Sh's 1<sup>st</sup> great. Auden reads it. Richard is big character. Lawrence wonders how such horrible characters of Sh have such beautiful language, Auden not satisfied—he says "Aren't we all [sob's]?" Kipling shows Sh's characters everywhere in Sapphic verse.

Richard wishes to kill Margaret too, but is prevented. He does, however, kill Henry. "For this (amongst the rest)," he says, "was I ordain'd." He exults as Henry bleeds: "What? Will the aspiring blood of Lancaster / Sink in the ground? I thought it would have mounted" (Pt. 3, V.vi.57, 61–62). In the same soliloquy, he also says that he has "neither pity, love, nor fear," and proclaims that [quotes lines 80–83].

Richard also has a much longer soliloquy in the earlier scene of Edward's wooing of Lady Grey, in which he broods on his future. It is Shakespeare's first great soliloquy. After itemizing the obstacles that lie between him and the throne, Richard says, [quotes 3.4.146–62]. He concludes the soliloquy by affirming his desire for the crown: [quotes ll. 174–95]. Richard is Shakespeare's first big character.

D. H. Lawrence says in one of his poems, that he marvels when he reads Shakespeare, that "such trivial people" can speak in "such lovely language": [quotes last four stanzas of Lawrence's poem "When I Read Shakespeare"]. Lawrence's view of Shakespeare's characters seems to me not altogether unjust, but also not quite satisfying. After all, aren't we all SOB's? Kipling's poems show Shakespeare's characters everywhere, in Sapphic verse.

<sup>1</sup> I am grateful to Diana Burnham of the Berg Collection and Edward Mendelson, Auden's literary executor, for putting me in touch with Alan Ansen, and to Ansen for his letter to me of 23 August 2001, in which he gave me permission to acquire photocopies of portions of his notes. Ansen also wrote that he did "attempt to capture Auden's voice," and that at one point there was some thought of his editing the lectures for publication.

<sup>2</sup> The three lectures for which Kirsch did not have Ansen's notes to rely on produced texts that would have taken less than half an hour to deliver.

Kirsch has filled out Ansen's notes both with added transitions derived from the plot of the play and with two extensive quotations from the play, only one of which is mentioned as having been read aloud by Auden. The most significant emendation and addition, however, occur in the treatment of Ansen's record of Auden's mention of Lawrence. Kirsch relies on a passage from *The Dyer's Hand* in which the Lawrence poem is quoted as part of Auden's attempt to address the problem of conceiving of a tragedy with a protagonist whom a Christian must find to be an ignoble sinner.<sup>3</sup> Kirsch replaces Ansen's "horrible characters" and "beautiful language" with "trivial people" and "lovely language" from the text of the poem (176–77). Are we to suppose that Auden, speaking from memory in the lecture, misquoted, or that Ansen made an error in note-taking? The difference is significant. As recorded by Ansen, "horrible characters" conveys a sense of moral judgment that is not so prominent in "trivial people." Indeed, Auden himself would seem to be remembering that stronger sense when he brings the Lawrence poem into the *Dyer's Hand* essay. Kirsch's interpretive work again appears in his attempt to make fuller sense of the note: "Auden not satisfied—he says 'Aren't we all [sob's]?" The introduction to the poem in *The Dyer's Hand* reads only "D. H. Lawrence's poem seems to me not altogether unjust."<sup>4</sup> Neither source quite justifies the assumption that Auden's dissatisfaction is with Lawrence's view of Shakespeare's characters (whether "horrible" or "trivial"). Kirsch's expansion of Ansen's note makes reasonable sense, but we cannot be sure that it is the sense that Auden intended in the lecture.

Auden's themes in his reading of Shakespeare, and his fellow-artist's responses to Shakespeare's art of verse and character construction, are clearly and perceptively characterized by Kirsch in the introductory essay. We get Auden distilled and clarified, free of the confusions, repetitions, and lengthy plot summaries that are a common sign of the relatively informal nature of the lectures. The most intriguing parts of Auden's criticism are really to be found in his epigrammatic judgments about art and character in the plays. Kirsch selects almost all of the striking remarks about the verse, though one wishes that Auden had given, or Ansen had recorded, more critical detail to help the auditor/reader understand why Richard's second soliloquy in 3 *Henry VI* is "great" (11) or why Henry V's reflections on the troubled sleep of kings is "terribly bad poetry, which is just as it should be" (107).

Auden's interest in Shakespeare's characters focuses on their choices as moral beings acting in history, and on their relation to other characters in the universe of Shakespeare's plays. He is more than willing to judge acts and choices by his own real-life standards of morality and expectations of behavior, though, as we might expect, his moral and social standards are often as unconventional as they are witty. We may well puzzle over the assertion that "Given Iago's knowledge, he should be a saint" (205), but I think Auden's remarks about Antony and Cleopatra, in perhaps his favorite play, catch certain truths about both characters and critic: "You cannot imagine Antony and Cleopatra retiring to a cottage. They need the fullest possible publicity and the maximum assistance from good cooking, good clothes, good drink" (236).

<sup>3</sup> W. H. Auden, *The Dyer's Hand and Other Essays* (New York: Random House, 1962), 176–77.

<sup>4</sup> Auden, *The Dyer's Hand*, 176.

No series of quotations can catch completely the rich playfulness of Auden's descriptive judgments and analyses. His lectures are the work of a widely informed speculative intellect combined with an artist's personal interest in form and language, but they are above all both liberated and limited as the work of a consummate amateur. As an artistic celebrity moonlighting in academe, Auden need not strive to make a critical case answerable to anyone but himself, but he also shares the virtue he finally finds especially attractive in Shakespeare: "There's something a little irritating in the determination of the very greatest artists, like Dante, Joyce, Milton, to create masterpieces and to think themselves important. To be able to devote one's life to art without forgetting that art is frivolous is a tremendous achievement of personal character. Shakespeare never takes himself too seriously" (319). Kirsch's reconstruction of Auden's almost year-long reflections on Shakespeare brings us into the stimulating company of a voice that deserved such careful and imaginative resurrection from the notes of an extraordinary student who, happily for us, did take the lectures seriously.

*Harold Bloom's Shakespeare*. Edited by CHRISTY DESMET and ROBERT SAWYER. New York: Palgrave, 2001. Pp. xiv + 292. \$55.00 cloth.

Reviewed by LAWRENCE DANSON

Harold Bloom needs enemies, and where they don't exist he invents them with, yes, Falstaffian amplitude. How else, except against all comers, in buckram or Kendall green, could he pronounce, heroically and begging no man's pardon, the greatness of Falstaff or Hamlet? There's something comical (but "rancid," too, to use one of Bloom's talismanic words) about this brilliant critic's impassioned defense of things that scarcely need defending. Sure, there are dissenters from the view that Richard III lacks inwardness while Hamlet is transcendent. But *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human* is less interested in arguing with particular critics than in opposing a whole spectral school of resentment, undifferentiated masses of historicists "Old and New," a legion of "academic puritans and professorial power freaks" who hate us youth.<sup>1</sup> Bloom is a writer of astounding power, but his book could have been better, and shorter, without his pose as *vox clamantis in deserto*. My favorite review of it—reprinted in the collection called *Harold Bloom's Shakespeare*—is Hugh Kenner's, which advises taking it in small doses.

Most of the eighteen essays in this collection began life as contributions to a seminar at the annual meeting of the Shakespeare Association of America in 2000. They have been meticulously edited, judiciously arranged, and introduced by Christy Desmet and Robert Sawyer. Many of the book's contributors find something, or everything, to dislike about Bloom's *Shakespeare*. Some are surprisingly temperate, given that Bloom leaves hardly a wither unwrung. The opening section reprints reviews by Jay L.

<sup>1</sup> Harold Bloom, *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human* (New York: Riverhead Books, 1998), 191, 271, and 282.