HAROLD BLOOM AS SHAKESPEAREAN PEDAGOGUE

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... Harold Bloom has always been an antithetical critic. Whether the primary system against which he was writing was New Criticism or, whether he is melodramatizing (or so it would have to appear to a theologian of any seriousness) the originality of the so-called “J” author of the Hebrew bible, he has always written against his teachers.

—John Hollander, Introduction to Poetics of Influence

... It is not Bloom’s rhetorical struggle with his reader, but his ultimate will to power over texts which makes him respect true originality so deeply, and thereby continue so relentlessly to work his visionary restoration on over-read texts, working down through layers of the varnish of facticity to the original image.

—John Hollander, Introduction to Poetics of Influence

In his Introduction to Poetics of Influence, a 1988 anthology of Harold Bloom’s writings (Bloom 1988c), John Hollander places Bloom, as critic, in a struggle with two entities: his own teachers and the texts that he seeks to master. Nominating Bloom for the status of master-critic with this anthology, Hollander configures Bloom’s relation to previous influences in a way that differs markedly from the “strong” poet’s relation to his predecessors, as defined in Bloom’s model of literary influence.
The Anxiety of Influence (1973), the book that made Harold Bloom's critical reputation, dramatizes relations of the literary kind as an agon, a rhetorical wrestling match between strong poets and their equally powerful predecessors. Writing poetry, in this model, becomes one part rebellion, one part homage. Both moods permeate Bloom's critical writings, but according to Hollander's characterization, Bloom does not engage directly with the literary giants whose originality he respects and restores through his criticism. Instead, he exercises a will to power over texts and resists former teachers. Both Bloom's own readership and the authors about whom he writes are somehow left out of the equation. Instead, the "strong poet–powerful predecessor" dyad, as outlined in The Anxiety of Influence, metamorphoses into a new version of the traditional rhetorical triangle: Rather than "author-text-readers," Bloom's oedipal triangle of critical relations involves "critic-texts-teachers." This is a particularly unstable rhetorical triangle, as Bloom's resistance to teachers—his critical predecessors—can acquire the urgency of the strong poet's resistance to his poetic forebearer, the author. The relation with readers can be equally vexed, if less well-articulated. Both statements are true particularly for the Shakespearean projects discussed in this chapter, Bloom's Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human (1998) and his series of critical anthologies on Shakespeare's plays and major characters. In Bloom's writing about Shakespeare, more than his other critical work, Bardolatry makes for an anxious relationship between author (Shakespeare) and critic (Bloom). While Bloom contends for recognition as a "strong critic," akin to a strong poet such as Shakespeare, his lofty claims for himself as critic are tinged with ambivalence and, yes, with anxiety. Two Harold Blooms emerge, a secular prophet who struggles against his critical forebearers and a more humble worker in the vineyards of Chelsea House Press, who seeks mastery over texts by sheer volume of publication. Bloom's uneasy relation to his expanded readership in Shakespeare becomes the site where he acts out his anxiety of influence in relation to Shakespeare as strong poet.

I. STRONG POETS, STRONG CRITICS

The relation of criticism to poetry is complex and changing in Bloom's mythology. At his most extreme, Bloom sees the critic as inferior to the poet and vulnerable to a debilitating idolatry. In "Poetry, Revisionism, Repression," for instance, he warns that critics must not idealize the strong poet's wrestling match with the dead (Bloom 1988d, 122). At the same time, critical reading is both necessary and inevitable. "The quest for interpretive models is a necessary function" because "to refuse models ex-