

**Ted Hughes'**  
***SHAKESPEARE AND THE GODDESS OF COMPLETE BEING***  
A Review  
By Mark Mendizza

*He that will sliver and disbranch  
From his material sap, perforce must wither  
And come to deadly use*  
King Lear, IV, ii.32-36

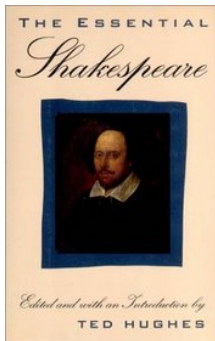
## INTRODUCTION

About seven years ago, when my daughter went off to college and my business was doing pretty well, I was looking for a new project, something to ward off an embarrassing mid-life crisis where I might be tempted to go out and buy a new Corvette.



For some reason Shakespeare came to mind. I thought, maybe instead of buying a Corvette I'll read all of Shakespeare's plays, which in college I had faked.

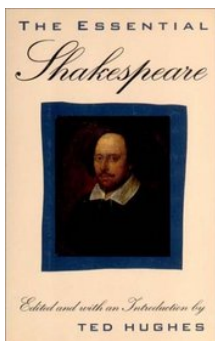
But then, I thought that was rather extreme. If I started reading all those plays, when would I have time to watch LOST? Remember “LOST”?



Later, while surfing the web for pants with substantially more elastic in the waist, I came across a discount book site, and saw this one for like eight dollars: *The Essential Shakespeare*, Edited with an Introduction by Ted Hughes.

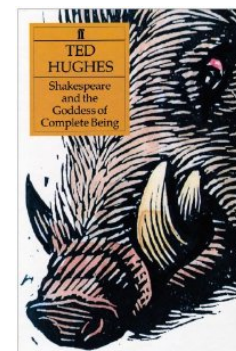
Hmmm. Ted Hughes? The scoundrel that ruined Sylvia Plath? Literature, sordid sex and suicide! It was perfect. Why read all the plays, when I could get the essentials right here from this little book, with a nice introduction by Sylvia Plath’s womanizing, but intriguing and literate spouse, and for only eight dollars. So I forgot about the Corvette, bought a pair of pants with a much bigger butt, and clicked on the *Essential Shakespeare*. For me, it caused “a sea-change into something rich and strange” from which I have yet to recover.

Little Book



This little book, which was first published in 1971 when Hughes was about forty, was the seed of this big one, which was published twenty year’s

Big Book



later, about the time in Hughes' professional life when he would either be thinking of laying down all his thoughts about William Shakespeare, or buying a new Corvette himself.

Before Hughes could select what was "essential" to Shakespeare, he had first to read deeply through the entire Canon; all the poems all the plays more than once. And unlike me, he couldn't fake it.

While at work on this anthology he lined up the writing, spread the entire Canon across the wall, so to speak, of his critical mind: The sonnets. The long narrative poems. And all the plays. And it was in this wide panorama of genius that Hughes discovered broad recurring patterns he had not appreciated before. There were characters and dramatic moments that seemed to possess more than just the similarities to which many other scholars had pointed. He saw a deep poetic infrastructure that stretched from *The Sonnets* and *Venus & Adonis* and *The Rape of Lucrece* to the seven tragedies and finally the redemptive acts of *The Tempest* and *The Winter's Tale*. This arc of poetic infrastructure, which Hughes believed was integral to Shakespeare's creative process, had a mythical lineage that stretched back to antiquity and even pre-history; two periods that Hughes knew well and with which his poetic work was infused.

### **"The Shakespeare Myth" & "The Tragic Equation"**



He called this archaic poetic infrastructure the “Shakespeare Myth” and later, “The Tragic Equation”.

To Hughes it was this mythical dimension that distinguished Shakespeare from all of his contemporaries. In addition to creating a new realism in his dramas, which everyone acknowledges, he simultaneously created a deep organic thread of living myth. This myth, which the author had thoroughly internalized, and which Hughes claims was as much a part of his imagination and artistic process as the DNA in his cells was a part of his biology; this myth drove the creation of the later plays like your own unconscious is driving your individual narratives. Your myth is telling your story. Shakespeare’s myth told his. It’s why Hughes prefaced this big book with a quote from Yeats.

*The Greeks, a certain scholar has told me, considered that myths are the activities of the Daimons, and that the Daimons shape our characters and our lives. I have often had the fancy that there is one myth for every man, which, if we but knew it, would make us understand all he did and thought.”*

W.B. Yeats

And that is what this book is about: the living myth, plus everything Shakespeare did and thought and wrote.

## A Recurring Pattern and a Theory

His discovery derived from two things: the recurrence in poems and play after play of a kind of misogyny and violence toward women characters; especially in the later plays. And second, a literary theory, a wild imaginative theory about why such misogyny occurred, not only within Shakespeare's imagination, but also within the wider Elizabethan and Jacobean culture, and ultimately, still, within our own; with you and me.

"I began to see those mature plays," he said, "from *As You Like It* (the overture to *All's Well that Ends Well*) to *The Tempest*, as a single, tightly integrated cyclic work. This work dramatized a myth which expressed a particular temperament, which in turn reflected, even in a sense embodied, a daemonic, decisive crisis in the history of England."

The crisis of course was the Reformation. It gets pretty complicated but the basic idea is that Shakespeare tapped into the "source myth" of Catholicism; that is, the myth of the Great Goddess and her sacrificed god. In addition, he mined the rival source myth of Puritanism: the enraged Jehovan god who abhors the Goddess for her presumed treachery or whorishness. Hughes argues that these two myths with their love-hate relationship with the Goddess are interwoven throughout the late plays and virtually coerced the author to follow a certain creative path toward the seven tragedies and

then, through a subtle mutation of the myths, provided the key to a liberation from that tragic destiny of isolation, to a transcendent solution, rebirth and “Completeness.”

“Shakespeare’s appropriation of the two myths not only gave him simultaneously the image for the fundamental conflict within his own subjectivity and the key to the spiritual tragedy of the Reformation, which in turn gave him access to the Reformation’s inner life as workable material for his art.”

So, although these myths, as we will see, seeped into our author through subjective experience; in other words: they were quite personal; they were equally archaic, spiritual and historical.

In the introduction of the anthology, he hinted at the myth and how it might have driven the creation of Shakespeare’s later works; how this powerful myth may have led to a dramatic prototype, a tragic template that the author used to pen his tragedies and the romances that followed. Was it possible that like the century of great Athenian writers or even the teams of television writers today that the greatest writer(s) that ever lived used a formulaic crutch to create his late master works? Twenty years later Hughes elaborated on these ideas, and in 1992, instead of buying a Corvette he published *Shakespeare and The Goddess of Complete Being*.

*Shakespeare and the Goddess of Complete Being* fleshes out these ideas about the creative process that led to William Shakespeare's later plays. Hughes argues that Shakespeare's imagination was possessed of a "Mythical Equation" that turns into a "Tragic Myth" and then mutates into something like redemption and rebirth. These ancient myths in their Elizabethan avatars involve the Puritanical rejection of both divine love (including the rejection of the Catholic virgin mother) and carnal love (which is nothing less than the rejection of life itself). These mythic forces work through the artist like an organic thread of DNA, to give birth to the themes, characters and much of the poetic language of the late plays. The sources of these thematic principles were the two well-known archaic myths mentioned above, and today might be thought of as archetypes. The mythical lineage was perennial and, according to Hughes, could be traced back, in one iteration or another, through millennium of human history. So we're dealing with something . . . "Primal". And although he was quite aware that ancient myths were not taken very seriously in the late twentieth century world of literary scholarship, for Hughes, myths were a living thing in our time; yes; but especially in the time of William Shakespeare. Hughes believed in the efficacious power of myth, in the magical capabilities of language and in the evolution of the human soul; which are not things one hears about much from our current literary establishment. Hughes was unique.

"This old fashioned soul appears on that stage which I call the mythic plane," he says, "where events and figures and images come into focus from beyond consciousness, and

where they perform so to speak, in obedience to those laws and that they remain mysterious to the observer.

THE SOUL IS THAT WHOLE DIMENSION LIKE A CREATURE WITHIN A UNIVERSE FULL OF OTHER CREATURES. ALL RITUAL DRAMA IS DRAMA ABOUT THE SOUL.”

And of course virtually all of Shakespeare’s drama was realistic, mythic AND ritualistic. It amused, mystified and transformed the audience depending on its level of awareness and perhaps its initiation. I believe, like Ted Hughes, that that was true then, and that it is true now.

The basic content of the mythic material appeared loosely in the early Sonnets, but Shakespeare gave specific poetic expression of his version of the myths in the two long narrative poems *Venus and Adonis* and *The Rape of Lucrece*. In a reversal of the original myth, Adonis, a rather priggish, one might say Puritanical young man rejects the Goddess. In the second, Tarquin, the son of a Roman king in 503 BC, lusts after and in a primal moment of brutally rapes the chaste Lucrece, who later commits suicide. The noble Roman is cast out in shame, which gives rise to the first Republic.

These two poems, and their complex, misogynistic content took hold of the artist. They drove his creative process, percolated to the surface and eventually not only “begat” the tragic acts of *Hamlet*, *Othello*, *Macbeth*, *Lear*, *Coriolanus* and *Anthony*, but also gave

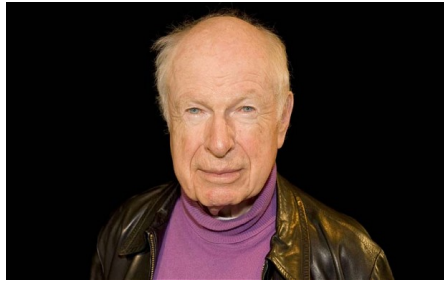
expression to the struggle between Catholicism and the Protestants. Fortunately, a kind of mutation of the same mythology also led the artist out of the tragic shadows and into a new and transcendent awareness, which began with the rebirth in *Cymbeline* and culminated in the miracles contained in *The Winter's Tale* and *The Tempest*.

The hero rejects the feminine (which also represented the Elizabethan/Jacobean rejection of Catholicism, and on the individual level of the hero, the rejection of his true soul). The hero's image of the sacred mother and great goddess changes into the image the life-threatening Goddess of Hell. The hero feels betrayed, threatened and enraged. In what Hughes calls a "Tarquin Moment of madness" He kills his beloved, and destroys his soul.

Later in the cycle, through Gnostic magic and ritual, the hero rediscovers the feminine and its link to the natural, sexual, transcendent experience. The hero is reborn into wholeness and embraces life. If the ideas in *Shakespeare and Goddess of Complete Being* hold up, then one may come to believe this tragic cycle actually saved the author, his community and the rest of us. I know. It's a big burden for one book to bear, and a lot of people think Hughes may have had a bit too much peyote, but if you accept his premises and trust in his knowledge of mythical lineage, then you'll find it quite an interesting "trip".

"I shall keep reminding myself," writes Hughes in his introduction, "that the main point is to project the...plays...as a single titanic work, like an Indian epic, the same gods battling through their reincarnations, in a vast, cyclic Tragedy of Divine Love."

**Peter Brook**



In a letter to Peter Brook, who Hughes worked with in a creative way for many years, he summarized the Shakespeare Myth. Speaking of Indian epic: One might recall that Brook adapted, produced and directed a nine-hour staging of the ancient Hindu poem *The Mahabharata* combining strains of the War of the Roses and Gotterdammerung into the cosmic grandeur of an Indian epic. Hughes' conception of the "Shakespeare Myth" echoes a similar cosmic grandeur.

**Letter to Peter Brook  
1972**

"Considering the basic story to be a combination of the two long poems, Venus and Adonis and Rape Of Lucrece, as I've outlined in the introduction, then pretty well every play—or at least the big poetic moments of every play—can be fitted to it, as it reappears in some form or another in each one."

## The Attack on Women and Nature



It is of course commonplace for scholars to point out recurring themes, characters and plot structures in Shakespeare's work. But Hughes divines something much deeper at work here, something that was operating at the very core not only of his creative process, but of his culture, of Elizabethan and Jacobean England, of the religious wars, the rise of public theater, the Puritan victories in the 17<sup>th</sup> century and of our modern world. In short, the rejection of the feminine principle as cause for the destruction of nature, the abuse of women worldwide and the tragic end of the human soul. Isn't it ironic that a man who was so reviled by feminists during most of his life, at least until he published *The Birthday Letters*, ended up writing a quintessential feminist tract. But no one really got it. Here's Hughes commenting on how some feminists felt about the book, and Hughes himself.

"Recently, on The Late Show, I watched a self-confessed feminist, laughingly paralysed by her fixed ideas about life in general and about me in particular. In my book, I have



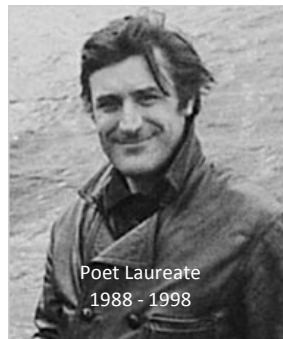
translated the Complete Works into the holiest book of all feminism's Holy Books, and Lisa Jardine did not know how to open it."

To be honest, not many people do, either know how, or attempt to open it. Alas, that's why I'm delivering this little talk.

Hughes puts it this way. "In other words he (William Shakespeare) recorded the most horrible of all disasters--the declaration of war against the natural (real) world and natural fellowship with it and in it, by a pseudo intelligence which is now on the point of culminating its logics and natural bent in destruction of the world and all life."

I know I've taken up precious time with these preliminary remarks, but many people tend to read this book as just another piece of literary criticism, and even criticize it as lacking scholarly standards. Which it sometimes lacks. It doesn't have an index, which infuriates the academy. It respects the lineage and influence on the imagination of human mythologies, which the academy spurns. It speaks to Hermetic Neo-Platonism as integral to Shakespeare's creative output, which the academy scoffs at. It believes in theater as ritual, even as healing ritual, even today. It's a wildluy impressionistic book of conjecture written by one of the finest poets of his generation. And frankly I have a much higher regard for thoughts about art that come from artists like Hughes and Rylance than the ones that come people like . . . well you know who I'm talking about.

## Poet Laureate 1988 - 1998



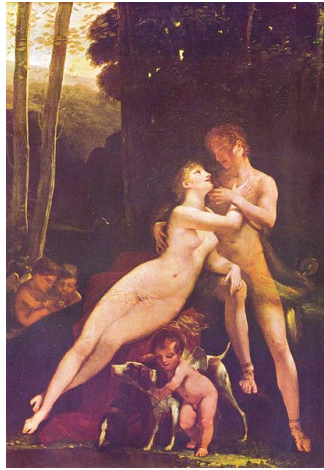
Westminster Abbey  
Poet's Corner

In spite of his decades of abysmal public relations after Plath's suicide, Hughes' was named England's poet laureate from 1988 until his death in October of 1998. He was honored with a memorial in Poet's Corner of Westminster Abbey, next to Tennyson, Eliot, Lawrence and ours truly William Shakespeare, who of course was added as an afterthought a mere 124 years after his passing. His *Goddess* was written after a long and close creative relationship with Peter Brook who also embraced the mythical dimension in theater.

In June Carole Sue, James and I were attending a workshop in Agrigento, Sicily. The eight days were devoted to the study of a single play, the culmination of the Tragic Equation itself, "The Winter's Tale", which was in part located in Sicily. Mark Rylance was our

guide for the week, and before a presentation or working out a scene from the play, he would often walk into the common room with a copy of this book under his arm, with a bouquet of multi-colored markers shooting out from pages he felt worth remembering. And there were a lot of them. The book is out of print. It's out of favor with most scholars. But for the artist, for players on the stage who are still seeking deeper interpretations of character, and those who believe there is still something deep and mysterious about the Canon, and certainly about its author, *The Goddess of Complete Being*, like Shakespeare themselves, is like a bridge from our ancient past to our precarious present.

Conception and Gestation of the Equation's Tragic Myth:  
*The Sonnets*  
*Venus & Adonis*  
*Lucrece*



The Great Goddess Venus was passionately in love with Adonis and Adonis with her.

Shakespeare's Tragic Equation, which today would probably be thought of more like a Tragic Algorithm, had its beginning in three sources: *The Sonnets*, *Venus & Adonis* and *The Rape of Lucrece*.

It finds its first expression in the long, lascivious narrative poem *Venus and Adonis*. The most immediate source for the poem was probably Ovid's *Metamorphosis* (which Hughes translated, by the way) and in which the great goddess Venus was passionately in love with Adonis and Adonis with her.

## Shakespeare's Switcheroo



Adonis becomes a Puritan, and rejects the Goddess

In Shakespeare's version, however, there is a small but stark reversal. Venus is still hot for Adonis, but Adonis does not reciprocate. He is removed, distant and seems more infatuated with hunting, with purity, chastity, and with himself, than he is with the Goddess and her lust for life. In short Adonis is a bit of a Puritan; and probably seeking a place of influence in the Republican party.

### **Venus to Andonis:**

"Fondling" she saith, "since I have hemmed thee here  
Within the circuit of this ivory pale,  
I'll be a park and thou shall be my dear:  
Feed where thou will, on mountain, or in dale;  
Graze on my lips, and if those hills be dry  
Stray lower where the pleasant fountains lie."

**Adonis to Venus:**

"I hate not love, but your device in love,  
That lends embracements unto every stranger.  
You do it for increase: O strange excuse!  
When reason is the bawd to lust's abuse."

789-98

Adonis rejects the goddess. This is the core of Hughes' argument. This rejection of the feminine aspect, of carnal and divine love, is the cause of the tragedies; while seeing the existential error in that rejection, the cause for redemption.

Of course for Shakespeare this rejection has its sources in the Sonnets, specifically sonnets 18 to 126; after the poet pleads for the beautiful young man to consider marriage and procreation, and before the poet is entangled in the humiliating relationship with the dark lady. In those 108 sonnets Hughes suggests that William Shakespeare lost control of the original commission for the poems, which was to persuade a young noble to marry and create heirs, and was helpless to resist the urge to bare his own love for the young man, for the "powerful, unstable, tempestuous, ambitious, unpredictable, extravagant nobleman," who we all know as Henry Wriothesley, the third Earl of Southampton. According to Hughes, the face that launched not a thousand ships, but 7 good tragedies.

### Henry Wriothesley, the third Earl of Southampton



According to Hughes, the face that launched not a thousand ships, but seven very good tragedies

Yes, *Venus and Adonis* was personal, intimate even. But like so much of his writing, Shakespeare was always able to create parallel universes, becoming at once the great new realist writer and the great visionary poet, as if the granular genius of Tolstoy and Dickens combined with the deep poetic vision of Keats and Blake.

“In the long poem Shakespeare drifted from his private, subjective situation into the giant step-up transformer of this mythic narrative,” says Hughes, “where the collision of private attitude and feeling has become the drama of a god and goddess.”

“In retrospect,” he continues, “one could call this (the rejected Goddess) the Tragic Equation’s very moment of conception. Venus lies stunned by her rejection.”

Upon her back deeply distressed.

Look how a bright star shooteth from the sky,

So glides he in the night from Venus' eye

814-816

Later, the Goddess hears the hounds barking. They have found a wild boar. She meets the boar head on, its frothy mouth, 'Like milk and blood being mingled together (902).

Adonis has been killed, gouged to death.

### **The Death of Adonis**



Once Venus recovers from the shock, she performs two acts that will have large consequences in the works that are still to come. First she prophesizes over the dead god:

Since thou art dead, lo, here I prophesy:

Sorrow on love hereafter shall attend.

It shall be waited on with jealousy,

Find sweet beginning, but unsavoury end.' 1135-8



Venus condemns Love is to certain tragedy – its cause: jealousy.

As she speaks, the goddess also transforms Adonis. His corpse vanishes, and a purple flower springs from his blood. She plucks the flower, places it between her breasts, and flies back to her heavenly home. Hughes makes much of this transformation. It is linked to the Christ story, the myth of the great goddess and her sacrificed god. It is a transformation that occurs in *Lear*. Posthumous is reborn. Not to mention *Leontes* and *Prospero*.

Hughes claims that, “Shakespeare’s is the only version of the myth in which Adonis (in the name of Adonis) rejects Venus..” 57 “By the adroit modification of Adonis’s attitude to Venus he had converted a straight forward tale of Idyllic love and unlucky accident into vibrant drama. As I say, this poem becomes a collision of divine wills. And what could well have begun as a sophisticated joke teeters out along the brink of authentic tragedy.”

According to Hughes, this is Part A of the mythic foundation for Shakespeare’s tragedies and also the precursor for the redemption that occurs in the romances.

Part B emerged from his second long poem, *The Rape of Lucrece*.

### *The Rape of Lucrece*



Compared to *Venus and Adonis*, which occurred in an almost light-hearted and other-worldly way, the long *Lucrece* is a stark piece of realism. Instead of fantastic mythical locations, the poem is set in secular Rome. The uncontrollable passionate lover, formerly female, is now male. The sexual victim, formerly male, is now female. The sexual purpose, formerly accomplished only in symbolic, mythic form, is now completed in an actual rape. The survivor, formerly returning to mourn, heartbroken, in Heaven, is now banished from his own country, broken by guilt.

Hughes argues that “This symmetry at the surface reveals a deeper symmetry beneath: *Lucrece* is the same event as *Venus and Adonis* on a different level; it is the second half of a binary whole; and it manages to be both these things at the same time.”

Go figure.

To understand how Lucrece works as the counterpoint to Venus, one only needs to understand the entire history of Western religion and the lineage of every god and myth from the beginning of time. And there's only one guy who has done this.

Here's Hughes on this mind-bending notion:

"What I want to concentrate on here is the curious fact that out of all the countless available narratives Shakespeare, having picked the source-myth of Catholicism for his first long poem, now picked the source-myth of Puritanism for his second. Somehow he had identified and appropriated the opposed archetypal forces of the Reformation, the two terrible brothers (that would be the Catholics and the Protestant/Puritans) that Elizabeth had pushed down into her crucible, under the navel of England, to fight there like the original two dragons of the island. And having appropriated them, as his imaginative capital, he locked them together so deeply, with dovetailed forms and contrapuntal music, that they seem like the two halves of one brain."

In a way, one might say Elizabeth herself personally caused the Shakespeare Myth, the public theaters and the tragedies. That is, they were all a reaction to her savvy control over the spiritual lives of her subjects; that is to say, the myths, the plays, the theater were outlets, perhaps the only allowable outlets, where the psychic struggles of her people could be expressed.

He goes on, "It can be seen here ... that in divining just how the second myth erupts from the first, in other words just how the man who rejects the female, in moral, sexual revulsion, becomes in a moment the man who assaults and tries to destroy her, Shakespeare has divined a natural law. One that presents no mystery to post-Freudians. It is so natural, in fact, that the inevitability of the tragic dramas that follow is based precisely on that law."

These two poems encompass the entire historical dynamic of Elizabethan England, from the religious wars that Elizabeth in her wisdom kept contained (often represented in the plays as rival brothers) to the personal heartbreak of a lovesick author, namely William Shakespeare. They transformed him. And they have transformed us.

The thing to remember is that when Tarquin rapes Lucrece, he is not only committing a serious crime, he also socking it to William's subjective life, killing the Virgin Mary and destroying all hope of English men and woman for any kind of spiritual union with god. It's true. The whole book reads like a forensics of an archaic crime scene, piecing together evidence to explain tragic acts. "in fact," says Hughes, "it does constitute the investigation of a crime – the inevitable crime of civilization, or even the inevitable crime of consciousness. Certainly the crime of the Reformation – the 'offense/From Luther to now/ That has driven a culture mad' as Auden phrased it." The Puritan Adonis and Tarquin figures are the perpetrators. The victim is the Goddess and the spiritual life of humankind.

**Is There a Tragic Equation?  
Is it Driving Shakespeare's Creative Process?**



**As You Like It?**

**All's Well that  
Ends Well**



**Measure for Measure**



**Troilus  
And  
Cressida**



## *As You Like It*



Jacque

“In essence, Shakespeare is healing himself.”

So is there a Tragic Equation? Is it driving Shakespeare’s creative process?

Let’s see?

According to Hughes’ the DNA went dormant for many years and a dozen plays. No Adonis. No Venus. To Tarquin.

Then suddenly it shows up again in *As You Like It*; not the full-blown mythical equation, which will occur later in *All’s Well*, but a small hint within this romantic comedy that Shakespeare has begun again to feel the myths percolating up within his imagination. Then full “boar”, if you’ll excuse the pun, in *Measure for Measure* and *Troilus*.

Hughes says that *As You Like It* and *All’s Well* mark a significant change in the writer and the writing. He argues that a conscious decision was being made in these plays to

conduct a kind of personal review the author's past and to set out on what amounts to a spiritual quest and a transformation of his artistic process.

I found it interesting that In *As You Like It*, he pointed to Jacques, the melancholy philosopher who just seems to be hanging out in the forest of Arden, pondering his existential circumstances, as an embodiment of the author. The image of this introvert set apart from the main party, is a fitting one to mark the beginning of Shakespeare's mythic journey. His retreat into himself, according to Hughes, marks the author's first step onto a new path for himself where he asks leave to:

Speak my mind, and I will through and through  
Cleanse the foul body of the infected world,

"Jacques and Prospero are not the same," explains Hughes, "but they are both representative of Shakespeare the man; they are both personal in a way and they both serve a dramatic, ritualistic and psychological/spiritual function, vis a vis Shakespeare himself and his audience. In essence, Shakespeare is healing himself."

The theme of the rival brothers, which is a variant of the two myths, also appears in the characters of Oliver and Orlando; but for Shakespeare *As You Like It* amounts to a "heads up" and a "taking stock" for his long new project.

## All's Well that Ends Well



"... searching for him to correct him and to redeem him into his new life, whether he likes it or not."

In *All's Well that Ends Well*, simple-minded Bertram is actually the case of Shakespeare moving forward with his introspective quest by taking a close look at himself, at the superficial, soulless person he had been in the past. Hughes even suggests that the Bard may have been experiencing some pangs of guilt for leaving poor Anne alone in Stratford for all those years, and although it is evidence that Hughes probably hadn't brought his formidable powers of analysis and reflection to bear on the authorship issues, it is also evidence of his readiness to speculate a bit on the biography. According to Hughes, "Bertram becomes the token representative of that earlier self. This character's empty values, his callow wrongheadedness, are allegorized in his misevaluation of Helena and his petulant flight from her." 118

In the play, Bertram and Helena again are not yet under the spell of the Mythical Equation, but they come much closer to embodying the outward behaviors of the two gods. Helena's love for Bertram speaks to the 'total, unconditional' love of Venus – lacking only the 'lust'. She incorporates the Sacred Bride rejected, the Divine Mother



abandoned by son and consort, and the Miracle-working Divine love itself. You'll recall that Helena was also a healer who was able to save the life of the King. In a more metaphorical sense, like many of Shakespeare's heroines, Helena represents the pure soul Bertram is in search of, even though he does not know it. That is to say, "she incarnates Bertram's all-forgiving soul – searching for him to correct him and to redeem him into his new life, whether he like it or not."

But like Adonis, Bertram rejects Helena. Like Tarquin, he seeks to despoil the chaste Diana. *All's Well that Ends Well* is another rehearsal of the myth. What is lacking, however, is the hard edge of the Puritan manifesto, the idealist in love with the pure, higher abstract idea love, while displaying an utter distaste for lust; and then of course the Tarquinian Moment. And the violence. That comes next, in *Measure for Measure*.

## Measure for Measure



Isabella is playing both extremes of the Goddess: the one that presides over the body, and the one that presides over the soul.

This is where you can see the Mythical Equation coming into fuller bloom. In Calvinist Angelo you have the self-righteous Puritanical rejection of the body, of sex, of the means to life. The complete rejection of the feminine.

Isabella is the ideal virginal female, “a thing enskyed and sainted”, preparing to take her vows of celibacy and enter the nunnery.

Hughes interprets “Lucio as the cynical, irrepressible Mephistopheles of the sexual underworld standing by Isabella,” as she ironically pleads for fornication and sexual license in order to save her brother’s life. During his discourse with her Angelo is overcome by lust for the body of Isabella. In a complete hypocritical reversal of his self-righteous Puritan rejection of the Goddess, Angelo bargains: either sleep with me or, a bit like Tarquin, I will kill your brother.

So, one begins to give rise to the other like two sides of an equation, the two myths usurp our characters. Angelo is Adonis, rejecting the Goddess, and then he is Tarquin, shamelessly threatening to take with violence what he desires, regardless of consequences.

“Isabella’s plea for sexual license corresponds to Venus’s for the same. Isabella is playing both extremes of the Goddess: the one that presides over the body, and the one that presides over the soul. She is a high priestess of the goddess of fertility and promiscuity, such as confronted the Jehovan reformers in Jerusalem as Astoreth, Asherah, Anath, Sacred Bride of the sacrificed god Adonis/Thammuz. At the same time she is the Diana-like priestess, in all but fact, of a Catholic nunnery.”

But there’s still something missing. The mythical equation is emerging, but there is something missing: and that something is the hero’s “total, and unconditional LOVE.”

## Where is the Love?

All three plays contain the beginnings of the tragic equation, but the heroes lack true love. Adonis rejects love, Tarquin feels lust without love, Bertram rejects love and feels lust without love, Angelo rejects love, and feels lust without love. So WHERE IS THE LOVE?

## Troilus & Cressida



The first play in which the hero possesses both “a total and unconditional love” AND a vulnerable inner life.

In Troilus, that’s where.

Troilus is possessed of a “total, and unconditional love” for Cressida, not unlike that of *Venus for Adonis*, and Adonis for the Goddess before Shakespeare made his switch.

Shakespeare needed that intensity of love and the turbulent rise of the hero’s inner life that follows to transform the simply mythical elements into something tragic. Both are lacking in *All’s Well* and *Measure for Measure*. Both – the passionate love and turbulent inner life -- appear in *Troilus* and contribute to his becoming a genuine tragic figure.

Hughes says that “Each hero’s tragic potential is exactly proportionate to the vulnerability of his inner life.” That is to say, Bertram has no inner life. He is practically vacuous. Angelo has no inner life. He’s a clerk promoted to his level of emotional and spiritual incompetence. We might even say that the intensity of the hero’s love actually

creates the vulnerable inner life required for the tragic hero to emerge. The point is that both are present in *Troilus*, the play that sets the stage for the explosion of the tragic equation in *Hamlet*, *Othello*, *Macbeth* and *Lear*.

## The Evolution of the Tragic Equation through the Seven Tragedies



**Othello**



**Hamlet**



**Macbeth**



**King Lear**



**Coriolanus**



**Timon of Athens**



**Anthony and Cleopatra**

## *Othello*



Textbook Tragic Equation

According to the equation," *Othello* was written before *Hamlet*. And it is in *Othello* that we see a clear, almost schematic exposition of the Mythical Equation turned into the Tragic Myth.

Othello loves Desdemona and she loves him. The requisite 'total, unconditional love' exists on both sides. It represents the pre-Puritan Venus and Adonis mythic idyll, before Shakespeare made the change.

Iago is the emissary of Hell who creates the double-vision within Othello: After Iago whispers his poisonous thought into Othello's ear his image of Desdemona goes from Sacred Mother and Divine Bride to the Goddess from Hell.

Othello faints. (which is comparable to Adonis dying)

Othello arises mad, and sets out to kill Desdemona. (He becomes Tarquin)

He kills Desdemona. (In the Tarquin Moment)

“Having smothered Desdemona (much as Tarquin gags Lucrece with her own nightdress), Othello is instantly enlightened, realizes the emptiness of his crime, and so kills himself. (as post-coital Tarquin, relieved of his ‘load of lust’ flees in remorse, is stripped of his royal succession, and banished forever.” Othello is text book Tragic Equation



## Hamlet



"Tragic stature appears (in Shakespeare) only where the hero destroys his own 'soul', by destroying his beloved, in full awareness of what he is doing, and suffering the whole process while being convinced that it must be done."

Hamlet is presented at the very beginning of the play with the double-vision -- the Goddess as Sacred Mother, Divine Love and, in the same person, the Goddess of Hell. In act one the ghost points out that Hamlet's mother married his father's murderer, then slept with him. From that moment, Gertrude is loved and then she is loathed, which is how the tragic equation gains traction and takes over. One can hardly fail to note that Hamlet speaks to his mother in the closet scene more like a rejected lover than an aggrieved son. The double-vision is palpable and in these plays always leads to the Tarquin Moment of violence; and the hero losing his soul.

Hamlet cannot separate Ophelia from his mother. He accuses her of possessing the same treacherous nature by virtue of being female, and rejects her absolutely. The rest of the play is very much a case of Hamlet trying desperately to avoid the violence of the Tarquin moment. But it gets him.

Hamlet's ego, individuality and intellect, all of which are based in the real world, struggle against the oceanic power of the myth. But the Tragic Equation surrounds him. The myth has its way, and tragedy ensues.

## Macbeth



King Macbeth is the Tarquin figure, while Scotland herself represents Lucrece.

Following Hughes' description of the endless lineage of the mythical avatars and the way in which they transform the tragic heroes in the plays can be very convoluted and sometimes indecipherable. Macbeth is a good example.

The way in which the Tragic Equation takes hold of Macbeth and his wife is so complex and circuitous that trying to understand it has actually driven some readers mad, and caused them go next door and murder their innocent neighbors. It's a tragic chapter and I advise it only to the stout of heart. But here's a sample:

" Duncan/Banquo/and early noble Macbeth equal Adonis; while Lady Macbeth/Hecate and the three witches equal the Queen of Hell. The irrational Macbeth equals the Boar. In the second half of the equation King Macbeth equals Tarquin, while Scotland equals

Lucrece. You can unpack the dense textual explication, or just trust me: The Scottish Play is under the spell.

## King Lear



Lear's patriarchal, ego-centric Self gives up its struggle and is, in his reconciliation with Cordelia, reunited with the Goddess.

By the time he began writing *King Lear*, Shakespeare is completely usurped by the Tragic Equation, so much so that he writes a TRIPLE; Three tragedies in one: Lear's family. Gloucester's Family. And the tragedy of rival brothers in Edmund and Edgar.

Lear demands the Venusian 'total and unconditional love' and interprets Cordelia's silence as a total rejection. The double-vision erupts. He sees in the woman he most loves "something more hideous / than the sea monster." He doesn't kill her, but it is a variant of the Tarquinian moment. In a way, upon Lear's banishment of his daughter, the tragic equation is complete in this play by the end of Act One, Scene One.

But of course in the raging current of this mighty work there are several other tragedies to come. To track them and identify the many different ways in which Shakespeare's myth affects plot and character would take almost as long as the play itself. But one

thing to remember throughout, that Cordelia is not only the realistic flesh-and-blood Cordelia, and like all of Shakespeare's characters, she IS real, alive and vivid; but she is also Lear's lost soul, in search of itself. While Lear suffers his utter estrangement from kingdom, family and soul, Cordelia, in France, making her way back to him, is an allegory of his soul gradually doing the same. On the realistic plane Lear is a vibrant representation of the human condition; a mirror if you will to nature. On the mythic plane an equally powerful drama is taking place.

At the heartbreaking end of the play, Lear's patriarchal, ego-centric Self gives up its struggle and is, in his reconciliation with Cordelia, reunited with the Goddess. He finds his soul; becomes whole, and complete. "He emerges as one on the opposite side of a Black Hole," says Hughes, and "into a new universe, punished, corrected, enlightened, and transfigured. The Goddess embraces him, correspondingly transformed, and awakens him with a kiss. It is the same tableau that Shakespeare placed at the end of *Venus & Adonis*, but Adonis is not only a flower, but alive."

Briefly, before his death, Lear feels the transcendent moment of completeness that Shakespeare will explore more fully in the Romances. The tragic equation is running at capacity and the several transformations that occur begin to hint at the solution that Shakespeare will reach, a Gnostic, Hermetic spiritual solution, ultimately a transcendent solution, beginning with the rebirth of Posthumous in *Cymbeline*. But before that there

are three other demonstrations of the Tragic Myth in *Timon of Athens*, *Coriolanus* and *Anthony and Cleopatra*

## Timon of Athens



Hughes criticizes the flawed tragedy as a play, but praises it as a poem

*Timon of Athens* is an odd bird, not only because it is so bad that many critics consider it unfinished, but also because the Tragic Equation works its way through the drama without a female protagonist. *Timon* is the only play of the tragic series not centered on the hero's love relationship to a woman, or, as in *Macbeth*, to the Crown, which is a surrogate for a woman, a variant of Lucrece. But Shakespeare AND Hughes both get around this inconvenience by "developing what was in effect a new algebraic variant for the Female: namely Athens herself"; the people of Athens. In his wizardly way Hughes criticizes the flawed tragedy as a play, but praises it as a poem, and then describes it as a powerful representation, at least in a poetic sense, of all the ideas he's been espousing. Here's a quote: "Timon's money runs out. When he calls on his friends for credit, they turn against him and none will help him. According to the equation this is the moment of 'double-vision'; the Queen of Hell reveals herself in the treachery of his friends."



Again, this fails in dramatic terms, “. . .Where Othello projected the Queen of Hell on to Desdemona, and Hamlet projected her on to Ophelia and on to his mother, and Lear projected her on to Cordelia, Timon can project her on nobody but the detestable knaves who deserve everything he says about them.”

“At a single stroke, he has been deprived of the tragic status of the hero who set out to destroy the one who absolutely loves him, and whom he loves absolutely. He is reduced to a frenzy against someone who has merely disappointed an unrealistic expectation.”

So where’s the tragedy? Why don’t we skip this one? The play seems almost inconsequential. And yet listen to Hughes turn this rather trivial circumstance into a most disturbing example of his tragic formula. I quote at length to illustrate two things: the prodigious arc of Hughes’ imaginative conjecture and at the same time one of the criticisms that Hughes received about the book: namely that he could and often did squeeze most eloquently his size eleven foot into his size nine shoe, and could turn a cold cup of tea into a metaphysical catastrophe. His analysis of *Timon* is also an example of how Hughes’ tragic sense spills over onto our contemporary world.



“What saves the situation as a tragic poem,” he says, “though still not as a play, is our realization that his rage and pain come from a deeper source than he admits to Apemantus. And it is the easy, unearned cynicism of Apemantus that gives us its scale. Timon’s great curse erupts from a shock of nihilism. It pours from a vision, newly confirmed, of a mankind without love. Presumably this vision has something to do with the mercantile, atheist, secularized society that was already opening in Jacobean England, in so far as submission to the Divine Love (and therefore any dependence on love in each other) was being supplanted by more pragmatic resorts. When Timon searches in the hearts of his friends for anything resembling the Divine Love, for any human substitute, this ideology is what confronts him – the apelike aspect of a mankind whose heart is, as the proverb says, where its purse is, a mankind that has lost, in fact, the Goddess, and is plunging towards the heartless monkey land of Swift and Pope, and beyond them towards *The Waste Land* and the dustbins of Beckett’s refuse-eating hominids.

Timon’s volcanic eruption, in these terms is the fountainhead of the desert of black cinders, which now covers the inheritance of secular man and his works – where ‘the dead tree gives no shelter, the cricket no relief’. (The Burial of the Dead).



BAMB! POW: Eliot! Eliot is where Hughes is going with all of this.

“Looking at it from this angle, one could argue that *Timon* is Shakespeare’s most concentrated and justified prophetic vision of the consequences of that ‘sin’ behind the Tragic Equation – that rejection (and death) not of God (to begin with) but of the totality of Divine Love: the ultimate statement of the true tragedy of Christ within formal Christianity. “

Are you following this? Shakespeare is not only a “literary shaman” who arises from a culture in crisis to provide a kind of supernatural understanding, but also a prophet. He has taken measure of the past and its perennial mythical foundations, which include an ever present Divine Love. He is immersed in a turbulent revolutionary present that is the “caldron” of his creative imagination and from which he feels the mythical plane shifting under him, a diminishment of love, toward a disaster of tragic proportions. And now, as prophet, he divines the future of humankind.

According to Hughes, “Shakespeare’s is the most agonized of such prophecies, presumably because, being born when he was, he was among the last to be nursed by the universal assurance of the Goddess’s eternal love and the first to feel the apparent certainty of her destruction, and because what cries out, in his tragedy, in that Tarquinian madness, is the agony and despair of the Goddess herself.” 287

For Hughes, Shakespeare was not only a Catholic mourning the loss of his Virgin Bride in the cult of Mary, not only a literary shaman who prophesied in his tragic equation a secular, disassociated, highly-scientific but unknowing culture removed from its relationship with nature (including sex) and in the grips of a terrible “double-vision” in which nature herself becomes the Goddess of Hell, a threat, to be subdued through reason, if not destroyed outright. But more than this, Shakespeare, through his profound ritual drama, also becomes the healer. Through his ritual drama: the redeemer.

## Coriolanus



The first in the tragic cycle in which the women actually survive.

In that late, all-to-brief reunion of Cordelia (the goddess) with Lear (the lost soul), Shakespeare had a glimpse of how he might break out of the fateful equation. In *Coriolanus*, he takes another step toward liberation. It contains an essential feature than *Timon* lacked: a female embodiment of the hero's soul and love: namely Rome itself, as well as Volumnia and Virgilia. And it is the first in the tragic cycle in which the women actually survive.

The city is centered on Coriolanus's mother Volumnia's 'total, unconditional' son-worship' and his wife Virgilia's husband-worship. Coriolanus's advance against Rome is in some ways a massively armored version of Tarquin's attack on Lucrece. Likewise, his mother's (and wife's) appeal for mercy resembles Lucrece's. "This confrontation between Coriolanus and his mother and wife, outside Rome, brings all the religious and mythic associations to a single focus. Coriolanus appears like Angelo in the beginning of *Measure for Measure*, as an inhuman abstraction, but much more actively pitiless and

destructive. It is a marvelously formidable embodiment of the tragic error – that Puritan absolutism and severity, the martial judgment against the ‘wholeness’ of the Goddess. He is the goddess-destroying god, destroying his wife and child and himself. Likewise his mother, who points all this out to him recalls that ‘total, unconditional love’ which created him and which is now trying to protect her world from his insanity.” 296.

“If Coriolanus were to go ahead and destroy Rome, the Equation would be complete. The fact that at this climax his ‘madness’ suddenly melts away in tears, and that he withdraws, letting his mother, wife and child survive, is significant – for the Equation. In King Lear, the Tragic Equation reasserted its pattern, and Cordelia had to die. But here, perhaps because Lear’s experience has radically modified it, though the hero must die, this is the first play in the tragic sequence proper (since Hamlet) where the Female survives.”

## Anthony and Cleopatra



"Let Rome in Tiber melt"

Which brings us to *Anthony and Cleopatra*. It is considered a tragic play but in terms of the Equation, Hughes argues that it is a bridge; a very important transitional play that, "... marks the point of substantial transformation between those plays in which man destroys himself and his world through his misunderstanding and rejection of Divine Love, (*Hamlet*, *Othello*, *Macbeth*, *Lear*) and those in which Divine love redeems him in spite of his misunderstanding and its consequences." (*Cymbeline*, *Winter's Tale*, *The Tempest*,)."

Although it may not appear so on the surface, Shakespeare is getting close to solving the problem. On the historical, realistic level it IS a tragedy: The willful, self-destruction of a great Roman general. On the mythical level, however – and with Shakespeare there is always a mythical level – it is quite a different story.

"For a while he has no idea what is happening to him," says Hughes. "What he is experiencing, in fact, is the tearing apart, within himself, of the two gods. In his bewildered dismay, he is a little like the 'swan's down feather' stuck on the full tide, that

‘neither way inclines’, between the two mutually incompatible roles, in the meeting and mixing zone of the two mythologies.” Here’s the poignant example Hughes uses to illustrate Antony’s archetypal ambivalence:

*Antony*

Her tongue will not obey her heart, nor can

Her heart inform her tongue – **the swan’s down-feather**

**That stands upon the swell at full of tide,**

**And neither way inclines.**

(Act III, sc. ii)

“Then, as he turns and follows Cleopatra, he understands that he has become something else, whose element is water, like the dolphin who showed his back for a moment in that first scene of the play, with its ‘**Let Rome in Tiber melt**’ (which of us have not felt like this?), and its ‘new heaven, new earth’, . . .”

Hughes’ continues his portrait of the evolving hero, “What remains, for this Osirian (Egyptian more than Roman) Antony, is for him to free himself, wholly and finally, from the obsolete Herculean Roman Antony, and emerge as his true self, the universal love god, consort of the Goddess of Complete Being, in so far as that can be incarnated in the body of the middle-aged Roman warrior, lover of a middle-aged, reckless, fearful queen.” (316)



According to Hughes, *Anthony & Cleopatra* comes closer than any other play to being a religious allegory, the story of a transcendent transformation of the soul from a limited, material (martial) and ultra-rational world (ROME) to a boundless spiritual realm of Complete Being (WITH THE GODDESS IN EGYPT). Anthony is not simply a great general who “hath given his empire up to a whore . . .” He is a man who has transcended the limits of his rational ego and ascended, with a little help from endless ecstatic sexual intercourse with an Egyptian queen, into a higher self. As Hughes puts it, “Shakespeare nowhere found an image of such perfect fullness for the simultaneity of the tragic and the transcendental in the unworldliness of erotic love.”

I feel the rhetorical beauty of Hughes’ analysis of Anthony and Cleopatra is matched only by its interminable length, which is much too wordy to quote. But if you are able, I suggest that you quit your job, divorce your spouse, and devote whatever time you have left on this plane of existence to a study of this chapter. For after Antony is “taken up”, the author could feel the Tragic Equation mutating within (yes: the imagination is largely a biological process), leading to a solution.

## The Equation Mutates Toward Redemption



*Cymbeline*



*Pericles*



*The Winter's Tale*

*The Tempest*



## Cymbeline



The first play Shakespeare devotes to rebirth of the hero

*Cymbeline* begins the cycle of “romances” (though in the First Folio it is classified as a tragedy). The play dramatizes the movement of the Equation, which operates on the tragic plane and can never escape it, to a mutation that is breaking through to a new plane, a transcendent plane that will become Shakespeare’s liberation from the grip of a tragic destiny that began with the Sonnets and long poems. One can almost feel the author of this play being released from his former constraints, as a kind of Antony who has removed his armor (“Unarm, Eros. The long days task is done/And we must sleep.”). Antony’s armor (his chest plate, “the sevenfold shield of Ajax”) left there aglow on the dark empty stage, is clearly the chrysalis left behind as he is carried up (“Take me up,” he commands) and like an emerging spirit enters a new plane led by Eros, followed by his Cleopatra. It is not difficult to imagine our writer going through a similar transformation in his heart and spirit and art. And *Cymbeline* is the first beneficiary.

This play is the first play that Shakespeare devotes to the rebirth of the hero. Imogen is of course the embodiment of the Sacred Mother and Divine Love and who, after the

treachery of Iachimo, becomes in the mind and heart of Posthumus the Goddess of Hell, who must die. After experiencing the double-vision and Tarquinian Moment he sets out to destroy the thing he loves. Pretty much textbook Tragic Equation.

But then Posthumus, like Lear, realizes his tragic error and resolves to correct himself, do penance and die. If he had, the Equation would have balanced and fulfilled its destiny. But the equation is mutating, and Imogen of course survived, thanks to her two brothers. Indeed, Imogen was herself reborn into an entirely different world, in the hands of Romans. As for Posthumus, he too survives and is reborn into a transformed world, too; where the two antagonists, Rome and Britain, have actually been reconciled, the tragic rift between Catholic and Protestant symbolically, ritually, healed. (Would that the U.S. Congress enters into such a ritual.)

What has happened here? After the dark, agonizing tragic cycle, what is Shakespeare up to? Hughes thinks it's obvious. "The death and rebirth of Posthumus and Imogen are in this way simultaneous," he says. "The soul dies from its separateness as a soul, the ego from its separateness as an ego, and both are reborn into the single self." Does anyone feel a "completeness of being" coming on here?

Neither two nor one was called.

Reason, in itself confounded,

Saw division grow together;

To themselves yet either neither,  
Simple were so well compounded

That it cried: "how true a twain  
Seemeth this concordant one!  
Love hath reason, reason none,  
If what parts can so remain

The Phoenix and the Turtle, 40-8

Published 1601

Hughes goes on to remark that Shakespeare must have viewed this new invention of his, this death and rebirth of his inexorably doomed heroes into a more forgiving and redemptive life, with some excitement. And one certainly feels the excitement and liberation (not mention inventiveness) in the last four plays of the cycle. "It amounts to a whole new technical process for dealing with the 'uncontrollable', the Tarquinian madness," he says, "that surge from the rejected Queen of Hell, the elemental power of the Boar, . . . is now suddenly contained within the power-station technology of the Gnostic style Theophany, which converts it to human warmth and enlightenment."

Yes, in a sense, it is Renaissance Neo-Platonism (what he calls Gnostic style Theophany) that Shakespeare is looking toward as a way out of the Tragic Equation. And without a fair understanding of the place Hughes believed this philosophical movement held in the

works of William Shakespeare, you will not fully appreciate the solution toward which the plays are tending, or indeed, the conclusions reached in “Shakespeare and the Goddess of Complete Being.”

“Occult Hermetic Neo-Platonism developed in Italy in the early fifteenth century in response to the deepening schism of the Reformation. It incorporated archaic mythic systems, and various traditions of spiritual discipline, drawn from Pagan, Asiatic, Islamic, Gnostic, and Hebraic sources, into a giant synthesis centered on a Christ figure, and based on the Divine Source, in which Catholic and Protestant antagonisms were reconciled into a greater inclusive unity.” The key here is that this philosophy was on fire during the Elizabethan Renaissance , and that it posed a solution to the religious wars of the Reformation and Counter Reformation, the “rival brothers”; not to mention to the spiritual crisis of its initiates. The philosophy was represented in its most flamboyant and eccentric manner by Giordano Bruno, who spent two and half years in London (1583 – 1585), a period of creative output for Shakespeare. No one can say for certain that Shakespeare was a practicing Occult Neo-Platonist. Indeed, there are scholars who claim “irrefutably” that he was a closet Catholic, a confirmed Protestant, a devout Unitarian, a Muslim from Kenya, a Jew and a John Dee-conjurer of angels. Its one of the marvelous enigmas about this writer, he is everywhere in the Canon and nowhere, which is precisely why we’re still looking for him or her or them. But most experts will agree that the philosophy was present in the culture (See Francis Yates) and that it was very influential during the spiritual revolution of the age, a revolution that shaped the

violent and exposed and perilous inner lives of English men and women, not to mention the imagination of William Shakespeare. And although it did propose a resolution to the religious wars through a more prototypical model that could assimilate the rival theological differences into one overarching sacred system, it never really caught on with the masses. Too esoteric, perhaps. On the contrary, Catholics and Protestants alike felt threatened by it. Catholics considered it devil worship and heresy. Bruno was burned in Rome in 1600. The Protestants and Puritans considered it heresy and magic, by its very nature demonic. For later enlightenment rationalists it was superstition. For modern science, absurd. So it went underground, so to speak, receded into more or less secret societies and brotherhoods (somewhat like the Freemasons and Rosicrucians) and perhaps into what we might today classify as mystery schools (British scholar and philosopher Peter Dawkins, by the way, has spent part of his career identifying the presence and role of the original Egyptian/Greco/Roman mystery schools in the plays, and is quite certain that they remain potent ritual dramas; in deed, that they were written by a group of individuals initiated into said mysteries).

The point that Hughes makes is that the Occult Neoplatonism was alive and that it was certainly present in plays like *Love's Labor's Lost* and *The Tempest*. It was part of Shakespeare's evolving imagination and his later plays, and then . . . it was gone. "What is curious," he explains, "is the completeness with which this hyper-imaginative, supercultivated world—which could well account for . . . Shakespeare's . . . sophisticated and profoundly consistent use of the mythologies of the great religions, for his use of

emblematic symbolism, both in his dramatic structure and his poetic style, and for his phenomenal abilities as an actively creative visionary—VANISHED. . . . It disappeared from the intellectually respectable range of ideas and was pushed deep into hell (with the witches).”

I believe the search for the author of the Canon is in part a search to rediscover what exactly it was that disappeared. (NOTE: the Shakespeare Authorship Trust, in collaboration with **Brunel University** devoted its 2012 meeting in London to:

***Shakespeare and the Mysteries*** - exploring the implications for the Authorship

Question of Shakespeare’s profound knowledge of Renaissance Neoplatonic and Hermetic traditions? The colloquium pointed out that the knowledge was not only allusions to alchemy, astrology and magic, to Paracelsian medicine, the Platonic ascent of the soul, and the Music of the Spheres, but also in the initiatic patterns of transformation and rebirth which inform the deep structure of his dramas.)

Which brings us to Pericles.



## Pericles



Pericles is the next play in the presumed order of things, but it stands a bit to the side of the direct path that Shakespeare takes toward a complete reconciliation of the tragic forces that have ruled his subjective life, his artistic life and the life of a good number of Elizabethans. The pathway consists of *Lear/Cordelia*--*Anthony and Cleopatra*--*The Winter's Tale* and finally of course *The Tempest*. The path is cleared with the tools of the Gnostic, Hermetic, Neo-Platonic transcendence; or what me might call the John Dee-Giordano Bruno solution. We'll leap over *Pericles*, which, by the way, infrequently staged and that we can go see at the *Noise Within* theater in Pasadena through November 24<sup>th</sup>, but I do want to mention one concept that Hughes introduces in his discussion of the play: namely a direct influence of these Gnostic ideas, in particular of the Gnostic myth of Sophia. There is no time to elaborate on this, except to say that in *Lear* Shakespeare seemed to be wrenching a transcendental solution out of his guts, possibly making it. Whereas in *Pericles* he began writing as Hughes points out, "not only as a Blackfriars entertainer, but also as an incognito Occult Neoplatonist creating a subliminal but ritualistic mythology, producing a visionary solution to religious conflict,

for a select group.” In *Pericles* we can almost witness Shakespeare more fully assimilating the Neo-Platonism and magic that becomes more and more explicit in the later Romances.

## The Winter's Tale



The culmination of the tragic cycle

*The Winter's Tale* represents in this long series of remarkable ritual dramas the most explicit rendering yet, the culmination, resolution and ultimate redemption of the tragic crime against the Goddess.

I had never read nor seen this play before; and certainly had no sense of its significance. I was certain that *The Tempest* was the culmination of Shakespeare's tragic cycle, not *Winter's Tale*. I remember when Carole Sue told me it was her favorite play, and that she'd seen it six times, I felt a sudden void in my understanding. Why would *The Winter's Tale* be more appealing than *The Tempest*? It hasn't even been produced and directed by Julie Taymor.

But then of course we went to Sicily, Carole Sue, James Ulmer, Janelle Balnicke and me. We were the four Yanks in a group of fiercely articulate Brits and as a group we worked

through every page of the play and even performed each scene together under the direction of perhaps the finest Shakespearean actor/director of our time, Mark Rylance.



Mark took us deep within the text where we made discoveries about interpretation and Shakespeare's uncanny balance between the vividly real and the evanescent ritual.

Peter Dawkins, who organized the event, walked us through the deep esoteric references within the play, including alchemical cycles and its relationship to the myth of Persephone, which was of course a myth of death and rebirth. I must say that now I see the world in a completely different way. I can't say how exactly, because it all took place on the "Mythic Plane". I have no doubt, however, that *The Winter's Tale* is the dramatic culmination at least of The Tragic Equation. In that play, on the island of Sicily, with Perdita, Florizel and Hermione, we were all reborn (as long as the wine held out). In *The Tempest*, however, something different occurs: we find out how it was done.

The first half of *The Winter's Tale* is classic Tragic Equation. There is 'total and unconditional love'. There are the two rival brothers. There is a Sacred Mother and Divine Love turned into the Goddess from Hell.



Leontes was his own Iago

There is the double-vision, which develops in the most agonizing and realistic manner on stage; where we witness the gradual interior torment of Leontes, acting, in a way, as his own Iago, feeling the Tarquinian rage curdling up within him and gradually corrupting the image of his beautiful innocent wife into a thing hateful and doomed. Having failed to kill his rival brother (Polixenes), Leontes resumes his role in the Tragic Equation as the Goddess-Destroyer, and sets about to kill Hermione. The distant, Protestant, legalistic Adonis, into whom Leontes has changed, insists on a "fair" trial for his wife during which, utterly separated from his truer self, he condemns Hermione and is ready to kill her. Suddenly the God Apollo intervenes, declaring Hermione innocent and Leontes a jealous tyrant. Leontes sees his tragic error, and if the Equation were to fulfill itself in this play, he would die, like Lear, like Othello, like Hamlet.

But this is not the Tragic Equation proper, this is the mutation, the thing that began subtly with Lear and gradually found its way to Cymbeline. The play recapitulates Adonis's original crime, his rejection of the Goddess, and brings it to judgment and condemnation by Apollo - Apollo the God of Truth, the God of Poetry, and the God of Healing.

In a way, Hermione's (and Paulina's) speeches in defense of innocence echoes the speeches of previous females in the tragic cycle who found a voice with which to defend themselves and the Female at large. Considering that there are sixteen large works in which the hero rejects the feminine, condemns her to death, or kills her, one might think there would be more speeches like the one delivered by Hermione. On the other hand, the silences of these other victims, especially Cordelia, played as stark and telling in the drama as the more outspoken.

<b>Cordelia:</b>	<b>Nothing, my Lord</b>
<b>Lear:</b>	<b>Nothing?</b>
<b>Cordelia:</b>	<b>Nothing.</b>

## Defending the Goddess

Isabella admonishes Angelo



Volumnia pleads with Coriolanus



Utterly alone, pregnant and facing the entire court, Hermione defends herself

Venus in the long poem was probably the first voice, trying to bring the hero to his senses before being completely rejected. Lucrece of course has a voice, pleading her case, calling on the Gods and all noble Romans to witness her words, before killing herself. Hughes omits Helena's pleas to Bertram from the list, because she does not argue that her rights as a woman, as the female, are being rejected. Her words exist on a more personal basis. But Isabella, in *Measure for Measure*, bursts forth with uninhibited rage against Angelo's criminal assault on the Female. In the next seven plays the Female is almost too stunned by the violence done to her, to even protest. The plays are all about the hero. However, Cordelia's single silent "Nothing" seems to crystallize the entire feminine existential predicament, and still echoes in our minds. In *Coriolanus*,

things change again; the Female pulls herself together, and transforms Cordelia's protest into an eloquent statement of the victim's case, against which the hero in his madness wilts. And after this, the heroines in Shakespeare's plays survive. But it is Hermione, standing virtually naked and pregnant with new life before her accusers and the entire court; it is Hermione who makes the most comprehensive protest and self-defense of all. It is in *The Winter's Tale* that Adonis, the little twerp that has been rejecting Venus for fifteen plays, is finally judged, punished and corrected. Then united once again with his Goddess.

Hughes claims that *The Winter's Tale* completes Shakespeare's journey into himself and his inquiry, his forensic investigation, into the 'original sin'. And when that statue of Hermione comes on stage before our eyes, it feels like a redemption of all that came before, and a conclusion. Like we're done. We're "complete" once again.

So why didn't the writer(s) stop? What's with the *Tempest*?



## The Tempest



As we all know, *The Tempest* is original in the sense that there is no formal source document. It contains elements of the Tragic Equation, for sure, but to be honest, they quickly fade away, leaving in its place a beautiful elaboration of the Gnostic wisdoms of the Sophia myth that was a part of *Lear*, that arose again in *Pericles* and that virtually takes over here in *The Tempest*. Hughes spends another hundred pages examining the unique aspects of the plot and of Prospero, and of course there are a hundred thousand other commentaries on the Hermetic sources of the play, its relation to Renaissance Neo-Platonism, to Bruno and Dee and the rest of the gang. In the minute I have left, I don't think I can add substantially to that. But it is clear that Shakespeare was in possession of those wisdoms. And that he probably felt some form of the Hermetic Philosophies could rescue himself from himself, and his new nation from the bloody conflicts of the Reformation. Hughes believes the play is a sort of looking back and a summation of his journey, which indeed it is. He says the "completeness" that was obtained in *The Winter's Tale* was so . . . shall we say religious, so spiritual, that it almost seemed to exist in the heavens. In *The Tempest*, however, Shakespeare brings it all back home, down to earth; A Completeness of Being we can all live with. If we just forget about riding around with Adonis in a red corvette, and embrace the Goddess.

**Appendix**

**Critical Reactions**  
**Implications for Authorship**

## Critical Reactions

*"Nothing has ever happened to them."*

*Shakespeare and the Goddess of Complete Being* was published in March, 1992. It's critical reception was strikingly polarized: most academics and Shakespeare specialists were hostile, while such poets and intellectually free spirits as had the opportunity to write about it all greeted it as a major work.

The academy itself was malicious. Their reaction to Hughes' arguments reminds me of some of the nastiness doled out by people like Shapiro and Wells to Mark Rylance; trying to label him as anti-Shakespeare – when they knew that was untrue -- rather than trying to understand his point of view, both as an artist and a critic. I think the fact that people like Shapiro and Wells are not artists, and do not really know what it feels like to work with the imagination or to create a work of art, almost makes it impossible for them to understand a Rylance or Jacobi or indeed a Ted Hughes.

I've included a copy of one critique. Here are some passages from Hughes reaction:

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10April1992

Dear Derwent

What a pity The Times didn't give my book to somebody who wasn't straightjacketed inside the English Tripos. Trouble with the dominant Gauleiters in that world is they don't know a thing outside their handful of disciplinary texts *and nothing has ever happened to them*. Those who know more and have learned otherwise keep their mouths shut and creep about, like estate workers among the gentry.

To A. L. Rowse  
15April1992

I make the distinction as you see, between great realistic poets, and great mythic poets—and define Shakespeare as a unique combination of the two. Since nobody in England recognizes the psychological vitality of myth, in poetic imagination, any more than they recognize the meaning of their own dreams, this hasn't been much thought about—and comes as a most unwelcome intrusion: that such a thing as a mythic poet can exist."

Scholars deny me, simply, a different kind of scholarship. Because I haven't cocked my leg at every reference, as Goeth says, and piddled a little scholarly note, to reassure the next dog along. What my book has revealed to me among scholars (which I suppose I knew any way) is their galactic ignorance of anything outside their specialized corner in their University library. And their incapacity of seeing any problem unless they already know the answer.

## ONE MALICIOUS CRITIC OF THE GODDESS

Sunday Times, The (London, England)-April 5, 1992

Author: John Carey

Shakespeare and the Goddess of Complete Being, by Ted Hughes, Faber Pounds  
18.99 pp516

The ideas for this book came to Ted Hughes in a dream. William Shakespeare visited him one night, clad for the occasion in dazzling Elizabethan finery, and laid on a special performance of King Lear, cosmic in scale. When he awoke, Hughes found he was in possession of hitherto-unguessed secrets about the Bard's life and work that he is now able to share with us.

Chief among these is that all Shakespeare's later plays, including the great tragedies, contain a magic formula derived from Babylonian creation myths. This occult ingredient takes the form of a mythic story-line, repeated in play after play, which combines, roughly speaking, the plots of Shakespeare's two long poems Venus and Adonis and The Rape of Lucrece.

The heroine this composite myth glorifies is the Great Goddess (Venus), who can take three forms, Mother, Sacred Bride, and Queen of Hell. In her first two forms she became, according to Hughes, the Virgin Mary the "source myth" of Catholicism. Shakespeare was, Hughes discloses, a "fanatical" Catholic, and all his mature plays dramatise the war between the Catholic goddess of sexuality, and her cold-blooded Puritan counterpart, Adonis. In the mythic story-line concealed within each play, the goddess loves but is rejected by Adonis, whereupon her Queen of Hell component turns into a wild boar and kills him. The boar then climbs into Adonis's skin and brings him to life again as a fierce slayer who kills the goddess.

Even when Shakespeare seems to be writing about something completely different, Hughes assures us, he is really re-writing this myth. It is this that makes him great. As a mere naturalistic playwright, the boy from Stratford could never have hoped to compete with classics such as Aeschylus. But the myth plugged him into a supernatural "power circuit". Only the aristocrats in his audience, of course, would have picked up his cryptic allusions to the myth, being steeped, as he was, in occult neo-platonic lore. But even the nut-cracking groundlings would have been electrified, without realising it, by the myth's divine force hence Shakespeare's universal success.

Detecting the magic story-line within the plays requires, Hughes concedes, some ingenuity. At first sight, indeed, there is not a single play that fits the mythic formula. The only cold-blooded Adonis-figure who rejects a goddess-type is Bertram in All's Well, and he does not turn into a killer. The killers (Othello, Macbeth, etc) have never been cold-blooded Adonises. Macbeth is an especially troublesome case since his murderous energies are not primarily directed against a woman at all. Hughes resolves this difficulty by perceiving that the elderly King Duncan is, despite appearances, an embodiment of the Great Goddess, and that Lady Macbeth (Queen of Hell) used to be part of Duncan but got split off before the play began.

Comparably bold insights clarify the enigmas of the other plays. Hughes freely adjusts the relationships between Shakespeare's characters, revealing, for example, that Prospero is Caliban's brother, Leontes is Hermione's newborn child, and Pericles, Thaisa and their daughter Marina comprise "a single fluid or gaseous composite being". The Tempest has to be rewritten altogether, so that its central figure becomes Virgil's Dido, a character Shakespeare somehow omitted from his cast.

A matter of some concern is the shortage of wild boars. Given the boar's central role in the magic myth, one might have expected Shakespeare to bring more of these animals on to the stage, or at least allude to them. The Winter's Tale has a bear ("almost a boar", Hughes pleads), and in The Tempest Caliban's suspicious addiction to "pig-nuts" instantly betrays him as a boar in disguise. But for the rest

Angelo, Macbeth, Othello, Lear, Leontes, etc we might never have guessed, without Hughes's help, that they were boars at all.

Hughes will hardly be surprised if his theories arouse some dissent among lovers of Shakespeare. Why, they may ask, does he imagine the plays would be better if they could really be reduced to the tedious mumbo-jumbo he is so besotted with? Is he so deaf to Shakespeare's poetry, so blind to his characterisation, that he thinks they need reinforcement from some Dictionary of World Superstitions? Can he not understand that each Shakespeare play is a distinct verbal universe, each tragic hero or heroine a unique being, and that to crunch them all together in his preposterous pick 'n' mix myth-pack is an act of grotesque, donkey-eared vandalism?

These questions are not easily answered in a manner respectful to Hughes. Whatever his deficiencies as a Shakespeare critic, however, he is undoubtedly himself a leading poet, and if we take the simple step of reading his book as a commentary on his own poetry rather than on Shakespeare's it at once becomes quite informative. His insistence that Shakespeare was a shaman (ie, a North-American Indian-type witchdoctor) can then be seen as a simple transference of his own long-standing interest in shamanism. The myth-mania he foists upon Shakespeare is a reflection of his own poetry's extensive debt to the mother-goddess mythologising in Robert Graves's *The White Goddess*.

Similarly, what he identifies as the central Shakespearean moment, when the boar rips open Adonis's skin and jumps inside, never, in fact, happens in Shakespeare at all. But it is just the sort of gory antic you might find in Hughes's own *Crow* or *Gaudete*.

Most Hughes-ish of all is the book's enormous and glaring self-contradiction. For in its whole goddess-worshipping stance it purports to celebrate the female principle, fluid and fertile, as against the logical and scientific male ego with its "repetitive tested routines". Yet Hughes, cramming the live flesh of each play into the straitjacket of his myth, is a positive demon for repetitive routines, and the pretentious scientific language he adopts throughout (comparing the plays to rockets, space capsules, nuclear power stations etc) clinches his similarity to the male ego he is supposed to be condemning. This same contradiction runs right through his poetry, pitting the designs his brain concocts against the anarchic welter of his imagination.

Fortunately, his poetic dynamism does at one point break free from the rhapsodic muddle of Shakespearean exegesis that mostly entangles him. In a long footnote on page 11 he describes a huge matriarchal sow, gross, whiskery, many-breasted, a riot of carnality, with a terrible lolling mouth "like a Breughellesque nightmare vagina, baggy with overproduction". Although smuggled in as a hermaphroditic version of the mythic boar, this sow has absolutely nothing to do with Shakespeare, and everything to do with Hughes's violently divided feelings about women. A magnificent late-Hughes prose-poem, the footnote is worth all the rest of the book several times over.

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Record Number: 996983175(c) Times Newspapers Limited 1992, 2003

## HUGHES REACTION TO CRITICS

To A. L. Rowse  
15April1992

" . . . I enclose a response I wrote to a malicious and incredibly superficial article in the Sunday Times by John Carey. I hope he isn't a friend of yours. I make the distinction as you see, between great realistic poets, and great mythic poets—and define Shakespeare as a unique combination of the two. Since nobody in England recognizes the psychological vitality of myth, in poetic imagination, any more than they recognize the meaning of their own dreams, this hasn't been much thought about—and comes as a most unwelcome intrusion: that such a thing as a mythic poet can exist."

But--common sense. Whenever was the plot and poetic logic of Macbeth or King Lear common sense? Or recognizable to common sense as anything but a language different from commons sense?

Eliot as a scarecrow in *The Hollow Men*, Yeats' 'Woman's beauty is like a white frail bird, like a white sea-bird . . . blown between dark furrows upon the ploughed land' or himself as a bird made by a Grecian goldsmith, Keats as a grain of wheat rotting in South Devon under the rain, Blake dining with Isaiah and Ezekiel etc make it as simple as can be for Shakespeare to be a salamander (actually, to be fair, I say his 'art' was a salamander) where spiritual life is an inferno. Surely I can be allowed this in a work that closes the door on scholars?

In my introduction I tell my reader this work is a Song. When you come to a sea, and there are such things you have to swim or sail, but you can't just go on walking across the bottom saying 'I insist that all this foolish water be removed.

My book is logical in the way that algebra is logical, which is to say in a way that scholarship is not. As you will see, logical I like a detective novel, if you could ever get to like it.

Yes, I agree about down to earth fact. What English scholars (I never include you in my disparaging sense of that term, as I've said, and I don't mind if it sounds like flattery, I read your scholarship with actual excitement, a very rare experience. I think because you find the same kinds of thing interesting—the same as I do, that is. Though I suppose my scope in English history is very very much narrower) What English scholars cannot concede is that myth is a collection of facts—in any of its specific usages. Myth in Keats *Lamia* is a series of 'facts'—psychologically hard data. At large, the myth of the *Lamia* returns to fluidity—the infinite possibility, till somebody else seizes it and fastens it into a shape of fact by making it the 'word' of a psychological condition that is as 'real' as anything in life can be. In that sense, myth in Shakespeare becomes a kind of hard fact. So I can deal with the elements of it exactly as if they were the components of an algebra—hard values, but at every point susceptible to modification by other hard values. This is the strangeness of my book to those scholars who are incapable of thinking off that tightrope between the word on the page and its source point in some literature or publication. Scholarship seems to me important in that all mythical data are based on myth and its associated fields. Lit. Scholars deny me, simply, a different kind of scholarship. Because I haven't cocked my leg at every reference, as Goeth says, and piddled a little scholarly note, to reassure the next dog along. What my book has revealed to me among scholars (which I suppose I knew any way) is their galactic ignorance of anything outside their specialized corner in their University library. And their incapacity of seeing any problem unless they already know the answer. Reading their reviews is like watching somebody scan a crossword puzzle commenting instantly only on those clues to which somebody just a few hours ago told them the answer. Then they throw the paper aside and go off yawning. I know you're as familiar with it as I am. I have ten thousand anecdotes of their typical behavior

Page 604  
10April1992

Dear Derwent

What a pity The Times didn't give my book to somebody who wasn't straightjacketed inside the English Tripos. Trouble with the dominant Gauleiters in that world is they don't know a thing outside their handful of disciplinary texts *and nothing has ever happened to them*. Those who know more and have learned otherwise keep their mouths shut and creep about, like estate workers among the gentry. The whole outfit stinks of pusillanimity and intellectual disgrace. They exactly correspond to those brave souls who rean Stalin's Writer's Union, and no doubt would have rushed to the same ecuritate jobs if ever that illusion had got here. They know this too and smile weakly at each other.

When I was at University these fellows tried their damndest to frighten and discourage me, and destroy what few free brain cells I tried to keep from them. Ever since, forty years, they've kept it up. And for forty years I've watched them destroying wave after wave of talented students. . . .

This letter goes on:

. . . And yet, Derwent, you shared his opinion. I can't quite believe that, a man who delights in the blooming of the thousand flowers. I'd have hoped to find some solidarity in you. I would ask you my boring question but I fear it might sound impertinent. Still you could try it on others—you'll get some surprises. I'm sure you're as familiar with The Complete Works as old faithfuls used to be with the Prayer Book. But next time you're in an amiable group of honest fold just try: how many of Shakespeare's plays have you read? How many more than once? Have you ever read the two long poems/ Just try it, sneakily and casually. Among ordinary fold, who tell you more or less the truth, I have yet to find anybody—other than English Professors and Peter Redgrove—who have read more than twelve more than twice. The average—read even once—I find to be eifht (I've been popping this question now and again for years. I know lots of my friends are not very literate, but I ask writers too). Sylvia Plath had read six Nor did she read any more while I knew her. Years spent on run of the mill garbage and the old boy left quite unregarded, murmured about and yawned over—like a mountain up half the sky. So my book's real problem isn't that nobody knows the religious background.

No, I like I might have found two or three who have read more—crankish souls.

I was surprised and sad to see you winking at the media cameras and sticking yourself on that bit of fly-paper about the bore.

You take care, in your kind (well, almost kind I expect you were brought in as a poultice to repair some of Griffith's mugging damage, and you felt poultices she be (a) very hot—it can't heal if it doesn't hurt a bi', and (b) with ginger). (Also, I know you snipers out there have to protect your flanks.)—you take care in your note of qualified kindness to isolate my verses of observation a la may from anything that might be so intellectually chaotic as Griffith's dea of what he disapproves of, myth, metamorphosis etc, as if you were removing the rainforest to reveal the thin one-season illusion of excellent soil. As if the rainforest had somehow overwhelmed and hijacked and wholly infested the one good thing.

Even poor old Crow, you have him trudge out on your parade-ground as a salt of the earth half-literate scouse, rough as hell of course but a good chap in a tight corner on occasions, a bit of a thistle.

Derwent, a secret: before he became pseudo history King Lear was the Llud who was Bran, the god-king of early Britain, who was a combination—to cut short a long story that would bore you—of Apollo and his son the healer Asclepius (by the Crow Goddess Coronis—the With Crow). Well, I don't suppose that sounds very relevant.

Apollo, Asclepius and Bran were Crow Gods. (Bran's 'sister', Branwen, who was the cause of the great mythic battle for Ireland in which Bran received his mortal wound, was a White Crow—Branwen means: White Crow) Llud as I say was Lear: Lear was the high-priest-king of a Crow God, a representative of the Bran who was the llud who gave his name to London, though it was Bran whose head was buried in his shrine on Tower Hill, which gave us his ravens to protect Britain—i.e. the little chaps hopping about there at this moment. If you follow the line of association you see that King Lear, at the centre of Shakespeare, and the earliest totem of Britain, Bran's crow—well, make of it what you like. I daresay it's all rubbish to you. But not to me, Derwent. So my Crow is Apollo the Sun God the Mighty Archer and Asclepius the Healer who are Bran, *fallen like King Lear destitute and naked on evil times*. That That's

where I got him. Without all that mish mash you wouldn't have been able to say a thing about him in your piece because he wouldn't have existed, he would never have emerged without that funny egg.

My Hawk, as would occur to anyone who had any interest in the symbols that made the West, is Horus. But Horus as the nobler of the two brothers in the fight over Cordelia—Gwyn (the White One), who was the spiritual son of Bran (as, in spite of Griffiths, Edgar is the spiritual son of Lear). Edgar n Llyr's myth is Gwyn. Gwyn, as a British Hero, bequeathed all his legends to Arthur. Yea, it was so. My Hawk is the sleeping, deathless spirit of Arthur/Edgar/Gwyn/Horus—the sacrificed and reborn self of the great god Ra. Hence the line; "The sun is behind me". Hence indeed, all the other lines. I don't just jot thee things down, you know. If I can't bring out of the pit I don't get them.

I could bore you further. In the first drafts of my poem Pike, which I daresay you'd class with my snowdrops, in some University Archive, the Pike is Michael, the Archangel nearest to God (Michael means like God)—the creature that 'will come from the wather' (he is the Angel of Water) 'With a fish tail and talk' (in Yeats). The advocate of Israel (the imprisoned and dispossessed) Who brought the dust from which God made man. Who planted the reed in the sea around which Rome's hills accumulated. Who fought all night with Jacob at the Ford. I had him (my pike Michael) hanging—almost but not quite motionless, in the great glory (the blinding dazzle) that radiates from the throne. He is the personal chaperon of the Shekinah—the female aspect of God, and wherever he appears, she is there.

Balderdash of course. Silly business about god and such. Good heavens, what would Griffiths and the other taught starlings say. Well, we know don't we.

So it goes.

Retournions a nos goutte-neiges,

Yours

Ted

All this sort of thing was far more current, the chatter of the excited flock, in the 1580's 90s etc, than it is now—or ever has been since. Shakespeare, untouched by the frosty breath of the Griffiths of this land, cannot have not known it—and much, much more, but whether he used it according to Griffiths and his kind or according to me and my kind is up for grabs. No doubt Griffiths would vote, with a pitying smile, for himself. *He knows that Shakespeare was allowed to know and think only what Griffiths decrees he shall be allowed to have known and thought*—there's a tortuous sentence for a torture chamber.

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Battling over the Bard - Books

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Sunday Times, The (London, England)-April 19, 1992

Author: Ted Hughes

Recently, on The Late Show, I watched a self-confessed feminist, laughingly paralysed by her fixed ideas about life in general and about me in particular. In my book, Shakespeare and The Goddess of Complete Being, I have translated the Complete Works into the holiest book of all feminism's Holy Books, and Lisa Jardine did not know how to open it.

Two Sundays ago, John Carey did no better in The Sunday Times, in what he told readers about that book. Bigotries bushed over his spectacles, he brayed about "vandalism" and lashed out with his hooves.

He demonstrated as a glitzy public entertainment his astonishing (at least, in an Oxford Prof of English it's surely astonishing) inability to see that Shakespeare is not one writer but two. Not simply and exclusively one of the greatest realists (like Tolstoy), but also, at the same time, the greatest of our mythic poets (like Keats). Which is exactly what Tolstoy didn't like about him. Tolstoy hated in Shakespeare what Carey cannot see. He hated the musical dominance of the mythic substructure. He called its effects (because he couldn't see the thing itself, either) "depraved" and "unnatural". They were the cause of what he regarded as hopelessly false characterisation, ludicrously unreal situations and plots the cause, in



general, of the pervasive "great evil" that he found throughout Shakespeare. Notoriously, Tolstoy connected the "depravity of imagination", in art as a whole, with the "evil" of music.

He wrote *The Kreutzer Sonata*, like an illustration in a sermon, to demonstrate just this. In *The Kreutzer Sonata* he "proves" how this "evil" of art is epitomised in its demonic source, the "evil" of music, and how this music is inseparable from, as if it emerged from, sexuality, but in particular from female sexuality from her ruthlessness (he called it a "devil" to reduce life. In this way, he transposed his hatred of the "mythic music" in Shakespeare, through his terror of "the dreadful thing" in music, through his hatred of female sexuality, to his hatred of birth itself. In other words, for Tolstoy at that point, life itself had become the "evil thing".

We prefer to reverse this Calvinist madness and re-name the source of life, calling it good instead of evil, whereupon female sexuality became a blessing, not a curse. So, following Tolstoy's argument in reverse, we convert music to a blessing, likewise, as it emerges from this source. Music rises from the origins of consciousness into visible imagery as the vital patterns of myth, which becomes thereby the original blessed language of life imposing a dance figure on its meanings. The mythic poet speaks not in the language of the realist's negotiation with outer circumstances, but directly the language of the sources of life. Which is why we value Eliot, Yeats, Keats, Coleridge's early poems, Blake, Milton and Shakespeare in a category separate from all the others. But for Carey, in Shakespeare, this language does not exist.

The only play of Shakespeare's that Tolstoy could half tolerate was *Othello*. To express his hatred of female sexuality and music, Tolstoy stole (unconsciously) the situation of *Othello* for *The Kreutzer Sonata*. But whereas Shakespeare's *Othello* (the one Shakespeare hero who positively dislikes music) threw away "a pearl richer than all his tribe", and knew too late that he had made a hideous mistake, Tolstoy, not satisfied that his destruction of female sexuality, in his tremendous story, was final enough, went on to write a fanatic moral tirade, virtually in defence of the murder. This utter renunciation of what Tolstoy called the "evil" thing finds its pallid, remote but unmistakeable echo in Carey's three-fold denial of the mythic poet in Shakespeare.

My book simply traces the organised shape and working of the mythic complex in this other Shakespeare's head, and shows how it expresses itself through the work of the great realist. This complex, which is the mythic substructure of Shakespeare's imagination, is in turn inevitably, in the thick of the religious crisis of that time the mythic structure of Reformation Christianity and of the matrix of pre-Christian religions from which it issued, as they were mediated through his temperament. This religious inheritance shaped every Western society, and the minds of their populations, and still largely determines our own. Only Carey, or his like, could pick all this up (easy, it's nothing to him) and crush it together into his tabloid, popsicle phrase, "a preposterous pick 'n' mix myth-pack". Or dismiss its presence in the plays as "an occult ingredient". It's irrelevant to him. It was body and soul for Eliot, Yeats, Keats, Coleridge, Blake, Milton in an obvious way as for Shakespeare. But Carey stares at it like Caspar Hauser at a box of alphabet letters, or like a bouncy, pink-necked young subaltern of the Raj squinting at a Hindu temple. It's all "mumbo jumbo" hesays. You have to wonder what he tells his students. And how he marks their papers.

He tells *Sunday Times* readers that none of Shakespeare's plays fits my theme because none of the tragic heroes happens to be cold-blooded which according to him I have made an absolute first requirement. They're all hot-blooded, he says (seeming to laugh). But Carey misreads everything, skipping along, snatching for soundbites. Readers can judge for themselves. What has to happen to Hamlet's hot blood before he can banish Ophelia to that nunnery (and to her death) and frighten his mother so that she thinks he's going to kill her (as indirectly he does bring about her death)? What happens to Othello's hot-blooded love, for him to be able to kill in cold blood the Desdemona he worships? He has to plunge, as he says, into the "icy current and compulsive course" of the frozen state of will that can reject and not feel. How does the royal champion Macbeth steel himself (or freeze his heart) to kill King Duncan? How

does hot-blooded Lear flash-freeze his adoration of Cordelia, so he can banish her? How does Timon bring his great hot love for Athens and his friends to the reversal of temperature at which he can curse them to "destruction" (and all mankind with them).

Shakespeare goes to some lengths to describe what has to happen to Coriolanus's hot-blooded devotion to Rome in the name of his mother and wife before he can become inhuman enough to roast them all to ashes, as he intends. How does Antony's burning passion for Cleopatra turn to the cold steel that tries to kill her? How does Posthumous freeze his heart against all women and send a hit-man to kill his adored wife? How does Leontes anaesthetise what turns out to have been his great love for his wife Hermione to the numb point where he can strive to condemn her to death, while he throws her baby into the wilderness? Each of these plays, it seems to me, turns on this moment, where the hot blood becomes...whatever it takes to murder the one on whose love your life depends. My book merely analyses what lies under that moment. Carey says it does not exist. Which plays has he been reading all these years?

Carey regards this change, from the passionate lover to the insane murderer, which always happens at a particular, sudden moment, as some daft invention of mine a "gory antic", as he describes it, out of my Crow. He would know, if he knew what he ought to know, that my Crow is Bran of the Tower Ravens. Bran who was Apollo (a Crow god) plus his son, the Crow demi-god Asclepius the Healer (whose mother was the white Crow goddess Coronis), was the god-king, a Crow god, of early Britain, where he was also the Llud who was Llyr who was Lear. More mumbo jumbo to make him smile.

That rictus of derision on Carey's face distorts his mind's eye too. He goes through my book, sticking his tongue out at everything, with the mental freedom of one of those blinded donkeys that spend their days plodding in a small circle, turning a millstone, and then, when they're let out into the open landscape, go on plodding around in the same small circle.

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To Ben Sonnenberg  
17May1992

I had anticipated that scholarly howl of indignation of course. Having utterly ignored my idea for twenty years (since I first sketched it in the Introduction of the Shakespeare Verse Anthology that I did in 1970) they could hardly, I thought, suddenly welcome it with open arms. Also, I could not expect our humanist post-Anglican secular orthodoxy suddenly to agree that their four hundred year censorship and prohibition of what I am trying to unearth was, as I most emphatically argue that it was, a calamitous mistake—and in fact a human crime that has by now virtually destroyed English Society, English Education, English individual life (all with the most rigorous and concerted application of the best minds in each generation.

Absolutely they took on themselves the role, they identified absolutely with the tragic hero in my book, the Adonis who rejects everything outside his puritan routine of fixed ideas, and in particular the spiritual, emotional and imaginative life (embodied for him in woman)—in other words rejects in every situation the human factor, the subjective factor. They have dealt with my book precisely as Adonis dealt with Venus in the long poem that is the DNA of my argument. And my book of course is the full statement of his crime and his punishment. So that screech from the dock was inevitable.

## NOTES FROM LETTERS:

### Goddess as Prose Poem

"The whole thing became wonderfully lucid to me—am I kidding myself? I must be. Anyway – it's sort of a prose poem, if nothing else."

"He (Peter Brook) doesn't read academic books about Shakespeare (or about anything)  
18JAN1991, Page 591

(Scholarly work is dry and contentious. I have found that reflections about Shakespeare from other artists have been far more revealing and humane. It was actually the humanism of Shakespeare that drew James to Edward de Vere)

### How the Book Evolved

"My eyesight has been in a way refashioned, writing this book—I'm now totally adapted to this peculiar world, like one of those shrimps living in the sulfur and fantastic temperatures of deep-sea volcanoes, and I no longer feel to have any confident idea of just how the final thing will appear in the old world where I used to live . . ."

. . . to describe how each chapter evolved from its predecessor . . . my terms and concepts are like philosophical or even mathematical terms and ought to be fully defined at the beginning and stable throughout – But the book grew as an imaginative work . . . or the whole book is like a language course, where the simple terms and grammar given in the first lessons are necessary for the slightly fuller development in the second and so on, till the whole system is perfectly clear and the student is a fluent speaker . .

21JUN91, page 595

### The business of Occult Neo-Platonism.

One can't just refer to this and assume that even Shakespearean scholars will understand and supply the rest. 400 years of cultural suppressive dismissal aren't going to be lifted willingly simply to indulge me. I wanted to give a compact, concrete, vivid idea of it—as it might have impinged on Shakespeare's operation—*(without it, in my opinion, there would have been no Shakspeare operation)*, stopping short of any assumptions about Shakespeare's actual involvement with it. It was a case of finding the adequate links (which do exist, through Sidney, Essex, Southampton, Love's Labours Lost and the Tempest) and emphasizing the right aspects. What has always been lacking even in Francis Yates' account of Hermetic occult Neoplatonism is any actual working knowledge of the traditional Hermetic magic – and its relationship to products of the imagination. . . . Long scholarly, exhaustive accounts of John Dee end up giving absolutely no idea of how he actually went about conjuring up and "angel."

21JUL91, Pg 595

Page 604  
10April1992

Dear Derwent

What a pity The Times didn't give my book to somebody who wasn't straightjacketed inside the English Tripos. Trouble with the dominant Gauleiters in that world is they don't know a thing outside their handful of disciplinary texts *and nothing has ever happened to them*. Those who know more and have learned otherwise keep their mouths shut and creep about, like estate workers among the gentry. The whole outfit stinks of pusillanimity and intellectual disgrace. They exactly correspond to those brave souls who rean Stalin's Writer's Union, and no doubt would have rushed to the same ecuritate jobs if ever that illusion had got here. They know this too and smile weakly at each other.

When I was at University these fellows tried their damndest to frighten and discourage me, and destroy what few free brain cells I tried to keep from them. Ever since, forty years, they've kept it up. And for forty years I've watched them destroying waver after wave of talented students. . . .

To Ben Sonnenberg  
17May1992

" . . . Adonis who rejects everything outside his Puritan routine of fixed ideas, and in particular the spiritual, emotional and imaginative life (embodied for him in woman) – in other words rejects in every situation the human factor, the subjective factor. They (scholars) have dealt with my book precisely as Adonis dealt with Venus in the long poem that is the DNA of my argument."

" . . . how could I expect our humanist post-Anglican secular orthodoxy suddenly to agree that their four hundred year censorship and prohibition of what I am trying to unearth was, as I most emphatically argue that it was, a calamitous mistake—and in fact a human crime that has by now virtually destroyed English Society, English Education, English individual life (all with the most rigorous and concerted application of the best minds in each generation.)"

## Implications for Authorship

- A. The fact that there is a systematic scheme to dramatize the existential and spiritual conflicts suggests that someone sat down and worked out this vast schematic ahead of time. Was it a single isolated genius? Or was it a genius and a team of consultants and writers?
- B. That the writing makes a sudden change into what Hughes calls the “Second Shakespeare”, and then a “Third Shakespeare”. This is not new, others have said as much. But Hughes description of the change is worth a second look. Did the writing change? Or did the writer(s)?
- C. Thorough knowledge of esoteric Occult Neo-Platonist subjects from . . . to Bruno. How could someone not initiated into the mysteries of Hermetic Gnostic Neo-Platonist doctrine have created such a scheme?
- D. Without assuming that Shakespeare was a devout Occult Neo-Platonist, or was more than amused by the ingenuities, the following ideas certainly caught his attention.
- The idea of an inclusive system, a grand spiritual synthesis reconciling Protestant and Catholic extremes in an integrated vision of union with the Divine Love.
  - The idea of a syncretic mythology, in which all archaic mythological figures and events are available as a thesaurus of glyphs or token symbols – the personal language of the new metaphysical system.
  - The idea of this concordance of mythological (and historical) figures simply as a Memory System, a tabulated chart of all that can be known, of history, of the other world, and of the inner worlds, and in particular of the spiritual conditions and moral types.
  - The idea of this system as a theater.
  - The idea of these images as internally structured poetic images – the idea of a single image as a package of precisely folded, multiple meanings, consistent with meanings of a unified system.
  - The idea of meditation as a conjuring, by ritual magic, of hallucinatory figures – with whom conversations can be held, and who communicate intuitive, imaginative vision and clairvoyance.
  - The idea of drama as a ritual for the manipulation of the soul.

One guy? Picked all this up at the Mermaid Tavern?

### **Hawk Roosting**

I sit in the top of the wood, my eyes closed.  
Inaction, no falsifying dream  
Between my hooked head and hooked feet:  
Or in sleep rehearse perfect kills and eat.

The convenience of the high trees!  
The air's buoyancy and the sun's ray  
Are of advantage to me;  
And the earth's face upward for my inspection.

My feet are locked upon the rough bark.  
It took the whole of Creation  
To produce my foot, my each feather:  
Now I hold Creation in my foot

Or fly up, and revolve it all slowly -  
I kill where I please because it is all mine.  
There is no sophistry in my body:  
My manners are tearing off heads -

The allotment of death.  
For the one path of my flight is direct  
Through the bones of the living.  
No arguments assert my right:

The sun is behind me.  
Nothing has changed since I began.  
My eye has permitted no change.  
I am going to keep things like this.