

**Book Review**

***The Muse as Therapist: A New Poetic Paradigm for  
Psychotherapy***

**by Heward Wilkinson,**

**London: Karnac Books. xxxii+258 pages. £20.99.**

**Reviewed by Richard M. Waugaman**

**H**eward Wilkinson is a British psychotherapist who has written an intriguing book, subtitled “A New Poetic Paradigm for Psychotherapy.” Why am I reviewing it for this journal? Because in his longest chapter, which Wilkinson calls “the passional centre of the book,” he argues that Edward de Vere was the concealed author of the works of Shakespeare. He admits that de Vere’s “powerful poetic ghost has... taken over the organizational energy of [this] book” (xvi). I will return to his chapter on de Vere shortly. First, I need to tell you more about the book, so you will understand why de Vere enjoys pride of place in it.

Wilkinson worries that the profession of psychotherapy suffers from excessive medicalization, as illustrated by the current infatuation with neuroscience on the part of many psychoanalysts. He therefore wants to demonstrate that the arts are equally fundamental to our understanding of the process of psychotherapy. I strongly agree with him on this score. He chooses poetry among the arts as “most accessible” to the argument he wishes to make (2). He acknowledges the existence of the specialized field of “poetry therapy,” which uses reading and writing poetry as a form of therapy. His focus is more theoretical, and is ambitious in its scope. He argues that all psychotherapy shares crucial features of poetry—they both deal with what is “pre-communicable”; they both exist within a “relational field”; and “both

have a potentially infinite dimension of cross-referential meaning” (2-3). Further, “poetry is a form of psychotherapy” (xxxii). Marvin Bennett Krims has recently argued that reading Shakespeare, in particular, is therapeutic for him, and can be for others as well.

Wilkinson makes the central point that poetry can be the most natural expression of intense emotions. He cites studies that show that “survivors of extreme experiences resort to poetry... when seeking to express themselves” (xxxii). Around the 4th century B.C.E., the Sanskrit epic Ramayana presented a myth about the birth of poetry. Allegedly, it arose spontaneously when Valmiki (the author of the epic) was overcome with pity, and noticed that he began speaking in verse. He then observed, “the utterance that I produced in this access of shoka, grief, shall be called shloka, poetry” (47). Similarly, commoners in Shakespeare’s plays who normally speak in prose shift to verse when they are in the throes of love. More recently, Howard Shevrin explained why he chose to write his novel about psychoanalysis in verse —“How else but in verse to capture the paradox of these seeming antinomies, the simultaneous presence of the sound with its echo, the light in its shadow, the voice of the silence? Psychoanalytic discourse is to ordinary discourse as metaphor is to prosaic speech. It thickens ordinary meaning by its very form... Only verse can provide these resources” (xii).

Wilkinson’s Chapter Four, “Reality, Existence, and the Shakespeare Authorship Question: King Lear, Little Dorrit, and the Man Who Was Shakespeare,” credits the works of Shakespeare for deeply shaping his worldview, and leading him to his career as a psychotherapist: “Shakespeare first gave me an inner view of madness—in *Hamlet*, *King Lear*, and *Macbeth*. Secondly, it was through Shakespeare above all... that I *gained a sense of the possibility of a universal understanding of persons*, the possibility of a universal psychology” (79; Wilkinson’s emphasis).

Wilkinson explains the central role of *King Lear* and Dickens’ *Little Dorrit* in his book—“I was led to them because they connected very deeply, on the one hand, with the psychology of the authorship issue, which is my thematic illustration and enactment in this chapter in terms of the purpose of the book, along with the alchemical-hermetic universality of the Shakespearean vision of the supreme Renaissance author” (80). He links the authorship issue with Freud’s concept of the return of the repressed, signalling his interest in discovering internal evidence of de Vere’s authorship through a close reading of Shakespeare’s works. He finds such evidence

through a study of characters, such as those in *King Lear*, where “de Vere’s entire family situation is duplicated, in terms of number, gender, and legitimacy status” (112).

In his extensive discussion of *King Lear*, he views Edgar as representing the author—“The abyss of Edgar’s descent—symbolizes the depth of the author’s self-imposed penitence—yet apotheosis of that penitence...” (151). Wilkinson makes the intriguing observation that de Vere seems to split himself in this and other plays, into “aspects of himself... about which he feels profound contrition,” and characters such as Edgar who sacrifice their own distinctive identities, take on the shame of others, and ultimately redeem them. Wilkinson compares Edgar to Prospero in *The Tempest*, the Duke in *Measure for Measure*, and Touchstone in *As You Like It*, and asserts that these characters “always signify attempts at exorcism of wrongs” (144), and enact de Vere’s attempts to negate his identity as a means of doing penance for his guilt and shame. De Vere in fact marked two of the seven “penitential” psalms in his Bible—Psalms 6 and 51. These two psalms are the sources of recently discovered, abundant allusions in the works of Shakespeare.

As with any book, there are some weaknesses. Wilkinson discusses philosophy a great deal, and Kant in particular. Sadly, Kant’s legacy includes his horrendous writing style. It has led many serious thinkers to confuse obfuscation with profundity. Rather than burden us with the unusual request that we read his book twice (xvii), Wilkinson might have edited his prose more carefully. Literary studies suffer from related problems of opaque writing style just as much as my field of psychoanalysis does, so it is unfair to make too much of this — especially when we are indebted to Wilkinson for educating his readers about the exciting implications of realizing the works of Shakespeare were in fact written by Edward de Vere.

### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Marvin Bennett Krimms, *The Mind According to Shakespeare: Psychoanalysis in the Bard’s Writing*. Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 2006.

<sup>2</sup> Vlamiki, *Ramayana, Book One*. Robert P. Goldman (translator). New York: New York University Press, 2005.

<sup>3</sup> Gary Logan, personal communication, November 20, 2008.

- <sup>4</sup> Howard Shevrin, *Dream Interpreters: A Psychoanalytic Novel in Verse*. Madison, CT: International Universities Press, 2003.
- <sup>5</sup> His Oxfordian interpretation of the play echoes that of William Farina, but he does not cite his book, *De Vere as Shakespeare: An Oxfordian Reading of the Canon*, London: McFarland, 2006.
- <sup>6</sup> For some examples, see R. M. Waugaman, "The Sternhold and Hopkins' Psalter is a Major Source for Shakespeare," *Notes & Queries* (in press).
- <sup>7</sup> Another stylistic distraction is Wilkson's use of machine-gun bursts of exclamation points. In a single parenthetical remark, for example, he deploys no less than three exclamation points.