Self-analysis by literature

By Ellen Glazer

Shakespeare through a Freudian lens

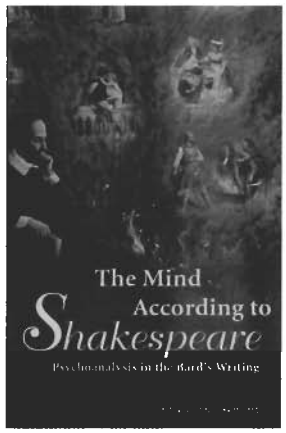

PHOTO BY GAIL SAMUELSON

DR. MARVIN KRIMS, as a practicing psychoanalyst with over 50 years experience, loves to prescribe Shakespeare. At the beginning of his collection of essays, *The Mind According to Shakespeare,* the Newton resident offers readers his own personal testimony for another source of healing: the bard.

Krims recalls the time in his life when he felt profound grief over the death of Edna, his wife of 33 years. Seeking comfort, Krims "discovered" Shakespeare. Yes, he had studied the playwright in high school but it was not until mid-life that Krims came to appreciate Shakespeare's remarkable capacity for healing. It was *Much Ado about Nothing,* and its lovers, Beatrice and Benedick, spoke to him in time of grief.

He writes, "I did not think I was ready to resume a social life. Much to my surprise, as I read *Much Ado*, I found myself identifying with Beatrice and Benedick and their pull-push, attraction-repulsion courtship. Their words somehow became my words, their courtship my courtship, what they desired, I desired. The boundary between us erased, I was,—for the moment,— them. This merged identification with the lovers felt so pleasant, so welcome, that I realized that I was now ready for a new love relationship. This realization came neither from the analytic couch nor from my self-analysis—my usual sources for insight—but directly from reading. The experience was therapeutic in the strictly psychoanalytic sense of the word, for I had learned something new and helpful about myself, something I had not known before."

The Mind According to Shakespeare is both a deeply personal account of one man's passion for Shakespeare and a traditional psychoanalytic work. Several essays that take a psychoanalytic look into the minds and hearts of Shakespearean characters are bookended by Krims' personal accounts of his relationship with Shakespeare. In essays with such psychoanalytic titles as *Prince Hal's Agression*, *Hotspur's Fear of Femininity* and *Romeo's Childhood Trauma*, Krims examines Shakespeare's ability to use both comedy and tragedy to explore some of the darkest and most complex of human emotions.

Take *The Taming of the Shrew*, for example. In his essay, *Uncovering Our Hate in The Taming of The Shrew*, Krims reminds his readers that audiences routinely and predictably laugh at Petruchio and Kate for their cruelty to one another and to others. Kate ties her sister's hands and then strikes her and she bashes Hortensio over his head with his lute, breaking both his head and the lute. Petruchio delivers his own doses of cruelty when he deliberately misunderstands Kate, and he humiliates her at their wedding by wearing ridiculous clothes. These acts evoke a response that is delights the audience. Krims writes, "Cruelty pleases us under the right conditions and the slapstick of traditional farce, like the whip Petruchio carried in nineteenth century performances of Taming, is a metonym for our unconscious desire."

Psychoanalyst Krims does not simply observe our base instincts: he demonstrates how Shakespeare, through comedy, helps us come to grips with these

instincts in ourselves and in others. He writes, "...if our reaction to Taming helps us to comprehend and accept our own inner aggression, we can better comprehend the aggression of others, fictive and real. I would now add that I believe we do ourselves a very personal "good" whenever we learn anything about ourselves that has been hitherto unknown or obscure; call it self-analysis by literature, if you wish."

In Romeo's *Childhood Tragedy*, Krims takes a provocative look at Romeo's unhappiness. Krims wonders why young Romeo is so convinced that his beloved Rosaline is the source of his misery. After, all, notes Krims, "Romeo could hardly have chosen a less available woman." In addition to being a Capulet, sworn enemies of Romeo's family, the Montagues, Rosaline has taken a vow of chastity. Why, wonders Krims, does Romeo devote his efforts and attentions to Rosaline even when advised by Benvolio, to "forget to think of her." For answers to this puzzle, Krims looks to Romeo's childhood and posits that our romantic hero is reacting like a young child who has been rejected by a love object. Krims suggests that Rosaline, the absent woman who never appears in person in the text, symbolizes Romeo's mother or perhaps a wetnurse, which the young child experienced as unavailable to him. The analyst writes, "Perhaps, then, these feelings represent repressed childhood memories displaced onto his current situation. According to this interpretation, his attachment to the rejecting Rosaline and the forbidden Juliet can be understood as a reenactment of a childhood rejection."

From there the analyst delves deeper into Romeo's early life and concludes and that Romeo is reacting to an early childhood trauma. Krims writes, "Romeo's tropes here are quite suggestive of childhood exposure to the primal scene of adults making love, per-

haps at a particularly vulnerable stage before self-boundaries were firmly established and before reality testing was well developed."

The Mind According to Shakespeare includes several other essays that examine Shakesperean characters through a Freudian lens. Others that Krims places on the couch include Hamlet, Hotspur and, with no surprise, King Lear. However, his most lively and engaging analysis takes a different form: it is a correspondence analysis between Krims and Beatrice, a feisty, bright young woman who contacts Krims because she is experiencing marital problems and there are no trained analysts in her area. She writes of her situation,

"We are in contact enough to know that we are not so very different from you. You love and hate as we do, suffer the same fears and preoccupations (only the contexts differ) and struggle with the same sort of problems with each other. It is the latter—my problems with my husband and my marriage—that I write to you. Simply put, Benedick, my husband, and I can't help but fight about anything and everything and yet, somehow, it is all much ado about nothing."

After several caveats about the limitations of a correspondence analysis and of trying to address marital problems with only one member of a couple, Krims takes her on—and with apparent delight. The letters that follow include ample verbal sparring (Beatrice writes, "Contour of your neuroses—spare me! Besides I already know all about that; tell me something I don't know. And what do you mean by my 'neuroses' anyway? Are you telling me I'm like one of your post-modern neurotics, perhaps skeptical but nevertheless whimpering on your couch like a helpless puppy-dog?"), as well as poignant passages in which the reader gets a chance to see the gentle analyst at work ("First, in regard to the issue of culture: yes, of course there is a cultural divide between us, but let us also remember that rejection is a basic fact of life in all cultures, and people still manage the hurt without all the bitterness that so pervades your marriage. No matter how important culture is, there are still individual differences in the way people respond to their culture. Culture affects individuals, not their individuality."). And in what may be a departure from his work with real live patients on his Newton couch, Krims reveals a good deal of himself to the spirited Beatrice. To help her better understand her relationship with Benedick, he explains to her "the herring factor."

The "herring factor" was something he learned from his father, the son of Jewish immigrants, who had only a sixth grade education. He told his children that when he felt accepted by people of more education or status, he felt, "Now I can sit down and eat a piece of herring with this guy." For Krims, "the herring factor" is the rebalancing of a previously unbalanced relationship. He writes to Beatrice, "I think our wish to tell me about your loving time with Benedick is your 'herring factor,' your way of establishing that you are not just a helpless neurotic but also a mature woman." To this, Beatrice replies, "First, I want to say that I like your father." Then she goes on to tell Krims he is the first Jew she has known.

Months later, a healthier Beatrice, enjoying a much improved relationship with Benedick, writes, "I mourn the fact that I am losing a valuable doctor and a dear friend. You see, as I've told you again and again, I've grown fond of—and dare I say it—grown to love you and shall miss you terribly. And this has nothing whatsoever to do with parents, grandparents, uncles, cousins or aunts. It has to do with you."

Indeed, in many ways, *The Mind According to Shakespeare* is a deeply personal work in which Krims shares with

the readers a great deal about himself. In the Eepilogue he writes extensively about his own life and testifies to the healing power of Shakespeare. "In recent years, Shakespeare has been my most important guide to what I now know to have been a lifelong journey of self-discovery."

One of the things Krims has discovered about himself in recent years is how much he enjoys writing. He credits his youngest son, Dr. Adam Krims, a professor of music composition, with helping him get started writing and publishing essays 15 years ago.

Some of the essays in *The Mind According to Shakespeare* have been published elsewhere, in such journals as *The Psycholanalytic Review* and *Free Association*, but Krims acknowledges that a whole new level of pleasure has come from the writing. "It was a challenge finding a publisher. I took a course for writers who wanted to get published at Harvard Extension. As part of the course, students had to submit a proposal for a book. Serendipitously, mine was read by an editor at Praeger (Krims' publisher) and I was offered a contract." The book was published in September, 2006. Krims is looking forward to doing readings and talks at psychoanalytic groups, Shakespearean societies, as well as local bookstores and libraries. He is grateful to have as his "greatest champion and promoter" his wife Kate, to whom the book is lovingly dedicated.

At 78, Krims works half- time as a psychoanalyst and half- time as a writer. He is very excited about two new writing ventures. One involves his efforts to bring his correspondence analysis of Beatrice to the stage. Krims is also busy at work on a book on Shakespeare's sonnets. He observes, "Read or see Shakespeare's plays and it is difficult to know anything personal about the man. Read his sonnets and you learn much more about Shakespeare's life." ◢