

Philip G. Zimbardo, Robert L. Johnson; *Psychology According to Shakespeare: What You Can Learn about Human Nature from Shakespeare's Great Plays*, Prometheus Books, Guilford, Connecticut, 2024.

Orhan Wasilewski, University of Warsaw, Poland

ORCID: 0000-0001-7393-9121

When tracing the line of cultural evolution, one should recall the wisdom of Ecclesiastes: "Nothing is new under the sun". Zimbardo and Johnson's work is not the first to tackle this subject – it belongs to a lineage of earlier attempts, such as *The Psychology and Shakespeare* by physician Sir John Charles Bucknill (London, 1859), or *Shakespeare and Elizabethan Psychology* by Murray W. Bundy (*The Journal of English and Germanic Philology*, 1924), to name only a few. Nor should we overlook Sigmund Freud, who fused psychology and literature through Sophocles to later label Hamlet's inner turmoil as the *Oedipus complex*.

Particularly in the humanities, creation is achieved not through the object of study but through the method applied to it – not *what*, but *how*. Here, two eminent psychologists join forces for an in-depth deconstruction of Shakespeare's psychological insight – though not necessarily a work of psychoanalysis. Their intention to penetrate the psychological depths of Shakespeare's dramas remains, but the methods and scientific framework are distinctly modern, drawing on contemporary psychology and literary theory. Unlike many co-authored works where chapters are divided, these authors write in a single voice – "we think, we suggest..."

The title *Psychology According to Shakespeare* implies not merely the psychology in Shakespeare but of Shakespeare – his authorship, his creative mind.¹ Shakespeare and psychology here are inseparably intertwined. Thus, the often-used expression "bridging Shakespeare and psychology" seems misplaced, for there is no real gap between them. Psychology is intrinsic to the characters and situations Shakespeare created. It takes a person of Zen-master-like insight to reveal what is both obvious and hidden – to spark the disciple's "Aha! It's here!"

1 In the Polish edition, the title has been translated neutrally as *Shakespeare and Psychology*, implying these two plains as parallel, not interlaced.

In this constellation, Shakespeare becomes not only the object of analysis but also, perhaps more importantly, the subject – a conscious teacher, even a “pro-psychoanalyst”. As the authors put it: “All some four hundred years before scientists Amos Tversky and Daniel Kahneman rediscovered the same concepts (confirmation bias, rationalist delusion, sunk cost heuristic - O.W. after the authors). Arguably, our man from Stratford even grasped what we now call cognitive dissonance”.

Labels change; the object endures. Before “cognitive dissonance”, there was “paradox” – discovered by ancient philosophers – or “absurdity”, favoured by the modernists. And then comes the sophisticated English “incongruence”, from Latin *incongruentia* – literally, “not coming together”. In every case, the unsuspecting witness must confront it existentially. Are not all classical tragedies, after all, built upon such a discrepancy?

Many elements attributed by the authors to Shakespeare’s time – medicine, magic, potions, anatomy, the theory of humors – were already known to the ancient ancestors of Europe.

The book rests on four conceptual pillars that represent dualities, the tensions between attraction and repulsion. These are its guiding signposts:

1. heritage vs. environment,
2. a person vs. a situation,
3. conscious vs. unconscious,
4. ratio vs. emotion.

As in most academic works, the table of contents serves as an X-ray of its structure.

„ PROLOGUE: Why Shakespeare and Psychology?

INTRODUCTION: Shakespeare’s Psychology and the Roots of Genius

PART I: NATURE VS. NURTURE CHAPTER 1 Nature–Nurture, Neuroscience, and the Brain of the Bard: The Tempest CHAPTER 2 The Ages and Stages of Man (and Woman): As You Like It

PART II: THE PERSON VS. THE SITUATION CHAPTER 3 Henrys, Humors, and the Psychology of Personality: Richard II–Henry V CHAPTER 4 Social Influence from Stratford to Stanford: Measure for Measure CHAPTER 5 Heroes Ancient and Modern, Major and Minor: Othello ---

PART III: INTO THE MIND CHAPTER 6 Sleep, Dreams, and
Drugs: Windows into the Unconscious: A Midsummer Night's
Dream CHAPTER 7 Mental Illness and Other Ill Humors: Richard III
PART IV: REASON VS. EMOTION CHAPTER 8 Emotion, Mo-
tivation, and Elizabethan Love: Love's Labour's Lost CHAPTER 9
Reason, Intuition, and the Prince of Denmark: Hamlet
EPILOGUE: Psychology, Shakespeare, and Beyond
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS, NOTES , BIBLIOGRAPHY „

The modest word “beyond” in the epilogue speaks volumes. The book extends well past drama analysis. The extensive bibliography – dense with psychological and literary references – nearly deserves a chapter of its own.

Besides the principal plays discussed, others appear in passing: *Titus Andronicus*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *Much Ado About Nothing*, *All's Well That Ends Well*, *The Winter's Tale*... none of the playwright's creations seems neglected. Still, one wonders whether Shakespeare's psychological richness can truly be condensed into a single 344-page volume.

The authors think beyond disciplinary boxes, passionately advocating interdisciplinary cooperation. Instead of hermetic specialization, they weave a fine web of interdependencies. Yet one lingering wish remains – that of a fuller balance between psychology and literary science. Ideally, one might imagine this book co-authored by a psychologist and an Elizabethan scholar.

The text contains glimpses into Shakespeare's biography, his everyday world, sketches of his contemporaries, and numerous cultural vectors radiating from the central theme. The authors manage to accommodate an impressive cast: Joan of Arc, Queen Elizabeth I, Columbus, Luther, Catherine of Aragon, Hobbes, Paracelsus, Mary Stuart, and many others. The work is dense with professional terminology – deconstruction, alchemy, Stanford Prison Experiment, gluttony, infidelity, Alzheimer's disease, bipolar disorder – each connected to Shakespeare's characters and dramatic situations.

Beyond psychology, the book engages with literary studies, history, culture science, sociology, and anthropology. Within psychology itself, the text freely references both classical and modern thought – from Freud to Tversky, Kahneman, and, fittingly, Zimbardo himself.

The authors also venture into “charlatan” or unofficial medicine as it appeared in Shakespeare's world – astrology, potions, poisons, anatomical dissections, and

above all, the four psychophysiological humours. With a playful scientific irony, they attempt to reconstruct Shakespeare's psyche according to the paradigms of his own era. Based on contemporary accounts, Shakespeare was likable, conciliatory, and – depending on the colour and density of his bile – alternately extroverted, sanguine, or melancholic, as any true poet was expected to be. The resulting “diagnosis” resembles a horoscope profile from a weekly magazine. Unsurprisingly, the Bard emerges as the quintessential Renaissance man.

All these components – structural, historical, and imaginative – had to be joined into a living whole, demanding both discipline and devotion. Some readers may feel overwhelmed by the flood of information, others by the sense of unfinished thematic meanders.

Visually, the book satisfies. Its modest design appears classical, avoiding unnecessary experiments, harmonizing perfectly with its content. The cover depicts Shakespeare in a purposefully “imperfect”, slightly jagged Renaissance-style font. Inside, the text is richly illustrated with period paintings and Romantic interpretations of his plays, as well as occasional modern diagrams of psychological interplay.

In 2025, the book received the “Book of the Year” award from the American Psychological Association's Division of General Psychology, “for its accessible and thought-provoking bridge between literature and psychology, exploring human nature through Shakespeare's plays and relating it to modern psychological concepts”.

A final question arises: Who is this book for? Though written by two psychologists, it is paradoxically less aimed at practising clinicians. Contrary to “Oedipus complex”, it is doubtful that *Richard III's pathology* or the *bastard complex from “King John”* will enter the psychological lexicon. Nor can one imagine a therapist prescribing: “To understand your issue, turn to Lady Macbeth and study her compulsive drive”, or “Read *King Lear* as a case study in your dementia”.

And yet, from the reverse angle – from psychology to literature – the concept works brilliantly. By embracing or debating the text premises, by delving into playwright's speleology of the human spirit, shakespeareologists may add an extra dimension to their interpretation. Such discourses may bewilder potential academic purists and enchanted classroom audience alike.

Finally, with its gently raconteur tone, *Psychology According to Shakespeare* can serve as both a stimulating academic study and a comforting bedside companion for the more demanding reader.

DOI: doi.org/10.64867/pjes.25435981.25.112.2840