JOHN BERRYMAN AND SHAKESPEAREAN AUTOBIOGRAPHY

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The publication in 1999 of *Berryman’s Shakespeare*, John Haffenden’s superlative edition of Berryman’s protracted and extensive, often very brilliant critical work on Shakespeare, comprehensively unveiled a rich source for the development of Berryman studies. Though Berryman’s Shakespearean writings are worthy of consideration in their own right, their frequently investigative, biographically exploratory nature means that inevitably some of their hypotheses are dated; one of the strengths of Haffenden’s edition is its detailed Introduction which sets forth the current consensus on the issues of dating and authorship into which Berryman delved. What justifies even the more speculative aspects of Berryman’s work, however, is its creative importance to the author; indeed, it is some of the Shakespeare work’s very idiosyncrasies that most merit attention in the consideration of its artistic importance. With this eccentric yet enduring, fragmented yet cohesive body of work before us we are now in a position to assess the relations between Shakespeare’s works, Berryman’s Shakespearean scholarship, and the poet’s creative opus.

As far back as his undergraduate days at Columbia University (1932-1936), Berryman was engaged in the serious study of Shakespeare, encouraged and inspired by his first mentor, the Shakespearean scholar Mark Van Doren. The early interest he had evinced in Shakespeare then intensified during his time at Clare College, Cambridge (1936-1938), where he pronounced that it was silly “ever to do anything but read Shakespeare – particularly when
we’ve only one lifetime”.¹ Before long Berryman was writing about his obsession too: in his first year he produced a seventy-seven page essay on “The Character and Role of the Heroine in Shakespearean Comedy”, with which he failed to win the Harness Prize, and then in his second year he had more success, winning the prestigious Oldham Shakespeare Scholarship.² Back in America in the 1940s Berryman tried to realize one of his Cambridge ambitions, working on a critical edition of King Lear. Over the course of his university career he lectured extensively on almost all of Shakespeare’s plays, once covering over twenty-two in a single course.³ However, Berryman’s greatest and longest-running Shakespearean enterprise was a critical biography, unfinished after twenty years of writings and research.

Berryman began a study of Shakespeare’s life and work in 1951, and over the next two decades labored on and off at plans and proposals, drafts and prefaces for his “Shakespeare book”. The project underwent numerous evolutions, and through various contracts. In 1955 he signed an agreement for “Shakespeare: A Critical Biography”, and then in 1958 took on a commission for a “Shakespeare Handbook”; this, together with “Shakespeare’s Friend”, a work considering possible collaborations between Shakespeare and William Haughton, ran parallel to the larger-scale biography, but none of these ventures was ever completed. At the end of the 1960s the biography was still protean in its substance. Its changing names tell us much about its shifts in direction: by 1969 it had become the cautious and uncertain “Shakespeare: An Attempt at a Critical Biography”; in 1970 the work sounded far more confident, with the grandiose title, promising great revelations, “Shakespeare’s Identity”. In 1971 Berryman was describing his undertaking as “a large psychosocial critical biography,” and it was now to be called “Shakespeare’s Reality”, taking the model of the psychologist Erik H. Erikson’s

² Berryman’s Oldham papers, which he kept, are in actual fact most peculiar as prize-winning essays. They skirt illogically over many plays, offer but the occasional aperçu, drop the odd critical reference, and protest repeatedly against the time constraints of the exams. See “College Papers”, John Berryman Papers (MSS43), Manuscripts Division, University of Minnesota Libraries, Minneapolis.