

Why Shakespeare?

Why am I so pleased when the Institute schedules Shakespeare events? Why has it occasionally crossed my mind that if I were stranded on a desert island with only one book of literature, my choice would be the Collected Works of Shakespeare?

Of all the authors I know, Shakespeare best loves his characters. He loves their nobility as human beings and he loves their quirks and idiosyncrasies – also as human beings. It is no accident that Shakespeare sometimes puts his most instructive lines to a most unlikely character, as if in acknowledgement of a wiser soul lurking beneath a foolish personality. Witness the over-puffed, verbally profuse Polonius in *Hamlet* giving this sage advice to his son:

“Give thy thoughts no tongue,
Nor any unproportioned thought his act.
Be thou familiar, but by no means vulgar.
Those friends thou hast, and their adoption tried,
Grapple them to thy soul with hoops of steel...
Give every man thy ear, but few thy voice;
Take each man's censure, but reserve thy judgment.”

While never failing to display their foibles, Shakespeare also never sells his characters short.

The Bard puts no limits on the heights to which a human thought and aspiration can soar. We hear Hamlet marvel:

“What a piece of work is a man, how noble in reason, how infinite in faculties, in form and moving how express and admirable, in action how like an angel, in apprehension how like a god.”

Yet Shakespeare is no stranger to the heavy pull of life on earth. The same character utters these lines: “O God, O God, how weary, stale, flat, and unprofitable seem to me all the uses of this world!” Shakespeare gives us, his audience, access to a character's interior nature. He allows us - through the magic of theatre - to virtually walk in the man's skin, so that we can soar with him on the wings of his idealism, and sink with him to the depth of his despair. I am richer for that experience. Shakespeare makes it possible to journey into the heart of another human being. His openness to grandeur of human possibility as well as his non-judgmental acknowledgement of human failings expand both my appreciation and my acceptance of my real life brothers and sisters of the human race.

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There is a deeply satisfying justice in Shakespeare's plays. Lady Macbeth seems so calculatingly cool in her plan to murder Macbeth for the sake of putting her husband on the throne, yet she is highly aware of the transgression of morality that she is about to commit. In the dark of night before the murder, Lady Macbeth terrifies us with her attempt to extinguish the voice of conscience:

“Come, you spirits
That tend on mortal thoughts, unsex me here,
And fill me from the crown to the toe top-full
Of direst cruelty! make thick my blood;
Stop up the access and passage to remorse,
That no compunctious visitings of nature
Shake my fell purpose.”

Yet Shakespeare assures us that this effort to snuff out moral awareness will not go unpunished by the character's deeper nature. We understand that Lady Macbeth's self-tormented sleepwalking scene has re-enacted itself time after time, as we watch her frantically trying to cleanse herself of her foul deed, continually rubbing and wringing her hands:

“Yet here's a spot... Out, damned spot! out, I say!...Who would have thought the old man to have had so much blood in him?...What, will these hands ne'er be clean?... Here's the smell of the blood still; all the perfumes of Arabia will not sweeten this little hand. Oh, oh, oh!”

In another of the Tragedies, Lear learns the enormity of his error of judgment through the enormity of his loss of his beloved daughter Cordelia. It is painful to watch, yet satisfying to the audience's sense of a morally balanced universe.

Shakespeare also knows how to dish up the fun. How can we resist a character named Bottom who calls himself an “ass” and spends half the play (*Midsummer Night's Dream*) wearing the fairy-given head of a donkey? How many times have I watched the play-within-a-play near the end of *Midsummer Night's Dream*, yet it tickles me to my toes every time! Remember the two lovers in the scene, Pyramus and his fair Thisbe? Per the script, Thisbe is played by a guy conspicuously in drag, consistent with the Shakespearean custom of young boys playing the female parts, The two lovers meet at a chink in the wall, “Wall” being played by a character who holds up two fingers to form the chink. I almost fall out of my chair every time they cry:

Pyramus: O kiss me through the hole of this vile wall!
Thisbe: I kiss the wall's hole, not your lips at all.

Or what about Shakespeare's character Viola, the girl pretending to be a boy who is sent by the duke to woo Lady Olivia in *Twelfth Night*? (In our time, Viola is played by a female; I can't help but remember while watching the play that in the Bard's time, the audience would have experienced the *triple* confusion of a boy playing a girl playing a boy.) Of course, Lady Olivia falls in love with Viola garbed as the duke's male page. Meanwhile the duke also finds himself inexplicably attracted to this boy-who-is-really-a-girl. Shakespeare mercifully provides us with Viola's identical-looking twin brother, so that by the time the whole complicated mess is untangled and everyone knows who is who, we get to celebrate the double wedding of the duke to Viola and of Lady Olivia to Viola's brother. All delightful fun!

Shakespeare's wordplay is matchless. The comic repartee between his characters, such as Beatrice and Benedick in *Much Ado About Nothing* or Petruchio and Kate in *Taming of the Shrew*, is as fierce and intricate as any of Shakespeare's battle scenes, and he slays us with laughter. Only a master wordsmith can misuse words as hilariously as Shakespeare has the officious Constable Dogberry do in *Much Ado About Nothing*. As he is exiting, Dogberry hopelessly mishandles words as he attempts to impress his superior with his high language, spouting, "I humbly give you leave to depart; and if a merry meeting may be wished, God prohibit it!" - saying exactly the opposite of what he means. As an experienced play director himself, Shakespeare cleverly crafts his character's lines to give stage directions. Just reading the script, we can visualize exactly what is happening in Juliet's tomb with Romeo's parting words:

"Eyes, look your last!
Arms, take your last embrace! and, lips, O you
The doors of breath, seal with a righteous kiss
A dateless bargain to engrossing death!"

For modern day Americans, appreciating Shakespeare requires scaling a rather formidable language barrier. His wording is ornate (it was for audiences in his day as well) and his scripts are filled to overflowing with references of all sorts: historic, mythological, botanic, zodiacal, scatological and anatomical, to mention a few. At whatever level of meaning we take his words – literal, psychological, political, symbolical, spiritual – Shakespeare is always operating on other levels as well. Shakespeare (or who ever wrote under his *nom de plume*, if you incline toward that theory) was an individual of not only exceptional intelligence, but also of encyclopedic learning. Watching a good production of Shakespeare is an exercise of intellectual rigor.

When we see Shakespeare with the Institute of World Culture, we get a head start in approaching the play. Together, we review the storyline and become acquainted with the main characters, themes and some key lines. We've even

had the fun of enacting some of the scenes, scripts in hand. Then we watch the play, live. We usually give ourselves time to “digest” the play, often over a dinner discussion. Watching Shakespeare, from an informed standpoint, in live theater, and sharing it with an interested group of fellow play-goers is for me a tremendously fulfilling cultural experience.

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