

## Articles

### **My Shakespeare Celebration**

William Shakespeare's contribution to the English language and literature remains invaluable. As an artist, he is simultaneously celebrated, revered and, in the case of first year students, feared for the ways in which he crafted plays and poems. His legacy is as far-reaching as his influence on the English language – from essentially providing the blueprint for all romantic comedy movies to allowing such wonderful modern creations as *Shakespeare's Star Wars* to exist (Artoo Detoo booping and beeping in iambic pentameter!).

Although, Shakespeare is arguably one of the most recognised names in literature, we actually know very little about Shakespeare, the man. For instance, each of the six surviving instances of this signature are completely different, resulting in at least six different ways of spelling his name (none of which is the same as the spelling we use), his birthdate is contested, and aside from a couple of specific, and recorded, dates, we know nothing about what he spent his days doing.

Perhaps it is this air of mystery that adds to our continued fascination with Shakespeare, and on Wednesday, 20 March 2016, the English Department seminar held a celebration of the 400<sup>th</sup> anniversary of what is considered to be Shakespeare's birth date. The celebration, entitled *My Shakespeare*, encouraged students and lecturers to reflect on what Shakespeare means for them. Below are a couple of pieces from the collaborative seminar.

## **Fallen Stars**

Our stars uncrossed  
The floor unpurpled  
Blood returned to wounds,  
From dawn to night to gloaming light  
Grow bright to sun unset.  
Render us as dreams remade,  
As hearts still to bleed,  
Before our fall to deepest lost  
Give us one moment freed.

I was inspired by the visual connotations of the words *star-crossed* (*Romeo and Juliet*) and *purpled* (stained with blood, *Julius Caesar*). *Star-crossed* evokes the image of celestial paths thrown into disarray by an immense and irreversible force – a powerful representation of fate. The colour purple is regal, suggesting the nobility of Caesar's blood as it stains Brutus's hands. The line "We are such stuff as dreams are made on" (*The Tempest*) also finds its way into the poem, merely because stars made me think of dreams. The poem is an imagining of tragedy reversed.

Iona Gilbert

## **My Shakespeare**

High school was a crucial time in my life. I was introduced to Shakespeare. While my classmates regarded his work as tedious and irrelevant, secretly I was falling in love. *Romeo and Juliet* was our set-work for the year and I could barely contain my excitement. Act III, Scene 2 was read by my teacher.

“Come, gentle night; come, loving, black-browed night; Give me my Romeo, and, when I shall die, Take him and cut him out in little stars, And he will make the face of heaven so fine That all the world will be in love with night...”

I took a deep breath, allowing these words to seep into my soul. I opened my eyes to a remarkable sight. Not only the girls, but the boys in my class were fainting and falling off their chairs upon hearing this. They thereafter asked my teacher's advice on how to approach girls using the words of Shakespeare. From thereon, all of my classmates were passionate about Shakespeare and regarded his work with the highest esteem. I sat there with a smile on my face, and Shakespeare in my heart.

Micayla Vellai

### **My Shakespeare**

When I was eight years old (or thereabouts) my father called me to his room one day and presented me with a leather-bound copy of the complete works of Shakespeare and a book on Roman and Greek mythology and duly instructed me to read them. We lived in a Karoo town, Beaufort-West at the time. I recall mildly objecting since my preferred reading matter was comics: Superman, the Amazing Spider man and of course more 'classical' comics like Prince Valiant. His response was to tear up my supply of comics except for Prince Valiant, in which, he said, the English was half decent.

It did not end there. During the school holidays when I visited home he'd often get the whole family to do *King Lear* or perhaps *Othello*. We'd read from the scripts which accompanied his series of Shakespearean LPs (vinyl). I developed a deep and abiding resentment for all things Shakespearean since, as a young boy, all I wanted to do during the school holidays was play outside with my friends.

However, in Standard 8 (Grade 10), I encountered Shylock in *The Merchant of Venice* which for some reason changed my mind about Shakespeare. Who can forget those memorable lines spoken by Shylock: "How like a fawning publican he looks. I hate him for he is a Christian...If I can catch him once on the hip, I will feed fat the ancient grudge I bear him" (Act I, Scene III). And what of the immortal lines spoken by Portia: "The quality of mercy is not strained, It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven... It is enthroned in the heart of kings, It is an attribute to God himself..." (Act IV, Scene I).

That point marked the beginning of a love-affair which has lasted a lifetime.

Llewellyn RG Jegels

## My Shakespeare

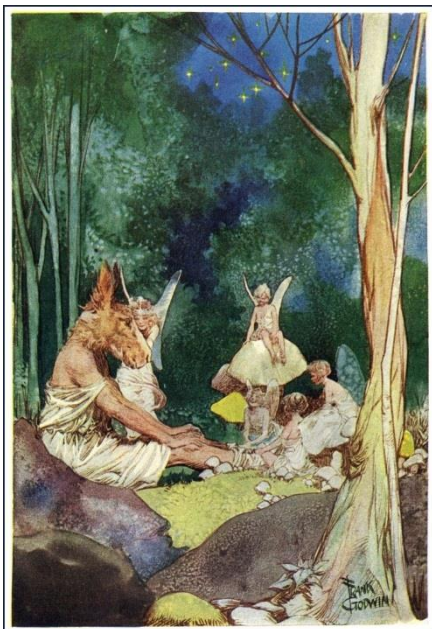


I cannot recall my first encounter with Shakespeare but it must have been in the idioms and expressions of the language in which I was raised and through which the world was mediated. I must have read his stories and seen his picture in the pages of *Look and Learn Magazine* from the age of 7, when I began to read on my

own. But I can clearly remember being spellbound by the stories and pictures of Charles and Mary Lamb's *Tales from Shakespeare*, which I read and read again, sitting high in the branches of a jacaranda tree or, on misty, wet days, lying under the gramophone in the living room as I listened to Beatles' records, lent to me soon after they came out by the older boys next door; they were English and different from the other children in the area. I was especially struck by the illustration in the Lamb book of A

*Midnight Summer Night's Dream*, a green and enchanted world not unlike, it seemed to me then, the one through which my friends and I roamed in the holidays. Our adventures took us into the indigenous forest of the Kloof gorge or through the sprawling three acre gardens of the suburb, which ran into the surrounding bush. I was thrilled, then, when given the role of a tree in the same play at school. It was a minor part, I thought, but I was 9 and didn't mind. The older children in the school had the major roles. My time would come, I reasoned. Only now, with the benefit of ecocritical hindsight, do I realise that I had the most important part after all.

The rehearsals went well. I had ample time to savour the best



parts of the play, the scenes set in the woods, from a vantage point on stage. I didn't have to worry about missing cues or getting words wrong. The opening night arrived. Everyone put on their costumes. I was wrapped in yards and yards of cloth, painted with images of bark and foliage. I stood on stage as upright and still as any forest tree. This wasn't a cool

English glade, but humid Natal. I grew hotter and hotter as the scenes unfolded; the events in the play became even more fantastical than usual. A man in the audience shouted "timber" as I fell. But I didn't hear him.

I regained consciousness back stage surrounded by teachers and my mother, a nurse. I was mortified. I wanted to resume my place on stage but they wouldn't let me. I didn't know at the time that my "swoon" would have been suited to numerous Shakespearean roles. I was never offered one of these, although I did go on to star in *A Christmas Tale* and *A Man for All Seasons*.

The Beatles broke up only a few years after our production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Most of the wild areas of Kloof had been developed by then too. The gardens through which we roamed were enclosed by walls and fences. The neighbouring English boys had become anti-apartheid activists. One had had to leave South Africa in a hurry. Watching *Mbabatha*, the Zulu *Macbeth* in Johannesburg, was the most significant moment of my adolescent experience of William Shakespeare, I think. It was the first time in twenty years that a white audience had been allowed to watch black actors. And it was clear who *Macbeth* was.

Michael Wessels

**“If music be the food of love, play on” William Shakespeare, *Twelfth Night***

Shakespeare, for me, changes the way novels, plays and all literary texts are read. Shakespeare is an experience and once you have experienced a Shakespeare play or sonnet, other literature looks different, reads differently and life itself is different.

Last year I was fortunate to go to England and I visited Shakespeare's home, Stratford-Upon-Avon. It was like walking through history, stepping into a different time period. The place itself told its own story; all I had to do was write.

I went into the house that Shakespeare grew up. All the beds in his house were smaller than our beds and are too small to lie down in. The story is that apparently, people in that time did not want to sleep lying down but rather in an upright position because they felt that when you die you will be lying forever. They did not want to sleep in the same position that you are in when you die. After walking through Shakespeare's house, we were met, outside in the garden, by three actors reciting snippets from different Shakespeare plays.

The people watching could call out a scene from any play and they would recite a few lines from it.

Shakespeare is alive always, through his writing and every time his plays are performed. Shakespeare breathes life into words and gives words a whole new meaning.

Thandi Bosman

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