

The Modern Elizabethan



By LORRIE MOORE

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AN academic colleague of mine once asked me who had made me into a writer. "And I don't mean one of those creative writing professors," he said to me, a creative writing professor.

"Well, who do you mean?" I asked, probably ungrammatically, a thing creative writing professors get to do.

"I mean, who was your Shakespeare professor?" he asked; he was of course a Shakespeare professor himself.

I understood what he meant: Shakespeare was elemental, formative, fateful. Unlike the work of any writer before or since, Shakespeare's plays and poetry, while taking advantage of an audience's church-acquired tolerance for long speeches, celebrated the relatively new language of English and explored the strangeness within the ordinary and the familiar within the strange — the task of every artist. He returned again and again to the pathologies of love, marriage and family — interest in which is a prerequisite for embarkation on an American literary life.

My own Shakespeare professor, now a fellow at the Folger Library, was a brilliant, handsome, manic young man fairly fresh from Duke, who on the first day of class sang an entire verse of "Afternoon Delight," clutching the lectern with bitter energy, to demonstrate to the students the all-pervasive and maddening junk he, as a Shakespearean, had been up against all summer.

He once diagrammed Hamlet as a sort of Pollock painting, with color-coded chalk for the characters. He directed us in a homemade film of "Romeo and Juliet," the Capulets in red pinnies. But in general, he simply, convincingly communicated his love of the work and helped the plays come alive. When I recently met him again in Washington, he said, with unsuppressed glee: "How long are you in town for? The Queen's Folio is here!"

Though many people have tried to insist that Shakespeare must have been a secret guild of theatricals, or the Earl of Oxford, or Sir Walter Raleigh, or some other person of education and rank ("How about the theory that Shakespeare is really Cliff Robertson?" joked a friend of mine), there is no doubt the man existed. Those who are still skeptical may be the same people who, generally pessimistic about human ability, insist that the pyramids were built by space aliens, or that Joyce Carol Oates is really a committee of middle-aged men. Or else they are the same elitists who think things like the roots of rock 'n' roll are actually white.

It seems clear — or at least we can say with a certain ad hoc confidence — that Shakespeare was born in Stratford-Upon-Avon 442 years ago today, the son of a Catholic mother and glovemaking father (Christopher Marlowe, his contemporary, was the son of a shoemaker — anyone got a problem with that?). He had one sister who lived into adulthood, and who may or may not have been the thwarted genius of Virginia Woolf's imagining: "what would have happened had Shakespeare had a wonderfully gifted sister, called Judith." What we do know, however, is that she was named not Judith but Joan. He also had three younger brothers, all of whom preceded him in death.

Shakespeare's eighth-grade education was enough to give him a good grasp of Latin, to help him land work perhaps as a legal assistant (the plays are full of knowledge of the law as well as of gloves), a tutor, a horse-holder and an actor. How many writers have had jobs like these? A lot.

According to Stephen Greenblatt's impressive biography, "Will in the World," Shakespeare's father's success then failure in the glove business may have prevented Shakespeare from going on to Oxford as many of his classmates (and Christopher Marlowe) did, but this is not the same as an insistence that he was too uneducated to have written the plays.

In Elizabethan England, apprentices abounded, as did pages and tutors, and Shakespeare would have easily made his way in that world. Actors had to know how to speak as gentlemen or bums, and carried around their own costumes and swords. The art and value of disguise, impersonation and adaptation is usually learned young. The father's mercantile life would have given the young son an early indelible glimpse of all segments of society — rich and poor, rural and urban, successful and failed — and arguably gave Will, in part, the great comic character Falstaff: the drunken father figure whom the successful young man outgrows, outpaces and renounces, though not without a chilling soupçon of hate.

Shakespeare married early and, for practical reasons, someone older and richer (where there's a will, Anne Hathaway, the old quip goes) and then left her behind to pursue revolutionary work in the world, only to return to her and take up companionship with her at the end. In this — and in his stalwart determination, knack for real estate and penchant for petty lawsuits — he is reminiscent (to me) of George Washington, whose marriage was made similarly coolly and for a good part of his life sat at that same convenient and pleasing distance (until retirement), while he annoyed the other army officers in New Jersey by dancing with their wives.

That Shakespeare's most passionate loves were at first youthful and then adulterous is suggested by his plays, which scarcely have a happy marriage in them, let alone a happy family. Though one shouldn't look to fictional work as autobiography, a writer will always write from what is on his mind, and somewhat from what he knows, and so the intensity and buffoonery of youthful erotic love and the low miserable hum of marital discontent — famous as literary muses — were probably Shakespeare's muses as well. Just as they were Charles Dickens's (another actor turned writer). And Edith Wharton's. And (remain) Alice Munro's.

The limberness of Shakespeare's gift is arguably best demonstrated not by the greatest plays — "Hamlet," "King Lear," "Macbeth" — but by two that are considered more minor, one a tragedy, one a comedy, and both written the same year, more likely the tragedy first, as the comedy is something of a satire on the tragedy. These are "Romeo and Juliet" and "A Midsummer Night's Dream." (That they might have been accruing simultaneously on his writing table is one of those events writers and critics alike are fond of imagining.)

Though they each have their various textual sources — Shakespeare, like Puccini, was a notorious artistic poacher, so much so that tales of Shakespeare's actual poaching of game have attached themselves to his legend — they are distinctly Shakespearean in their look at love.

In "Romeo and Juliet," however inconvenient Cupid's choice, the energy of youthful love hurdles obstacles: "With love's light wings did I o'erperch these walls," says Romeo to Juliet, adding, "And what love can do, that dares love attempt." Though at play's end he is dead from his own hand, as is Juliet, victims in their own plot to outsmart the rather vicious society around them. Impetuosity never had a greater poet or a greater dramatist. Nor a greater comedian.

In "A Midsummer Night's Dream," a kind of buddy tale of mind and body on a fated forest trudge, erotic love is quite literally a drug, defying all solemnity and even intelligence, washing the brain in potions, something modern scientists have at long last proven to be an accurate occurrence. The most beautiful creature of the forest is made to fall in love with a blustery bumpkin by the sad name of Bottom, who through fairy mischief is now sporting the head of, well, an ass. A donkey's head: this is grotesquerie worthy of a Tim Burton movie. And it is all in service of Shakespeare's compassionate skepticism about love.

Each of these plays contains the other: "A Midsummer Night's Dream" contains "Romeo and Juliet" in its enactment of the tragical tale of "Pyramus and Thisbe" but played for laughs: "These yellow cowslip cheeks/Are gone, are gone!/Lovers make moan;/His eyes were green as leeks." And "Romeo and Juliet" contains a window onto "A Midsummer Night's Dream" in the comic relief of Romeo's friend Mercutio, who throws barbs at the mere idea of romantic love to the comic approval of his entourage: "Prick love for pricking, and you beat love down."

The structure of both these plays is intricate and geometrical. "A Midsummer Night's Dream" moves easily in a single day among four different worlds and among the various romances giddily proceeding within them (some with more elegance than others). At the end of "Romeo and Juliet" the body count perfectly, symmetrically comprises two Montagues, two Capulets and two relatives of the Prince. Death, not love, has the final blocking, though of course there is always the curtain call, and everyone is back up and alive again, as if to keep trying. Oh, why not.

Shakespeare's London was one of the great cities of Europe, though smaller than Madison, Wis., is today. It was also rife with the religious bloodshed of modern Belfast or Baghdad. When Shakespeare arrived in London as a young man he would have passed, impaled on the famous bridge into town, the skull of a distant cousin, killed for being a Catholic. How could this fail to leave an impression?

He filled his early plays, written in his new home, with violent young men and angry mobs. When he left, rich and successful, it was to die (at 52) of what doctors today have speculated was a rare cancer of the tear duct — an illness as cruelly ironic as that of Puccini's cancer of the throat. His beloved Globe Theater had burned down. He could not have been happy.

But he did not know that his work would survive forever not just on stage but in book, screen and musical form — no one at that time could have. Or that his words would inspire their own honoring thefts: Joni Mitchell took a glittering simile of his for "That Song About the Midway"; "West Side Story" and "She's the Man" borrowed his plots.

Washington, Dickens, Puccini and Tim Burton somehow merged into one: there's your genius. Or the bare bard bones of him.

Add a dash — of Ogden Nash.

Lorrie Moore is a professor of English at the University of Wisconsin and the author, most recently, of "Birds of America."