Course Objectives, English 3304A, Shakespeare

In some eighteenth-century novel, *Tom Jones* perhaps, a schoolmaster comes away from seeing his first Shakespeare play, amazed that so trite a playwright should have acquired such a reputation. The play's plot was all right, but the language! "Sound and fury," "the milk of human kindness," "out, out, damned spot," "double, double, toil and trouble," one cliché after another for three whole hours!

An eminent Stratfordian brought that incident to my mind when he rose to perform at the memorial service at the National Arts Centre for my colleague Charles Haines. He recited a medley of lines from Shakespeare that he had put together for the occasion. He had a fine voice and spoke in the rounded theatrical cadence that the world instantly recognizes as Shakespearean. But Shakespeare's lines lost all their edge in his theatrical delivery. The beautiful voice fussed and strutted, but left the emotional substance of Shakespeare undisturbed. And he kept bringing his medley back to the song from *Twelfth Night,* "Hey-ho, the wind and the rain," neutering the power of Shakespeare's words by bathing it in sentimentality. Sentimentality and oratorical pomposity: the theatrical style that the world recognizes instantly as Shakespearean. Amateurs, because they haven't learned it, often put a truer Shakespeare on stage than the professionals do. Two barriers keep us from Shakespeare, the domestic familiarly of his language and the stylization of modern production of his plays. They come from the same source, his success, his enormous popularity right from the beginning. My aim in the course is to entice you to vault the barriers, search for a Shakespeare truer than our popular Shakespeare, and enjoy a full encounter with his imagination.

You'll want to know what I mean by an encounter with Shakespeare and, for that matter, what I mean by the truer Shakespeare. I'll deal with that first, and I'll start with another recollection.

It is an incident from a French documentary film. An old farm woman is being interviewed by the film-maker, a Jew who, as a child, had taken refuge with her when France was occupied by the Nazis. She was part of a secret network that the French Reformed churches of an isolated mountain valley had set up during the Second World War. They hid away thousands of Jews in the course of the war, eventually getting them over the mountains and out of France. "I can see how you might have kept Jewish families during the Vichy times," the interviewer says, "but when the Nazis took over, you knew you'd be shot if you were caught. Why did you keep doing it?"

The woman shrugs. "We'd got into the habit, I guess," she says, with the hint of a smile.

A simple gesture, and behind it, a world of meaning. The woman had acted with a generosity and courage that none of us can be sure we'd find in ourselves. Her shrug said just that. If she'd been a hero, no one could have predicted it, least of all herself, and if her motive was heroic, it was mixed with other motives. Her explanation, "We'd got into the habit, I guess," is a cliché, obviously inadequate as an explanation, and her shrug and smile tell her interviewer that she knows it and knows that the situation can't be easily accounted for. They are little things, a shrug, a cliché, a smile, a mere instant of time. But in that instant the woman is an artist, her action what every work of literature is: a mixture of gesture, word, and reason that comes to grips with human behaviour without being false to its complexity.

But there is something else in the incident, and it takes us very close to Shakespeare. The woman wasn't prompted by rational calculation to do what she did, but by a predisposition that she can't account for. Predispositions do not materialize out of nowhere. We are bred to them, which is to say that they come to us from our culture, that they are a product of the traditions and institutions in which we live and grow. The woman was a Frenchwoman, bred in the traditions of democracy, with its imperative of public responsibility, and she was a conscientious Christian, bred in the traditions of reformed Protestantism, with its imperative of personal responsibility, its memories of persecution and suffering, and its reverence for the chosen people of the Old Testament. In these things alone, even though we see nothing of the institution that most profoundly influenced her — her family, with its particular traditions and loyalties — we may begin to see how her predispositions were shaped. But nothing is certain in human life. Other people, bred to the same culture in the same valley, didn't do what she did, though they in fact kept up a conspiracy of silence that hid from official eyes what she and her cohorts were doing. Culture is always something of a riddle, a complicated mass of conflicting forces, some

pulling one way, some another, bringing a community, if it is lucky, to a healthy balance, and if it is not, to disintegration and tyranny.

And where is the truer Shakespeare in this? The truer Shakespeare opens a door into the puzzle of our own culture, in the way that only the greatest pieces of literature can do, for they articulate, better than any other works of art or science, the complex of aims, desires, feelings, and reasons that are fundamental and enduring in a culture. The truer Shakespeare is the Shakespeare in whose work, if we read and reread it with imaginative insistence, holding even our most pious certainties in suspension, we can encounter the complex and surprising play of forces that have shaped and continue to shape us, now to health, now to sickness, now to abundance of life, now to death's manifold and subtle sterilities, but ultimately to health, because we are lucky, the impulse to life runs deep in our culture, and it runs deep in the work of Shakespeare.

I have given away what I mean by an encounter with Shakespeare. I have been too solemn, however. Let me pull back for a moment. To encounter any literary artist is first to take delight in what he, or what she, has written. Accordingly, my primary aim in the course is that you will come to enjoy, with your own ears, your own eyes, and all the powers of your imagination, each of the plays that we will be reading. Then, as you come to know Shakespeare's work more intimately, as your enjoyment in it deepens, as you think your own thoughts about it and allow it to ruffle your pieties — whether left, right, theist, atheist, hot, or cold — I hope that you come to a deeper and more balanced knowledge of the cultural tensions and ultimate impulse towards life that have shaped your predispositions and made you what you are.

Note that I have said "knowledge." The enjoyment of art is a meditative enjoyment. It is not a means to some end, obedience, say, or revolution, but an end in itself, like the art that creates it. Despite all the claims that have been made about its moral aims and effects, art does not influence our actions in any simple way, though Thomas Bowdler thought so when he expunged from his edition of Shakespeare everything he construed to be sexually unhealthy, and though modern producers think so when they expunge from their Shakespeare everything that they construe to be, for example, politically unhealthy. The example of Bowdler suggests that if we bear down hard on the apparently offensive passages, we may find that the disease is in fact something that we have projected upon Shakespeare ourselves and that what is actually there before us has something refreshing to teach.

Of course, I am overstating my position. I am a teacher, and, true to my calling, I am always hoping that my students will do more than increase their knowledge. I am hoping that some time in your encounter with Shakespeare you may suddenly see yourself, like Macbeth, standing on the bank and shoal of time, an infinity stretching out above you, a tide slowly eating away the sand at your feet, and that, turning in shame from what we have all failed to be in the face of the undeserved misery that we have encountered in our lives, you will feel sleeping powers awakening inside you. Such things, I know, come unexpected and unbidden. But I can think of few more powerful catalysts than the work of that rough-edged playwright who worked the London stage for the two magical decades that straddle 1600.