

Youth and Age in Shakespeare's Plays

By William Pratt

We know relatively little about Shakespeare's life, but we know a great deal about his works. In the 52 years between his birth in Stratford-Upon-Avon in 1564 and his death there in 1616, he traveled no farther than the city of London, which in his time was a four-day journey by horseback. It was a small world he inhabited, but he more than made up for it by the reach of his imagination. The sources of his plays testify to his wide reading in history and literature, and the settings vary from parts of England and Scotland he had never seen to foreign places he had never visited: Istria, Verona, Venice, Rome, Alexandria, Athens, France, Denmark, even an island in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean. In the 25 years he lived in London, less than half his short lifetime, he wrote 154 sonnets and 37 plays, an astonishing achievement that still towers over English literature, and is universally admired in every language into which it has been translated. I once asked an Italian friend why I kept seeing quotations from Shakespeare in the Italian newspapers, and she replied, "why, because he's our favorite writer." It seems miraculous that an ordinary middle-class citizen of an English town could become the world's most revered writer, yet that is what has happened in the four centuries since his death, leading some readers to speculate that Shakespeare the author could not have been the William Shakespeare of Stratford-upon-Avon. They think he should have been a wealthy nobleman, educated at Oxford or Cambridge, to have had such a commanding view of the world, but his legions of loyal readers know that the real Shakespeare was praised by Ben Jonson, a rival playwright and poet who actually knew him. In a poem "To the Memory of my Beloved Author William Shakespeare" Jonson marveled that though Shakespeare "hadst small Latin and less Greek," he was the "Sweet Swan of Avon" and a master of the English language, who wrote "not of an age but for all time." Shakespeare's life may not have been heroic, but his true identity

does not depend on the meager facts of his life. It rests on the magnitude of his works, which have dominated literary studies and theatrical productions the world over for four hundred years and counting.

We do know a few facts about him. He was born in Stratford to reputable parents, married Anne Hathaway from the neighboring village of Shottery, had three children by her, and left her in his will his “second best bed,” (probably the bed they slept in). We know he left Stratford for London in 1586, began his career writing sonnets and narrative poems, and soon joined the Lord Chamberlain’s Men, a group of actors and playwrights, in whose company he began writing plays as early as 1591. We know he was a respected member of the theatrical profession in London, both as actor and as playwright. We know he had royal patrons who admired his plays, notably Queen Elizabeth and her successor King James. Most important of all, we know the order in which his plays were performed, giving us valuable insight into the gradual unfolding of his mind. We know that one of his earliest plays was a fantastic comedy called *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, staged in 1595. For the next sixteen years he produced plays regularly, varying from comedies to tragedies to historical dramas. And we know that his last play was *The Tempest*, another fantastic comedy, staged in 1611. He then left London and retired to Stratford, where he appears to have written nothing significant until his death in 1616.

Shakespeare’s entire literary career lasted from 1591 to 1611. During those twenty years he was amazingly prolific, staging a new play at least once a year, in theatres located on the south bank of the Thames, especially in the Globe, a historic theatre recently reconstructed to perform the whole Shakespearean canon . You can see his plays there today, from his first play written when he was in his late twenties to his last play written in his late forties. What these two plays tell us is how Shakespeare aged as a writer. Both are comedies, but what a difference

there is between them. They show how his imagination was tempered by his experience, as he grew from youth to age in a mere two decades. Differences in style and subject matter between *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *The Tempest* are striking enough for us to see how rapidly Shakespeare grew from the innocence of youth to the wisdom of age during his brief but unparalleled literary career.

There are no differences in quality between the two plays. Both are masterpieces of their kind, each a model of comic genius. The difference between them is one of greater experience and surer judgment in the mind of the author. The first play is clearly a youthful work, with real and imaginary characters meeting in a friendly forest setting and making preparations for the wedding feast with which the play will end. They live in a fantasy world, filled with gaiety and free spirits, fanciful characters and magical transformations. Some are members of the court, some are fairy creatures who observe the romantic entanglements of the couples and interact with them, and some are tradesmen rehearsing for a farcical play within a play, "The most lamentable comedy and most cruel death of Pyramis and Thisbe." They are amateur actors, with a professional director named Peter Quince assigning the roles and supervising the rehearsals.

Shakespeare's last play is darker throughout, beginning with a destructive tempest and a shipwreck, set on an island far from civilization, where good and evil characters are at war with each other, plotting harmful actions which if carried out would make the play a tragedy rather than a comedy. *The Tempest* is generally acknowledged to be the culmination of Shakespeare's Later Comedies, often called Tragicomedies, containing elements of both comedy and tragedy that have to be resolved peacefully in a final harmonious marriage ceremony. The moral lessons exhibited in the last play of Shakespeare point toward a more mature view of human nature than is to be seen in his first play. *A Midsummer Night's Dream* takes a broadly comic view of the

world, in which conflicts occur, but all are light and all end happily. *The Tempest* dramatizes a world in which tragedy is always looming, only preventable by the superior wisdom and forcefulness of a powerful man of good will. There are moments of high tension in *The Tempest*, even threats of death, but the play ends in the resolution of all conflicts, brought about entirely through the wisdom and good will of Prospero, one of Shakespeare's supreme characters. No such wise and benevolent character appears in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, since none of the conflicts in Shakespeare's first play are serious enough to need the firm resolution necessary in *The Tempest*.

Both plays contain superhuman characters who are invisible agents under the command of the main character--Oberon, king of the fairies, in the friendly forest of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, and Prospero, the former Duke of Milan, in the much stormier setting of *The Tempest*. Oberon is a playful figure who enjoys taunting his fairy queen, Titania, and presides over a trio of human lovers unsure of whom they love, whom he manages to steer towards final reconciliation through multiple marriages. Prospero had been the ruler of an Italian city-state, but was deposed by his treacherous brother Antonio before the play begins; he has been exiled to a remote island with his daughter Miranda. In the first play Puck is the fairy messenger, who takes his directions from Oberon, and causes much of the comedy to occur, by his magical manipulations of the pairs of lovers and the band of amateur actors who are rehearsing a ridiculous farce to entertain the courtiers of Duke Theseus of Athens at a wedding feast. Puck confronts Bottom the Weaver, playing the role of Pyramis, lover of Thisbe, in the play within a play, and crowns him with a donkey's head. He then puts drops on the eyelids of Titania, the fairy queen, which cause her to fall in love with Bottom the Weaver, despite his absurd ass's head. In the last play, Ariel is the fairy spirit obedient to Prospero, who directs him to play tricks

on the shipwrecked mariners bent on conquering the island, causing them no harm but preventing them from doing any harm to others, thus producing comic outcomes rather than the tragic consequences that would have occurred had the villains succeeded in their dastardly schemes.

The difference between Puck and Ariel is emblematic of the difference between Shakespeare's earliest and latest comedies. Puck is portrayed as a mischievous imp who boasts "I'll put a girdle round about the earth in forty minutes," and who mocks the misguided pairs of lovers with "What fools these mortals be." Ariel, in contrast, is agile and ingenious, but not mischievous, as he carries out the orders of Prospero, thwarting the conspiracies of the villains who have been shipwrecked on the island, exposing them in plain sight to the good characters, in particular to the innocent young lovers Ferdinand, son of the king of Naples, and Miranda, daughter of Prospero, who exclaims "O brave new world that has such people in it." Little does she know how bad they are, but Prospero sees through their machinations. As Ariel flits about above the action, he sings some of Shakespeare's rarest songs, notably the dirge for Ferdinand's father, the King of Naples, who is presumed to have died in the opening tempest, but who is very much alive, though separated from his son:

Full fathom five thy father lies,
Of his bones are coral made.
Nothing of him that doth fade
But doth suffer a sea change,
Into something rich and strange:
Sea-nymphs hourly ring his knell:
Hark! now I hear them—ding, dong, bell.

That Ariel is capable of such high poetry is a tribute to his intelligence, and is in sharp contrast to the more earthly strains of music which Puck intones,

Up and down, up and down;
I will lead them up and down;
I am fear'd in field and town;
Goblin, lead them up and down.

The difference between youth and maturity in Shakespeare's first and last comedies is revealing, but not unique, for there are striking parallels in his earlier and later tragedies. *Romeo and Juliet*, one of his earliest plays, was first staged in 1595, the same year as *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. It is a romantic tragedy about two young lovers whose lives end in early death. *Antony and Cleopatra*, staged in 1606, is a romantic tragedy about two much older and far more worldly lovers, one an Egyptian empress, the other a Roman emperor, who die in each other's arms as did the young Italian lovers. But Antony and Cleopatra were real historic characters in the ancient capitals of Rome and Alexandria, not imagined lovers in Verona, an Italian town Shakespeare chose for his setting. Though Antony and Cleopatra were rulers of kingdoms, their love was also fated to end in mutual death.. To compare a pair of Shakespeare's finest comedies, early and late, with a pair of his most moving tragedies, early and late, provides further proof of the miraculous powers of his imagination, which enabled him to write plays that enriched the English language with the ripe fruits of youth and the riper fruits of age.

That *Romeo and Juliet* was first performed in 1595 means his early tragedy appeared in the same year as his early comedy, giving us a clue to the breadth of Shakespeare's genius. He alone of the world's great playwrights was equally adept at writing tragedy and comedy. The two early plays embody unforgettably the idealism of youth and its impulsive spontaneity. At the beginning of the tragedy, Romeo is madly in love with Rosalind, and is suffering painfully from

her neglect, but as soon as he sees Juliet at a party in the house of the Capulets, he falls head over heels in love with her and she with him. The trouble that immediately arises is that Romeo is of the house of Montague, sworn enemies to the house of Capulet to which Juliet belongs, and thus the “star-crossed lovers” (as Shakespeare calls them) are doomed from the start to tragic consequences, which they try vainly to circumvent. They know full well that they can never hope to marry with their parents’ consent, but they are so deeply in love that they must find a way to marry in secret, and that is what they do, though their honeymoon will last only a single night. Shakespeare’s early tragedy is the perfection of youthful love fated to end in death.

Antony and Cleopatra was not performed until 1606, a decade later than his early tragedy, but it is quite evidently a latterday romance, between two lovers who have known many other loves, and whose quarrels punctuate their relationship as often as do their expressions of affection. Cleopatra, queen of Egypt, has earlier had a child by Julius Caesar, the Roman emperor, following his conquest of her country, and Antony is married to Fulvia at the time he meets Cleopatra, having come to Egypt as one of the triumvirate ruling the Roman Empire after Caesar’s assassination. Moreover, when Pompey challenges the triumvirate with his army and navy, Antony suddenly leaves Cleopatra and goes to Rome, where, newly widowed by the death of Fulvia, he consents as a gesture of imperial solidarity to marry Octavia, the sister of Octavius Caesar. The two imperial lovers are not naïve and innocent, like Romeo and Juliet; they are experienced in the arts as well as the politics of love, and quite willing, when the opportunity presents itself, to dally with other lovers for a time. Yet Shakespeare treats his older lovers seriously, depicting them as truly in love, dedicated to each other if not always faithful. Their tragedy comes from having to mix love with politics, resulting in Antony’s ultimate defeat in a sea battle with Octavius Caesar, precipitated by Cleopatra’s shipboard flight in the face of the

enemy. His loyalty to her robs him of his valor, and in disgrace he falls on his sword in the best Roman fashion, to be carried to Cleopatra where he dies in her arms. Despite their quarrels their love is genuine; their infidelities have not kept them from dying in each other's arms. She dies upon hearing he has died, he by his own sword, she by the poisonous bite of an asp. When the victorious Octavius Caesar comes to pay his respects to her in her pyramid, he finds she has killed herself, just as Antony has, and so Caesar gives the command to honor her in death: "She shall be buried by her Antony."

Antony and Cleopatra ends with the Roman emperor's joint epitaph to the older lovers, as *Romeo and Juliet* ends with the Prince of Verona's epitaph over the young lovers:

For never was a story of more woe
Then this of Juliet and her Romeo.

Shakespeare's plays have entertained audiences for four centuries and have never gone out of style, nor are they likely to. His poetic gift is unsurpassed; he created more living characters than any other writer ever has, and his ability to write both tragedies and comedies sets him apart from all other playwrights, including the Greeks. Shakespeare's life is embedded in his works; he never wrote an autobiography. But to study Shakespeare is the best way to know him, and reading his plays in chronological order offers us further knowledge of how he matured in his judgment of mankind. His first and last comedies are about lovers, but they change in tone from light to dark, as the lovers change from youthful idealists who live in a forest dreamland, their thoughts dwelling on wedding feasts, into older realists acquainted with violent tempests and forced exile and threats of death, who need to be protected by a benevolent ruler if their lives are to end in harmony rather than death. His tragedies portray innocent young lovers like Romeo and Juliet, who defy their families and marry secretly, who are bound to suffer

from the conflicts which they themselves provoke, even if innocently, and whose only consolation is to die in each other's arms, while older and more experienced lovers like Antony and Cleopatra, wiser in the ways of the world, suffer from their own infidelities and their constant bickering, and though they are sovereigns, they cannot sustain their power against stronger adversaries, and are forced in the end to die by sword and serpent bite. Their sole consolation, like that of the young lovers in his first tragedy, is to die in each other's arms, more faithful in death than they were in life. We may believe that Shakespeare himself was a youthful idealist who took his blows in life and grew to be an aging realist at the end of his career..

Shakespeare is eminently quotable. To choose memorable speeches from each play gives us insight into the growth of Shakespeare's mind from youth to age. Oberon, King of the Fairies, speaks the closing lines of the comedy in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* Act V, Scene ii: .

Now until the break of day,
Through this house each fairy stray,
To the best bride-bed will we,
Which by us shall blessed be;
And the issue there create
Ever shall be fortunate,
So shall all the couples three
Ever true in loving be;
And the blots of Nature's hand
Shall not in their issue stand.

Prospero shows his wisdom in a final command to Ariel in Act V, Scene I, of *The Tempest*,:

Hast thou, which art but air, a touch a feeling
Of their afflictions, and shall not myself,
One of their kind, that relish all as sharply,

Passion as they, be kindlier mov'd than thou art?
Though with their high wrongs I am stuck to the quick,
Yet with my nobler reason 'gainst my fury
Do I take part; the rarer action is
In virtue than in vengeance; they being penitent,
The sole drift of my purpose doth extend
Not a frown further. Go, release them, Ariel.
My charms I'll break, their senses I'll restore,
And they shall be themselves.

It is Romeo, in Act V, Scene iii, of the early tragedy, *Romeo and Juliet*, who breaks into the tomb of Juliet, and speaks movingly to her, thinking she is dead,

Ah, dear Juliet,

Why art thou yet so fair? Shall I believe
That unsubstantial Death is amorous,
And that the lean abhorred monster keeps
Thee here in dark to be thy paramour?
For fear of that I still will stay with thee,
And never from this palace of dim night
Depart again: here, here, I will remain
With worms that are thy chambermaids. O! here
Will I set up my everlasting rest,
And shake the yoke of inauspicious stars
From this world-wearied flesh. 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!
.....Thus with a kiss I die.

And it is Octavius Caesar, in Act V, Scene ii, of the later tragedy, *Antony and Cleopatra*, who commands his soldiers to carry Cleopatra to her tomb:

Take up her bed;
And bear her women from the monument;
She shall be buried by her Antony:
No grave upon the earth shall clip in it
A pair so famous. High events as these
Strike those that make them; and their story is
No less in pity than his glory which
Brought them to be lamented. Our army shall
In solemn show, attend this funeral
And then to Rome.

Shakespeare's dramatic language is fully equal to the demands of both comedy and tragedy, conveying with eloquence not only the appropriate sentiments of his characters, but his own wiser judgment of human nature, as he progressed from idealist to realist, from youth to age, in his plays.