

# Shakespeare, Prince of Light

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## *Why do people read and perform Shakespeare's plays some 400 years after his birth?*

- 1 Goneril, Regan, Hamlet, Angus, Duncan, Glansdale, Mortimer, Ariel, Leontes . . .
- 2 These names from Shakespeare were part of our childhood; they crystallized and became the substance of our dreams. Even when we could scarcely read, we knew that behind the names lay a continent with rivers and kings, clans and castles and archipelagos, that someday we would explore. The names of these somber, or radiant, protagonists revealed to us the texture of poetry, the first peal of a great bell. Later, much later, come the days and years when we discover the lines and lives of these names. We discover suffering and remorse, martyrdom and cruelty, beings of blood, creatures of air, voices illuminated for a magic feast, banquets attended by bloodstained ghosts. All that action, all those souls, all those passions—all that life.
- 3 In every epoch, one bard assumes responsibility for the dreams and the wisdom of the age: he expresses the growth, the expansion, of that world. His name is Alighieri, Victor Hugo, Lope de Vega, Walt Whitman.
- 4 Above all, his name is Shakespeare.
- 5 These bards amass leaves, and among the leaves one hears birdcalls; beneath these leaves roots grow. They are the leaves of great trees.
- 6 They are leaves, and eyes. They multiply and gaze down on us, insignificant men, through all the passing ages, they gaze on us and help us discover ourselves: they reveal to us our labyrinths.
- 7 In the case of Shakespeare, there is a third revelation, as there will be others: that of the sorcery of his distilled poetry. Few poets are so compact and secret, so secure in the heart of their diamond.
- 8 The sonnets were carved from the opal of tears, from the ruby of love, from the emerald of jealousy, from the amethyst of mourning.
- 9 They were carved from fire, made from air, sculpted from crystal.
- 10 The sonnets were uprooted from nature so whole that, from first to last, one hears how water flows, how the wind dances, and how, golden or flowering, the cycles of the seasons and fruits follow one after the other.
- 11 The sonnets hold an infinity of keys, of magic formulas: static majesty, speeding arrows.
- 12 The sonnets are banners that one by one rise to flutter from the castle tower. And though exposed to weather and to time, they conserve the magenta of their stars, the turquoise of their half-moons, the splendor of their blazing hearts.

- 13 I have read Shakespeare's poetry for many years; the poems, unlike the plays, do not tell of lives, of battles, of derring-do.
- 14 There is the stark whiteness of the page, the purity of the road of poetry. Along that road glide endless rows of images, like tiny ships laden with honey.
- 15 Amid this excess of riches in which the driving power of creativity moves in time with intelligence, we see, we can almost feel, an unwavering and flourishing Shakespeare, and note that the most striking aspect of his poems is not their abundant power but their exacting form.
- 16 My name is written in my copy of the *Sonnets*, along with the day and the month in 1930 when I bought the book on the island of Java.
- 17 It has been with me, then, for thirty-four years.
- 18 There, on that far-off island, it was my model, the purest of fountains, deep forests, a fabulous multitude of hitherto unknown myths; it was crystalline law. Because Shakespeare's poetry, like that of Góngora and Mallarmé, plays with the light of reason, imposes a strict, if secret, code. In a word, during those lost years of my life, Shakespeare's poetry kept open a line of communication with Western culture. By Western, naturally, I mean Pushkin and Karl Marx, Bach and Hölderlin, Lord Tennyson and Mayakovsky.
- 19 Of course, poetry recurs throughout the plays as well, in the towers of Elsinore, in the castle of Macbeth, on Prospero's ship, among the perfume of pomegranates in Verona.
- 20 A phantasmagorical wind blows through the tunnel of each play. The oldest sound in the world, the sound of the human heart, is the matter from which these unforgettable words are formed. Fantasy and humanity appear in all the plays, along with the parlance of the common man, the signs of the marketplace, the vulgar voices of parasites and buffoons, all accompanied by the steely ring of suits of armor locked in crazed combat.
- 21 But what I like best is to follow the extravagant flow of Shakespeare's poetry, a harmony painted on the wall of time in blue, enamel, and magic seafoam, an amalgam imprinted on our eternity.
- 22 As an example, in the pastoral idyll *Venus and Adonis*, published in 1593, there is the flickering of cool shadows on flowing waters, the insinuating green of singing groves, cascades of rippling poetry, and myth fleeing into the greenery.
- 23 Then suddenly a steed appears, dissipating fantasy with its pounding hoofs, as "His eye, which scornfully glisters like fire, shows his hot courage and his high desire."
- 24 Yes, if a painter were to paint that horse: "His art with nature's workmanship at strife, as if the dead the living should exceed." There is no description that can equal that of this amorous, furious horse galloping with real hoofs through marvelous sextets.
- 25 And I mention it, though Shakespeare's bestiary contained traces of many beasts, and his herbarium retains the color and scent of many flowers, because that pawing steed is the theme of his ode, the generative force of nature captured by a great synthesizer of dreams.
- 26 This autumn I was given the task of translating *Romeo and Juliet*.

- 27 I accepted the request with humility. With humility, and with a sense of duty, because in fact I did not feel capable of decanting that passionate love story into Spanish. But I had to do it, since this is the anniversary of Shakespeare's birth, the year of universal veneration of the poet who opened new universes to man.
- 28 Translating with pleasure, and with honor, the tragedy of those starcrossed lovers, I made a discovery.
- 29 I realized that underlying the plot of undying love and inescapable death there was a second drama, a second subject, a second principal theme.
- 30 *Romeo and Juliet* is a great plea for peace among men. It is a condemnation of pointless hatred, a denunciation of the barbarity of war, and the solemn consecration of peace.
- 31 When Prince Escalus, in moving and exemplary language, reproaches the feudal clans who are staining the streets of Verona with blood, we realize that the Prince is the incarnation of enlightenment, of dignity, and of peace.
- 32 When Benvolio reproaches Tybalt for his warlike temperament, saying: "I do but keep the peace; put up thy sword," the fierce swordsman replies: "What! drawn, and talk of peace? I hate the word . . ."
- 33 So, peace was despised by some in Elizabethan Europe. Centuries later, Gabriela Mistral—persecuted and insulted for her defense of peace, dismissed from the Chilean newspaper that had published her articles for thirty years—wrote her famous phrase: "Peace, that accursed word." One sees that the world and the press continued to be governed by Tybalts, by swordsmen.
- 34 One reason more, then, to love William Shakespeare, the greatest of all human beings. There will always be time and space to explore in Shakespeare, to lose ourselves, or begin the long journey around his statue, like the Lilliputians around Gulliver. And though we may go a long way without reaching the end, we always return with hands filled with fragrance and blood, with flowers and sorrows, with mortal treasures.
- 35 At this solemn moment, it is my pleasure to open the door of tributes, raising the curtain so the dazzling, pensive figure of the Bard may appear. And across four centuries I would say to him: "Greetings, Prince of Light! Good health, sir itinerant actor! We are the heirs to your great dreams; we dream them still. Your words do honor to the entire world."
- 36 And, more quietly, I would whisper into his ear: "My friend, I thank you. "