DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 391 164 CS 215 169

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TITLE Shakespeare for the Post-Postmodern Age.
PUB DATE 10 Nov 95
NOTE 22p.; Paper presented at the Community College Humanities Association National Conference (Washington, DC, November 9-11, 1995).
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Guides - Classroom Use - Teaching Guides (For Teacher) (052)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Drama; *English Literature; Higher Education; Language Usage; Modernism; Poetry; *Reading Aloud to Others; *Renaissance Literature; Teaching Methods
IDENTIFIERS Literary Canon; *Optimism; Postmodernism; Recitation; *Shakespeare (William)

ABSTRACT

Labeling literary or artistic periods is always tricky, and labeling an emerging period (such as this post-postmodern one) is, of course, impossible. Harold Bloom has labeled this period the "chaotic age" because of the canon wars that have raged among factions. One writer with a place in any canon and who is an anodyne to the chaos of the present period is Shakespeare. One effective way of teaching Shakespeare is to read his words aloud. Educators must remember that they are teaching college students today who have not been read to and who have not necessarily read Shakespeare in high school. The instructor who reads aloud need not see himself/herself as a showoff or "ham"; rather, he or she should see himself/herself as a facilitator, a presenter. Students learn to appreciate and understand Shakespeare by listening to his work read aloud. Choice excerpts from "Romeo and Juliet," "King Lear," and "The Merchant of Venice" demonstrate the beauty of Shakespeare's language and how well that beauty lends itself to recitation. In addition, Shakespeare suggests a theme for the present era--optimism. Despite dark periods in history, including a number of sonnets that depict the tortuous entanglements of love, Shakespeare was wise enough to be an optimist and this optimism comes through even in his great tragedies. Examples of optimism can be found in "King Lear," "Much Ado about Nothing," and "Taming of the Shrew." (TB)

SHAKESPEARE FOR THE POST-POSTMODERN AGE

Dr. Carolyn Leech, Community College Humanities Association, Washington, D.C.,

November 10, 1995

Those hands, which you so clapped, go now, and wring
You Britains brave, for done are Shakespeare's days:
His days are done, that made the dainty Plays,
Which made the Globe of heav'n and earth to ring.
Dried is that vein, dried is the Thespian Spring,
Turned all to tears and Phoebus clouds his rays:
That corpse, that coffin now bestick those bays
Which crowned him Poet first, then Poets' King.
If Tragedies might any Prologue have,
All those he made would scarce make one to this:
Where Fame, now that he gone is to the grave
(Death's public tiring-house) the Nuncius is.

For though his line of life went soon about,
The life yet of his lines shall never out.

Shakespeare's days are *not* done since Hugh Holland's lines from his sonnet at the opening of the 1623 First Folio have been confirmed: the life of Shakespeare's lines *shall* never out.

Good afternoon. I hope you are enjoying this conference and these fascinating and stimulating people as much as I am. My name is Carolyn Leech, I teach literature and composition at a community college in Ohio. and the name of my talk today is one *post* short in the program. My title actually is "Shakespeare for the Post-Postmodern Age."

Labeling literary or artistic periods is always tricky, and labeling an emerging one is, of course, impossible. Most agree that we've been in label trouble this whole century. "Modernism" was desperately generic; "post-modernism" was used to signify that things had changed, even though we hadn't yet satisfactorily described, though we had certainly decried, the features of the "modern" era. Now the twentieth century is about over, and still no one is sure how to label the explosion of techniques and critiques we have used and are using in art, in literature. "Post-postmodernism" is a label now cropping up in some articles to designate "late-twentieth/emerging-twenty-first century," but, like its two predecessors, it gives time frame only, and really doesn't label style or theme.

Some critics, of course, *have* labeled the era more tellingly. Harold Bloom, for instance, in his book *The Western Canon* labels both style and theme in one phrase -- he calls ours "The Chaotic Age"! And so it is. Bloom writes of the canon wars that have raged among many factions, factions often clearly more politically than aesthetically motivated. These canon wars have left us literature teachers thoroughly unsettled as we approach the millenium about what or whom to include in our survey courses. One of *my* responses to that unsettling has been anthologizing the fifty best world authors ever. No, I'm not going to tell you my choices here. But if you're curious about my choices, or if you have opinions you'd be willing to share on that subject of the fifty best world authors ever, please see me before the conference is done so I can chat with you and/or give you a response ballot.

One name that is on my list, and will be on yours, and is on Harold Bloom's is, of course, Shakespeare. Bloom says Shakespeare is the Center of the Canon.

Today I want to suggest a non-chaotic style and a non-chaotic theme for teaching that Center of the Canon, that Shakespeare, in a post-postmodern era. The style I advocate is large doses of reading aloud, and the theme I suggest is optimism. Before you decide those are overly simplified or naive ideas, give me a chance to tell you how my students have convinced me that this teaching style and this theme are what they need.

For successful teaching style, Shakespeare must be read aloud. The "life yet of those lines" must be intoned, interpreted with grins and leers and pensive frowns and pauses if Shakespeare is to be fully understood by our students. I know that dramatic reading cannot be a forte of every teacher, gifted though he or she might be in other techniques, and yet I urge those of you who have the flair to use it in the classroom, to *show* your students what it is that Shakespeare meant. You see, one of the most important things my children and my students have taught me about reading is this: A person does *not* learn to love reading by reading; a person learns to love reading by being *read to*.

We are looking at, we are teaching, a generation who were *not* read to. The tragedy of this deprivation is often that they have no clue how wonderful reading can be. For love not just of Shakespeare but of all literature, we need to be reading to our students, to be showing the greatness of the literature through explanation coupled with oral interpretation.

That students need and want this kind of teaching has been confirmed to me again and again. I started this teaching style of reading literature aloud to my students only very occasionally and somewhat self-consciously. "They'll think I'm a ham or a show-off," I feared. "They'll think I was too lazy to write a lecture."

But the days I read to them were always the days when I got the most rapt expressions, the most eager questions afterwards, the best follow-up on their reading of the next section. And the comment I've received more often than any other has not been "Gee, you're a regular Glenda Jackson" but it has been "I didn't understand it until you read it to us." Students need to hear Shakespeare read aloud in order to know how to read it to themselves. You don't have to be a Diana Rigg or a Derek Jacobi in the classroom to give them this example. Just pick out a passage and be a presentor, not just an explainer:

But soft! What light though yonder window breaks? It is the East, and Juliet is the sun! Arise, fair sun, and kill the envious moon, who is already sick, and pale with grief that thou her maid are far more fair than she. Be not her maid, since she is envious. Her vestal livery is but sick and green, And none but fools do wear it. Cast it off. It is my lady; O, it is my love. O that she knew she were! She speaks. yet she says nothing. What of that? Her eye discourses; I will answer it. I am too bold, 'tis not to me she speaks. Two of the fairest stars in all the heaven, having some business, do entreat her eyes to twinkle in their spheres till they return. What if her eyes were there, they in her head? The brightness of her cheek would shame those stars as daylight doth a lamp; her eyes in heaven would through the airy region stream so bright that birds would sing and think it were not night. See how she leans her cheek upon that hand! O that I were a glove upon that hand, That I might touch that cheek!

Now that's a very famous speech -- for us -- but our students *have not* in this era had the same high school literature courses we had and thought were standard. They've taken mini-courses in detective fiction or sports literature. For many of them, the Shakespeare they get in your course will be a *first time* exposure. So *read* them the stuff our literary heritage is made of.

But reading aloud to your students need not -- indeed should not -- be confined to the famous speeches. You may have video clips of Zefferelli's *Romeo and Juliet* or you may have Laurence Olivier or Mel Gibson on tape to give clips of the great *Hamlet* speeches. *Your* reading aloud may be most valuable for less-well-known moments, less well-known plays. One example of such an opportunity is in the play *Two Noble Kinsmen* done by Shakespeare with John Fletcher. The play, of course, is the ancient story of Palamon and Arcite. Their loyal friendship is challenged by their loving the same woman, Emilia. Another woman, the jailer's daughter, becomes enamoured of Palamon when he is imprisoned, and she tells the audience how thoroughly she is enchanted. Her recall of how she gradually fell in love can be enjoyed and chuckled at by your older and wiser students as they listem to these words of a giddy maid who has reached the ripe old age of -- fifteen:

Why should I love this gentleman? 'Tis odds He never will affect me. I am base, My father the mean keeper of his prison, And he a prince. To marry him is hopeless; To be his whore is witless. Out upon't! What pushes we wenches are driven to when fifteen once has found us! First I saw him: I, seeing, thought he was a goodly man; He has as much to please a woman in him (If he please to bestow it so) as ever These eyes yet look'd on. Next, I pitied him; And so would any young wench o' my conscience That ever dream'd or vow'd her maidenhead to a young handsome man. Then, I lov'd him, Extremely lov'd him, infinitely lov'd him; And yet he had a cousin, fair as he too; But in my heart was Palamon, and there, Lord, what a coil he keeps! To hear him sing in an evening, what a heaven it is! And yet his songs are sad ones. Fairer spoken was never gentleman. When I come in to bring him water in a morning, first he bows his noble body, then salutes me thus: "Fair gentle maid, good morrow. May thy goodness get thee a happy

husband!" Once he kiss'd me -- I lov'd my lips the better ten days after. Would he would do so ev'ry day! He grieves much, and me as much to see his misery. What should I do to make him know I love him, For I would fain enjoy him? Say I ventur'd to set him free? what says the law then? Thus much for law or kindred! I will do it. And this night, or tomorrow, he shall love me

Alas, the jailer's daughter does not win his love, but she does set him free, and eventually he wins his truelove Emilia in this somber tragi-comedy on which Shakespeare collaborated.

Just as I said you need not read only famous pieces, I also don't mean to imply that you should read only soliloquies. Reading more than one character and changing voices can be fun for you and entertaining for your students, so go ahead and read multi-character scenes. One that goes over well in my class is from *The Merchant of Venice* -- and *not* the famous "quality of mercy" speech, but the dialogue between Portia and Shylock that comes directly after.

Portia: We do pray for mercy, and that same prayer doth teach us all to render the deeds of mercy. I have spoke thus much to mitigate the justice of thy pleas. Which if thou follow, this strict court of Venice must needs give sentence 'gainst that merchant there.

Shylock: My deeds upon my head! I crave the law, The penalty and forfeit of my bond.

[Bassanio implores the presiding Duke to intervene, to overrule the law and bond, but Portia insists:]

Portia: It must not be, there is no power in Venice can alter a decree established. 'Twill be recorded for a precedent and many an error by the same example will rush into the state. It cannot be.

[And Shylock approves her stand with glee:]
A Daniel come to judgment! yea, a Daniel!

And Portia asks: I pray you let me look upon the bond. ... Why this bond is forfeit, And lawfully by this the Jew may claim a pound of flesh, to be by him cut off Nearest the merchant's heart. Be merciful Take thrice thy money bid me tear the bond.

Shylock: When it is paid according to the tenure. It doth appear you are a worthy judge; You know the law, your exposition hath been most sound. I charge you by the law, whereof you are a well-deserving pillar, proceed to judgment. By my soul I swear there is no power in the tongue of man to alter me. I stay here on my bond.

Portia: Why then, Antonio, thus it is you must prepare your bosom for his knife -

Shylock: O noble judge, O excellent young man!

Portia: For intent and purpose of the law Hath ***full*** *relation to the penalty, which here appeareth due upon the bond.*

Shylock: 'Tis very true. O wise and upright judge! How much more elder art thou than thy looks!

Portia: Therefore lay bare your bosom.

Shylock: Ay, his breast, So says the bond, doth it not, noble judge? "Nearest his heart" -- those are the very words.

Portia: It is so. Are there balance here to weigh the Flesh?

Shylock: I have them ready.

Portia: Have by some surgeon, Shylock, on your charge, To stop his wounds, lest he do bleed to death.

Shylock: Is it so nominated in the bond?

Portia: It is not so express'd but what of that? T'were good you do so much for charity.

Shylock: I cannot find it. 'tis not in the bond...We trifle time. I pray thee pursue sentence!

Portia: A pound of that same merchant's flesh is thine. The court awards it and the law doth give it.

Shylock: Most rightful judge!

Portia: And you must cut this flesh from off his breast, The law allows it, and the court awards it.

Shylock: Most learned judge, a sentence. Come prepare!

Portia: Tarry a little, there is something else.
This bond doth give thee here no jot of blood;
The words expressly are "a pound of flesh" But in the cutting it, if thou dost shed
One drop of Christian blood, thy lands and goods are by the laws of Venice
confiscate Unto the state of Venice

Shylock: Is that the law?

Portia: Thyself shalt see the act; for as thou urgest justice, be assur'd thou shalt have justice more than thou desir'st.

Shylock, of course, decides he does not wish to forfeit his life as penalty for shedding the blood of a Christian; For that threat, his holdings are seized and he is sent from the court abashed, defeated, and not because he is Jewish but because he is mean-spirited. Antonio's friends in court crow delightedly: *O upright judge! Mark Jew, a learned Judge!*

[A judge whom they all discover later is, of course, an upright, learned, worthy WOMAN judge!]

I hope these samples have convinced you that reading aloud is a good idea for your classroom style. Some of you are doubtless thinking to yourselves, "I could certainly do those speeches better than she just did!" Terrific! Do them! Your students need it. You'll enjoy it! Others of you may be more reticient than I, may be over-modestly saying to yourselves, "I'm not sure I'd be comfortable being so emotive in the classroom." Don't think of it as *emotive*; think of it as *instructive*.

You're showing students how to read Shakespeare so they can read it themselves. Practice at home with your dog as your audience. Get some justification for that speech class they *made* you take for your undergraduate degree. Then read aloud to your students with the feeling and enthusiasm that Shakespeare inspires in you. I hope for this read-aloud teaching style idea that you will decide to say with me and with Bottom from *Midsummer Night's Dream*, "When my cue comes, call me, and I will answer."

That's style. Now theme. My second ambition for today is to suggest a theme for your post-postmodern Shakespeare courses, and I told you earlier that one I advocate is optimism. Optimism, I think, is a theme once again due for its turn in the cycle. We have brooded a great deal in the twentieth century about the devastation of world wars and nuclear threat and societal breakdown, and literature has pursued and promulgated those themes. We have psychoanalyzed and deconstructed and rehistoricised writers and their writings and our own experience so that despair has imbued our age. And it's our own fault. Those of us who are going to retire in the next ten or fifteen years had something that we have denied our children and our students. We had pride and self-reliance. When we started school in the fifties, they told us we were citizens of the greatest country in the world. We were told we were the brightest, most generous people on the planet. We were told our efforts could make a difference, that we could contribute to our world, and that the way to do it was to work hard, get an education, be responsible.

That fifties' attitude *was* naive -- *but* it allowed us to believe in ourselves and our potential. It encouraged us to go somewhere, be someone, do something. We have not allowed our children and our students that same belief, that same encouragement. We have told them that the world was a bust and there was nothing they could do about it.

The movies and television shows we've produced, the novels we've read and lauded, the anthologies we've edited and the new historicist textbooks we've written for the classroom have harped on failures, disappointments, blame, and paranoia.

But lately, it seems to me that some writers, usually with a somewhat apologetic air, have noticed that life goes on, that vitality exerts itself, that it is joy, not sorrow, that draws us onward. Themes that reflect these positive, optimistic observations about life, will, I expect, become less and less self-conscious, more and more revered, at least for their turn in the cycle. We are approaching a millenium. Turning points, like centuries, and certainly millennia, have a way of encouraging people to think of endurance rather than doom, hope rather than despair. I suspect the millennial effect is likely to encourage more expressions of optimism.

For that post-postmodern, post-millennium theme, Shakespeare will be entirely appropriate. Ann Forrester has given us many good reasons why we should continue to teach Shakespeare. To that list of justifications, I would add this: Shakespeare, who had so many areas of insight and wisdom, was wise enough to be an optimist. His plays and poems, therefore, offer the optimism theme the new millennium is likely to seek.

Shakespeare was optimistic even in his great tragedies, for evil does not ultimately triumph. Good men might be overcome by bad, but evildoers also perish. At the end of the play there is a Malcolm to restore honor to Scotland's rule -- or Albany, Edgar, and Kent are there to mourn Lear and Cordelia and to reestablish peace. In a romance like *The Tempest* Prospero may have suffered exile, but he is ultimately restored as Duke of Milan.

Shakespeare is optimistic about love, too. In the comedies, love always triumphs. Even in his sonnet series, which, as I'll demonstrate in a moment, has some pretty bitter sentiments, love endures beyond all else.

Sometimes Shakespeare's optimism is built on characters who insistently and steadfastly proclaim themselves allied with one point of view only later to reverse themselves and embrace that which they had previously scorned. For Shakespeare, wisdom, even if it comes late, is a redemption and a cause for hope that good and rightmindedness eventually emerge.

One example of this change of heart and mind is Gloucester in the tragedy *King Lear*. Gloucester is a good and loyal man, who nonetheless misjudges his sons and as a result brings great misfortune on himself and on his king. Bastard son Edmund deceives his father Gloucester with a letter forged with Edgar's name that suggests legitimate son Edgar would wish his father Gloucester murdered so that inheritance might be more swift. With misjudgment that parallels that of Lear, Gloucester is taken in by the phony letter. Thus, with ironic truthfulness and with despair that is not unlike that of many in our own pessimistic century, Gloucester says:
These late eclipses in the sun and moon portend no good to us. Though the wisdom of nature can reason it thus and thus, yet nature finds itself scourg'd by the sequent effects. Love cools, friendship falls off, brothers divide. In cities, mutinies; in countries, discord; in palaces, treason; and the bond crack'd 'twixt son and father. This villain of mine comes under the prediction; there's son against father: the King falls from bias of nature; there's father against child. We have seen the best of our time. Machinations, hollowness, treachery, and all ruinous disorders follow us disquietly to our graves. Find out this villain, Edmund; it shall lose thee nothing; do it carefully. And the noble and true hearted Kent banish'd! his offence, honesty! Tis strange.

Indeed, it is strange -- tragic -- that Gloucester speaks so truthfully, but alas, of the *wrong* son.

In Act III Gloucester learns how wrong he has been and he pays for his misjudgment in the bloodiest scene in all Shakespeare. Confronting Cornwall, Regan, Goneril, and Edmund, Gloucester bravely admits to these children who have revealed themselves as greedy usurpers that he has sent King Lear into hiding to escape them ... and why? Loyally and defiantly Gloucester says:
Because I would not see thy cruel nails pluck out his poor old eyes; nor thy fierce sister, in his anointed flesh, stick boarish fangs. The sea, with such a storm as his bare head in hell-black night endur'd would have buoy'd up and quench'd the stelled fires. Yet, poor old heart, he holp the heavens to rain. .... But I shall see the winged vengeance overtake such children."

They do not allow him that sight, of course, as they gouge out his eyes -- onstage -- and send him wandering away. In Act IV we hear Gloucester as he has come to true sight in his blindness: Here's Shakespeare's somber but ultimately reassuring theme that wisdom will be one result of terrible tragedy -- or as Gloucester says it: Our defects prove our commodities.

Edgar, disguised as Old Tom, finds his father Gloucester on the heath and hears Gloucester say:

I have no way, and therefore want no eyes; I stumbled when I saw. Full oft 'tis seen our means secure us, and our mere defects prove our commodities. Ah dear son Edgar, The food of thy abused father's wrath! Might I but live to see thee in my touch, I'd say I had eyes again!

And at the end Edgar *has* revealed himself to his father, Edmund has somewhat repented his wickedness but died, the wicked sisters have died, and Lear and Cordelia have died. It has fallen to Edgar, Kent and Albany that they should "the gor'd state sustain"

Characters who, like Gloucester, renounce early declarations in favor of wiser ideas later are much more cheerily treated, as the audience would expect, in Shakespeare's comedies.

You fellows, certainly, will want to illustrate this reversal from foolish to wise ideas by reading Kate's speeches from the beginning and then the end of the *Taming of the Shrew*.

We gals are more amused by the change of heart illustrated by Benedict in *Much Ado About Nothing*.

Benedict vows emphatically to stay single, scoffs at Claudio in love, and describes his own requirements for a woman as being so exacting and exalted that he clearly thinks he has exempted himself from succumbing to love. Benedict mutters:

I do much wonder that one man, seeing how much another man is a fool when he dedicates his behaviours to love, will, after he hath laugh'd at such shallow follies in others, become the argument of his own scorn by falling in love; and such a man is Claudio. I have known when there was no music with him but the drum and the fife; and now he had rather hear the tabor and the pipe. I have known when he would have walked ten mile afoot to see a good armour; and now will he lie ten nights awake carving the fashion of a new doublet. He was wont to speak plain and to the purpose, like an honest man and a soldier; and now is he turn'd

orthography; his words are a very fantastical banquet -- just so many strange dishes. May I be so converted and see with these eyes? I cannot tell; I think not. I will not be sworn but love may transform me to an oyster; but I'll take my oath on it, till he have made an oyster of me he shall never make me such a fool. One woman is fair, yet I am well; another is wise, yet I am well; another virtuous, yet I am well; but till all graces be in one woman, one woman shall not come in my grace. Rich she shall be, that's certain; wise, or I'll none; virtuous, or I'll never cheapen her; fair, or I'll never look on her; mild, or come not near me; noble, or not I for an angel; of good discourse, an excellent musician, and her hair. . . shall be of what colour it please God . . .

When Beatrice wins his heart, of course, Benedict then readily and cheerily renounces all he has said in the past: I'll tell thee what, Prince: a college of wit-crackers cannot flout me out of my humor . . . in brief since I do purpose to marry, I will think nothing to any purpose that the world can say against it; and therefore never flout at me for what I have said against it; for man is a giddy thing, and this is my conclusion.

My conclusion is that Shakespeare optimistically -- and wisely -- provided endings wherein people learned from their mistakes, grew as a result of their experiences.

Many of Shakespeare's poems, too, can be used to support this optimism thesis. Nevertheless, some of Shakespeare's sonnets are those of a very unhappy, and even bitter, man. Thomas Thorpe published the sonnets in 1609, and used a sequence for the poems which was not one necessarily dictated by Shakespeare, but which has the reader perceive the lover in three stages of love -- first enchanted, then fearful at the waning interest of the object of his love, and finally bitter at rejection.

I offer my students and now you these samples of Shakespeare in his loving, his doubting, and his disillusioned moments of love.

In sonnet number 2 in Thorpe's sequence, Shakespeare was clearly a young man. His obvious theme is that our children can carry on our traits, but it also seems a seduction pitch, implying an invitation to the young lady to submit to lovemaking for her own posterity's sake. Shakespeare speaks of when the loved one will be *really* old -- say forty -- and my margin notes to my students take exception to such prejudice against the mature woman. I point out it is obvious Shakespeare never met a Joan Collins or a Sophia Loren if he thinks gals are washed up at forty!

2

When forty winters shall besiege thy brow,
And dig deep trenches in thy beauty's field,
Thy youth's proud livery, so gaz'd on now,
Will be a totter'd weed of small worth held
Then being ask'd, where all thy beauty lies,
Where all the treasure of thy lusty days,
To say within thine own deep-sunken eyes
Were an all-eating shame, and thriftless praise.
How much more praise deserv'd thy beauty's use,
If thou couldst answer, "This fair child of mine
Shall sum my count, and make my old excuse,"
Proving his beauty by succession thine.
This were to be new made when thou art old,
And see thy blood warm when thou feel'st it cold.

By sonnet 57, one learns there is a hint of distress in the lover's devotion. It would seem the beloved has been dallying with others, but the lover is trying valiantly to ignore it and merely to remain ever at her beck and call:

57

Being your slave, what should I do but tend
Upon the hours and times of your desire?
I have no precious time at all to spend,
Nor services to do, till you require.
Nor dare I chide the world-without-end hour,
Whilst I, my sovereign, watch the clock for you,
Nor think the bitterness of absence sour,
When you have bid your servant once adieu.
Nor dare I question with my jealous thought
Where you may be, or your affairs suppose,
But like a sad slave stay and think of nought
Save where you are how happy you make those.
So true a fool is love that in your will
(Though you do any thing) he thinks no ill.

The sonnet sequence continues with poems that implore, that fret, that hope, that agonize. By sonnet 147, however, -- only seven from the end of the set of 154 -- the poet has become most bitter. He painfully declares *this* to the world:

I'm in love -- and staying that way only makes me ill. Love overrules my good sense; my reason leaves me in disgust because I do not act on its counsels. I'm suicidal over this love; I'm insane. I don't even talk sensibly. I talk as a madman. I thought you were wonderful, but I was wrong.

Here's how Shakepeare expresses it.

147

My love is as a fever, longing still
For that which longer nurseth the disease,
Feeding on that which doth preserve the ill,
Th' uncertain sickly appetite to please.
My reason, the physician to my love,
Angry that his prescriptions are not kept,
Hath left me, and I desperate now approve
Desire is death, which physic did except.
Past cure I am, now reason is past care,
And frantic mad with evermore unrest;
My thoughts and my discourse as madmen's are,
At random from the truth vainly express'd;
For I have thought thee fair, and thought thee bright,
Who art as black as hell, as dark as night.

Now *that's* a bitter man! But an optimist can't maintain such bitterness. At the end the lover still adores, despite rejection. The final sonnet in the series (as Thorpe sequenced it) creates an elaborate myth. I remind my students that the

Shakespearean sonnet gives a story setup in the first eight lines and the resolution of that plot in the last six lines, with the closing couplet usually providing a surprise. Then I explain to them that in sonnet 154 the story setup is that Cupid laid down his flaming arrow while he dallied with maidens who succumbed to his appeal despite their being pledged to chastity. The most beautiful virgin resists Love's charms and steals the neglected arrow while he sleeps, thus disarming the god of love. In the last six lines, which give the plot outcome, that maid thrusts the arrow into a well and thus creates a hot spring to which many come for cure. In the closing couplet, however the lover finds that while those warmed waters might cure others, his love cannot be cooled.

154

The little Love-god, lying once asleep,
Laid by his side his heart-inflaming brand,
Whilst many nymphs that vow'd chaste life to keep
Came tripping by, but in her maiden hand
The fairest votary took up that fire,
Which many legions of true hearts had warm'd,
And so the general of hot desire
Was sleeping by a virgin hand disarm'd
This brand she quenched in a cool well by,
Which from Love's fire took heat perpetual,
Growing a bath and healthful remedy
For men diseas'd, but I, my mistress' thrall,
Came there for cure, and this by that I prove:
Love's fire heats water, water cools not love.

With that ending, can we conclude the sonnet sequence is optimistic? I'm not sure, but I *am* sure that asking if Shakespeare appears to be an optimist in the sonnets *or* in the plays makes for a lively debate among my students, and I offer that question, that theme of optimism, as one you might enjoy exploring with your students.

Well, having urged you to read aloud to teach your students to love reading and having urged you to make Shakespeare's optimism one of the themes you explore with your students, and having gotten in my side pitch in hopes that you will help me decide who are the other forty-nine are on the list of the fifty best world authors ever, time draws nigh that I should set you free .

And I would set you free by concluding this afternoon with something from what was probably Shakespeare's last play, *Henry VIII* written in 1613. That play finishes with the birth of Elizabeth and throughout it condemns duplicity in men and celebrates fidelity in women, specifically Queen Katherine who was divorced in favor of Anne Boleyn. In the Epilogue, or afterword, of the play Shakespeare admits -- as he does often in his plays -- that he fully realizes it is the *women* in his audiences who must be pleased. Since this audience has a larger number of women than men in it, I too realize that, and so I close with this:

'Tis ten to one this play can never please
All that are here. Some come to take their ease,
And sleep an act or two; but those, we fear,
W' have frighted with our trumpets; so 'tis clear,
They'll say 'tis naught; others, to hear the city
Abus'd extremely, and to cry, "That's witty!"
Which we have not done neither: that I fear

All the expected good w' are like to hear
For this play at this time, is only in
The merciful construction of good women,
For such a one we show'd em. If they smile,
And say 'twill do. I know within a while
All the best men are ours; for 'tis ill hap
If they hold when their ladies bid 'em clap.

And I do thank thee kindly!