

## Limina: a Journal of Historical and Cultural Studies

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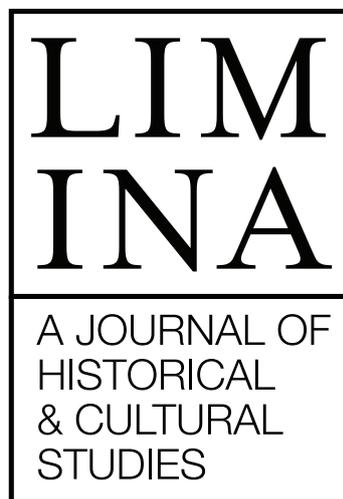
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### Submitting to Limina

Information regarding the journal and how to submit can be found at <https://www.limina.arts.uwa.edu.au/future>.

### Cover Image

UWA Japanese Garden, Perth, Western Australia. Photograph by Rebecca Repper.

### Shakespeare and Me

#### Encounters with Shakespeare

Jude Brigley

#### Encounter 1: 'passions are made of nothing but the finest part of pure love'

At the back of my mother's cupboard, I found *Shakespeare's Country*. My grandmother bought it for me when I was 13 years old and slipped it in my Christmas stocking. I read it voraciously, as the places were as exotic to me then as foreign destinations. Re-looking through the photographs, I realised that I knew these places and had photographed them myself. I spent much of my early career in the so-called Shakespeare country. At 13, I loved the descriptions of Stratford-upon-Avon. A year later, my school took the class to the Memorial Theatre, but I already knew the layout of the streets. You see, from the ages of 9-14, Shakespeare was my favourite author. My long-suffering family knew this. My mother bought me a copy of *Shakespeare's Collected Plays*, a large, dense volume, for my 12th birthday. I was very proud of it and took it with me to university, only for it to fall apart 40 years later.

The Shakespeare affair started slowly enough. From the time I was eight, my mother, who had learnt passages by heart at school, would recite Shakespeare as she brushed my hair. 'By heart' is such a lovely phrase because words we learn become part of us and stay in the heart, in the places too deep for tears. My mother's favourites were Portia's 'Quality of Mercy' and Mark Antony's 'Friends, Romans'. I learnt both speeches. I did not understand but I had a feeling in the pit of my stomach from the incantations. Perhaps it was a mistake to quote the words to other children, but they worked like a charm to ward off any bullies, for who would mess with a disconcerting child? Poets and children have such teeming brains. At Junior School, when work was finished, we were allowed to choose a book from the big cupboard. One day, I noticed an old book, falling apart. I opened it and saw my mother's name inside. It was as if we were linked through time. I sat down and read *Macbeth*. Many of the speeches were short and direct. Now, I said 'out, out brief candle' and 'lead on McDuff' in the school yard.

The first time I was taken to Stratford on a school trip, it was by my forward-thinking English teacher, Gloria Richards. I rushed my friends around streets I had only read about and insisted on buying a chalk bust of Shakespeare. At the theatre, we saw David Warner play Hamlet and Glenda Jackson as Ophelia. At the time, I did not realise how interesting Jackson's take on the character was, but I have often pondered about her spirited Ophelia. I studied most of Shakespeare's plays at college and I taught many of them repeatedly, always finding something new and interesting in the texts. Reading the *Batsford Guide* reminded me of that first careless rapture in discovering the Bard. He glistens in my imagination, his words still golden. I had forgotten the depth of our relationship until re-imagining those heady salad days. When I turned 15 (although Shakespeare would always be in my heart), I had a new love. It was Keats who adorned my bedroom wall and his melancholic rhapsodies were the music of my adolescence. Finding the old guidebook that my grandmother so lovingly chose for me introduced me to that old self, chanting iambic pentameter around the streets of my little town. Tomorrow, I am going to read a Shakespeare play and I don't care which one. All I want is to be transported to some magical island or Arcadia or Arden.

### Encounter 2: The night has been unruly

It is said that Shakespeare's audiences, the groundlings, were an unruly lot. So, maybe Shakespeare would not have been surprised by some of the productions I have witnessed. When amateurs take on Shakespeare, you can expect some disasters. I am not forgetting my school production of *Twelfth Night*, when, as Maria, I looked out stage right and uttered the line, 'Here comes Sir Toby Belch, now'. I waited, but Sir Toby entered stage left behind me. It was a comedy, and we made a joke of it. Later, in a college production of *King Lear*, Lear, propped up on a sun-lounger, is reunited with his youngest daughter. At that moment, the contraption snapped to lying position. Not so funny and yet very funny. After that, his lines were addressed to the fly tower. I think it was the same production where clouds were projected on a diorama as a background to the heath scenes: the machine was out of control, and the clouds scudded by at a rate that would break the land speed record.

Actors must dread school audiences, who often do not suffer lulls in action easily. In the dark of a theatre, it can be hard for teachers to know who to control. I have seen whole classes marched out in the middle of a scene. They were not marched out of the production of *The Merchant of Venice*, which I witnessed as a schoolgirl. Every time a suitor had a box to choose, schoolboy wags would shout out, 'Take the money' or 'Box 13' in mockery of a gameshow of the 1960s.

Poor Laurence Harvey was once heckled by school pupils in a London production of *The Winter's Tale*. They thought he was being 'too hammy' and booed. No doubt Shakespeare's audience would have been much tougher, more willing to heckle than any school class. Nobody boos or messes about when truly engaged, when the words move them to tears or laughter. So it is with all audiences composed of whining schoolboys, creeping at a snail's pace to the theatre.

### Encounter 3: 'When madmen lead the blind.'

It was in the 1970s – I was still in my 20s – that I attended a lecture at the small library at Lydney on the Severn. I was the youngest person there, having travelled on my moped from Gloucester to the estuary village. The audience was made up of matronly women who had dressed up for the occasion in hats and gloves, as if on a sabbath outing. They had come to see the Shakespearian scholar G. Wilson Knight. The talk was on *King Lear* and all the flowers mentioned in the text, before biscuits and a cup of tea, all included in the ticket price. After the break, the crowd anticipated a reading of 'The Heath' but no one realised what would happen next. No one expected the 81-year-old, shirtless and crowned with flowers, calling on hurricanoes, thunder, or fire. Two ladies with horn-rimmed spectacles and floral hats left in a flurry. Those who stayed saw the storm approach. The light through Lydney library's glass windows seemed to darken, as if the Severn bore had tsunamied up the river in memory of 1607. Ingrateful man was summoned up by powerful words and the ladies' white and nyloned hands gripped their handbags tighter.

### Epilogue: 'you have but slumbered here'

Through my teaching years, I read and taught the required Shakespeare plays with enthusiasm, and, as students have assured me, with the inspiration he had always afforded me. Shakespeare had something to say on most subjects, and although I neglected him and followed other loves, he did not hold it against me.

In the quiet of the nights when I stood vigil over my dying mother, her in the limbo of a journey to an undiscovered country, lines of Shakespeare came back to me: of banks where the wild thyme grows, of qualities of mercy, of honourable men. I recited them aloud to my mother, who first got me interested in Shakespeare as she brushed my hair. It comforted me and I like to think that it comforted her – to hear a voice repeat the steady iambic rhythms as she slept.