

*Though this was madness, yet there was method in it;  
my first encounters with Mr. William Shakespeare*

Maurice Jamall

### **PROLOGUE**

I went to school in England in the 1970s, some thirty-something years ago. I wonder, how many reading this inconsequential memoir can remember the 1970s, how many can say, ‘I was there, too’? No more than a few, I suspect, though a happy few, I fancy. So let me remind you, or let me enlighten you of that long-ago decade, for this is how it was. That is to say, this is how I remember it was. I could well be wrong. Then again, I could well be right. Perhaps I am merely choosing to remember how I wish it had been or hadn’t, how it ought to have been, or oughtn’t to. You have no reason to believe my words; what you are about to read is no deathbed confession. Then again, you have no reason to err on the side of skepticism, either. What could I possibly gain by lying to people I shall never meet? Or perhaps I am going to create, accidentally, incidentally or otherwise, a painting worthy of Dorian Gray’s attic, a portrait that never actually was, or, on the other hand, is always, or always is. Confused? Good. Then you and I are on the same capricious page. The memory plays tricks on the best of us, perhaps more often than it does on the worst of us. That is the gist of my ramblings so far. And with that round-the-houses caveat expelled, it’s time I got on with it.

The 1970s: The Cold War was in full swing, as terrifying as my first love’s father, as frigid as his coquettish daughter. Bombs launched from the Soviet Union could hit London in about the same time as it would take to boil an egg. As a result, the country, indeed the Continent, was gripped by one, single burning question: “What would you do with your last four minutes?”, or more specifically, “Who would you do in your last four minutes?” (My answer? How do you choose between Hitchcock’s obsession and Holly Golightly?).

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The 60s, along with its optimism and goodwill, were well and truly over. The Beatles had broken up as if to prove it so. Britain was a dour place, gripped by pessimism and self-doubt. We had joined the Common Market and as we all wrestled with decimal coinage, the sighs of the confused masses rang out in supermarkets, corner shops and market stalls across the land: “What’s that in old money?” “You mean a sixpence is now two-and-a-half pence? That makes no sense!” Not a lot else made sense back then. There were but three television channels, just two if you numbered yourself one of a certain class, since that vulgar *Johnny-Come-Lately*, ITV, was deemed off limits by this self-anointed elite. ‘Light Entertainment’, as it was then still known, consisted of a steady diet of racism, sexism and poking fun at queers, all in order to help keep that smug, self-satisfied smirk on the face of Middle England.

It was against this backdrop that I began my formal education. I went to a traditional English public school in the south of London. Like all institutions of its ilk, it was anything but public; passing through the school gates, through a looking glass of sorts, meant entering a secret world nestled in the remoter parts of between-the-wars England, a world with its own rules and conventions earthed in a logic that would baffle the Queen of Hearts herself. That said, there was the occasional moment of lucidity to be found; for one, it was here that I met the first of my life-long heroes, William Shakespeare. And this is how it happened.

### ***Act One: Toil and Trouble***

I sat at a desk, wooden and worn, by the generations that had gone before. Looking round, I was relieved to find that most of the other boys appeared to be just as petrified as me. Strangers bound to an uncommon destiny; a disconcerted but very lucky few. I screwed my courage to the sticking-place and stole a glance at the adjacent row. Directly across from me sat a ridiculously handsome boy. Sea-green eyes and a face that, had place, time and the relative power of the sexes been different, would so easily have launched those thousand ships. A mop of blonde hair crowned his head, so carelessly disheveled it must have taken an age to get it looking so. My gaze now fell upon his tie; yel-

low stripes on black, he was in Moffat House. I was in Livingstone (green stripes, in case you were wondering). I caught his eye and to my relief and delight, he grinned. "I'm Haycraft," whispered the ridiculously handsome boy. I felt an uncertain smile toy with my lips. "I'm Jamall," I replied.

And then it happened.

He burst into the room, striding with an arrogance befitting a cruelty we were to come to know so well. Instinctively, and as one, we all stood, the wise thing to do, as it turned out. He surveyed us with a cold, impersonal eye.

"Sit."

We sat.

And we waited. We waited, interrogated by a heavily pregnant pause. Then our English master, Mr. Mason, unleashed the first of many hells. The rest was anything but silence.

"If you do not know the difference between a soliloquy and a monologue, you will never understand Shakespeare," he barked. "Well? How many of you can tell me the difference between a soliloquy and a monologue?"

A second pregnant silence hung in the air. To avoid catching his eye, I began to take notes.

"Haycraft, how do you spell *soliloquy*?" I whispered.

"em-oh-en-oh-el-oh-jee-you-ee," he whispered back.

The bastard! I couldn't help but burst out laughing which did not sit well with

Mr. Mason.

"You, boy! What is your name?"

"Jamall, sir. Sorry, sir."

Mr. Mason glowered at me. Clearly, he felt the setting of an example coming on.

"Jamall? That would be an Asian name, would it not?" he enquired.

"Yes, sir," I replied, almost gratefully. "My father is from India. Calcutta, actually."

"Calcutta, actually. Indeed," he echoed malevolently.

And, even at the tender age of eleven, I could sense that this man was

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about to humiliate me. Mr. Mason went on, almost talking to himself (would that be a soliloquy or a monologue?).

“A marvellous place, India. So many wonderful things there. The Taj Mahal springs to mind, does it not, Jamall?”

A nervous titter rippled around the room. Everyone, myself included, had spotted what was coming.

“Well, Jamall—Taj Mahal—I think an hours’ Rounds will remind you of the importance of paying attention when in my classroom. And, yes, I think your new-found friend can have the same.”

And there endeth the first lesson. As we left the room, some forty minutes later, I recall thinking two things: First, that while children can be cruel, it takes an adult to be clever with it. And second, what the hell were Rounds?

### ***Act Two: A Pound of Flesh***

There must have been a special committee, doubtless under the auspices of the Board of Governors, whose sole purpose it was to cook up the most ludicrous yet heartless punishments. Rounds were exactly that. Haycraft and I, dressed in nothing but our gym kit, reported to the Prefects’ Room. A tall, rather lanky sixth former—I think his name was Beatty—led us to the playing fields. For an hour on that bitterly cold September evening, we ran its circumference. If we fell back into a trot, we were ordered to pick up the pace. *Round and round the garden ...*

There is something about a shared injustice that creates a lasting bond between the wrongly accused so much so that by the third lap we were on first name terms, doubtless a school first. James Carlgren Haycraft and I remain the fastest of friends to this day.

Punishment of another sort was meted out in Mr. Mason’s classroom. Universally disliked, this was a man for whom the word, *mirthless* might well have been coined. For though he took us through the mechanics of Shakespeare’s plays and sonnets, though he parsed the texts with thoroughness and great skill, there was never any joy in the doing. He did not teach us to delight in Shakespeare but to ‘know’ Shakespeare primarily for Exam Week. And so we

dutifully remember that *Lear* cannot be fully understood outside its historical context, that King James VI of Scotland, James I of England that is, was busy uniting a realm and *King Lear* was the Bard's warning against division. We noted down that the Fool was gifted *carte blanche*, the only person at Court with the right to ribald the monarch with impunity. Mr. Mason's classes were informative and infernally tiresome. '*Oh would the night were come!*' '*Will no-one rid us of this turbulent Bard!*'

### ***Act Three: Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead***

To many, speaking any ill of Shakespeare is tantamount to speaking ill of the dead, for such is the reverence with which he is treated in far too many classrooms. But in our third and fourth years, we were privileged to have a new English master, a man for whom Shakespeare was more than words, words, words on a page. A man who was able to open our hearts and minds to the greatest writer the English language has ever known. Mr. Barnard encouraged us to take the great Bard down from his lofty pedestal and actually say what we thought and felt about the texts we were reading. I have never found Shakespeare all that funny and while in Mr. Mason's classes, I was left in no doubt that this was due to my impoverished powers of literary criticism, Mr. Barnard never ceased to impress upon us impressionable boys that pleasure and displeasure are subjective sensations. His approach to teaching Shakespeare was a breath of fresh air.

We played with words, we explored ideas; he lifted the veil and we uncovered new meanings, new feelings where once there had only been method. I recall one occasion where we were discussing the role of sin in *King Lear*. One of the boys argued that since the king derives his authority by Divine Right, he is beyond the judgment of ordinary men (this was very much the argument that King Charles postulated at his show trial of 1649, much good that it did him). This being the case, surely, my classmate went on, Lear was above reproach, beyond sin. Mr. Barnard then said something that I have never forgotten and has, on too many occasions to number, pricked my own conscience: *King or no, you can commit a sin even against a blade of grass.*

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But it was with Shakespeare's sonnets that he made his truest mark. For whereas his predecessor had concerned himself only with matters of structure: of octaves and turns, of quatrains and couplets, Mr. Barnard put love, hate, envy, longing, lust, fear, and the sum of all other parts at the heart of each and every class. Were these sonnets, as passionate as they are mournful, written by a middle-aged man of humble birth pining for a young boy from noble stock?

*Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?*

*Thou art more lovely and more temperate* (Sonnet 18)

*My spirit is thine, the better part of me* (Sonnet 74)

It was all quite intoxicating and very heady stuff. Mr. Barnard was well aware that many of the feelings and themes that resound in Shakespeare were far beyond the intellectual and emotional range of boys our age. Yet unlike Mr. Mason, who would chide and sneer if we were unable to grasp the meaning of a text, whenever we would be confounded or confused, when they appeared no more than words, words, words, he would gently assure us that one day, when we were older, they would speak to us as eloquently then as they spoke to him now. He was right. I suspect he knew he would be.

Someone, I can't remember who, once said, '*Rugby is a ruffian's game played by gentlemen, and football is a gentleman's game played by ruffians.*' At my school it was more a case of rugby as a ruffian's game played by Neanderthals. So it was with no small amount of joy that I leaped at the chance to take part in the school play of 1980. Since rehearsals were scheduled for the same time as Games, I escaped the ignominy of being shoved, crushed, and generally pummeled by trolls obsessed with the possession of a preposterously shaped ball on dark, cold winter evenings.

It was through the school play that I came to know and love Mr. Barnard's playful side; to put it plainly, he was a dreadful ham and a terrible 'luvvie' to boot. The play chosen for our year was Tom Stoppard's fifteen-minute version

of *Hamlet*. Condensing a four-and-a-half-hour play into a quarter of an hour might seem at first glance a fool's errand, but Stoppard does it brilliantly. He turns this most potent of Shakespearean tragedies into an absurd, comedic romp. Mr. Barnard coaxed and coached we budding thespians so well that on the night we performed, the laughter in the audience was genuine and heart-felt, not merely the polite titters and giggles of parents and friends. That was my one and only time on the stage but I learned so much from the experience. Bringing characters to life opened my eyes and ears even further to the marvels, the gems, that are to be found so readily in the works of Mr. William Shakespeare, and by any who care to look. I beseech you to look. Or now, to look again.

### ***EPILOGUE***

#### *A Life Remaindered*

A look recalled (the first tear),  
A secret shared (the second falls),  
A laugh relived (the third away),  
A smile returned (drip-drop-drip-drop),  
A bond unbound (now soddened cheeks),  
A dream jilted (a life remaindered)

Anthony Barnard died, true to form, at home nursing a snifter of brandy on an evening following another successful school play. To say he died far too young, before his time, would be shallow, and flippant to the cusp of impertinence. We each of us carves a deliberate, if all too often, unexamined path through this temporal odyssey and I have no doubt that my former teacher would be sorely disappointed in me were I to spend the precious coin of the English language like a drunken sailor on shore leave, on such a banal remark as that.

No life worth living is free of regret, yet no life well met is without consola-

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tion. Instilling a love of literature, a love of language, a love of words, in his pupils was the passion, the calling that kept him going for many, many years. Mr. Barnard was an alcoholic and he was mocked for this, behind his back, by many among the thousands of boys that came and went as he lived his life. But that is not how this gentle master, this kindly scholar, this empathetic gentleman is remembered by those of us lucky enough to have had him as our English teacher. And so I think it would be fitting if I were to leave the last word of this inconsequential memoir to the playwright and poet that he loved so well, that he taught so many of us to begin to understand:

*Good night, sweet prince. And flights of angels sing thee to thy rest.*

**Note:** A Japanese translation of this essay was originally published in the Seikei University, Faculty of Humanities, Jinbun Sousho (2013)