

A belated comment on Shakespeare in Love

Everything we could have asked for...unfortunately

Shakespeare in Love, directed by John Madden, written by Marc Norman and Tom Stoppard

By David Walsh
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It is understandable why *Shakespeare in Love* should find a significant response. These are difficult days and highly confusing ones for a great many people. There is a widespread intuition that the immediate future holds little good in store.

The figure of William Shakespeare is immense, but his work has gained stature in recent years for reasons that are not perhaps entirely literary. Shakespeare takes on an even more monumental character, almost a godlike quality, in what many experience, consciously or not, as a morally and intellectually barren time.

This is how I interpret, at least in part, the news that Shakespeare was recently voted the man of the millennium in Britain, as well as the new spurt of film adaptations of his plays and studies of his life and work. I find Harold Bloom's notion, in his *Shakespeare: the invention of the human*, that "the worship of Shakespeare ... ought to be even more a secular religion than it already is," somewhat troubling from several points of view, but that is the subject of another discussion.

Poetry is one possible route around the perimeter of external reality, or possibly a point of resistance within it, for the individual who finds him or herself at odds with, or disheartened, by the existing state of things. Sexuality, the plunge into pure physicality (real or imagined), is another. The passage from poetry to sexuality and back again is an easy and natural one.

"Shakespeare" and "love" seem to embody these two "pleasure principles." Those who assert or claim to be asserting these principles, against the banalities and cruelties of the time, are bound to receive support. Why should they not?

This is a passage from Act 2, Scene 1 of *Romeo and Juliet*, the famous balcony scene:

ROMEO

*Lady, by yonder blessèd moon I vow,
That tips with silver all these fruit-tree tops-*

JULIET

*O swear not by the moon, th'inconstant moon,
That monthly changes in her circled orb,
Lest that thy love prove likewise variable.*

ROMEO

What shall I swear by?

JULIET

*Do not swear at all,
Or if thou wilt, swear by thy gracious self,
Which is the god of my idolatry,
And I'll believe thee.*

Shakespeare in Love imagines its hero (Joseph Fiennes) suffering from literary and sexual blockage in 1593, set free to write and participate in the staging of *Romeo and Juliet* by a passionate, but short-lived affair with a young noblewoman, Viola De Lesseps (Gwyneth Paltrow). She enters his life dressed as a young man seeking a part in his play.

One of the filmmakers' central devices is to create a background of events, large and small, drawn from Will Shakespeare's daily life which finds ultimate echo, transmuted, in the love tragedy he is writing: the playwright's fickle mistress, Rosaline, becomes Romeo's discarded girl-friend in the play; a battle between two playhouses, The Rose and The Curtain, is transformed into the feud between the two noble houses of Montague and Capulet in imaginary Verona (a Puritan preacher's curse against the two theaters ends up in the mouth of the dying Mercutio: "A plague o' both your houses."); a conversation in bed between Will and Viola on a morning when they oversleep and risk arriving late and without new pages at rehearsal forms the basis of Act 3, Scene 5 of *Romeo and Juliet* ("Wilt thou be gone? It is not yet near day..."), etc.

Queen Elizabeth I, as well as historical figures in the life of the English theater--playwrights Christopher Marlowe and (as a morbid boy) John Webster, theater manager Philip Henslowe, theater manager and actor Richard Burbage, Master of the Revels (the government official who oversaw public entertainment) Edmund Tilney--all make appearances.

Much of this is amusingly and even appealingly done. The script, which bears playwright Tom Stoppard's particular imprint, is well above average. The passages from *Romeo and Juliet* enchant audiences. The cast knows what it's doing and seems to be having fun doing it. Moreover, I'm glad that John Madden's film edged out Steven Spielberg's *Saving Private Ryan* at the Academy Awards, whatever that victory signified.

Shakespeare in Love, however, makes almost no lasting impression.

Does any film whose subject and title promise so many delights have a right to be so ultimately inconsequential? I don't believe so.

As pleasure principles, "Shakespeare" and "love" have the potential to be disruptive, to make some headway--by lyricism, comedy or other means--against what the spectator takes for granted about life. An artist might say: here is beauty (and ugliness), here is pleasure (and pain); now look at the world, look at your life.

There is another possible approach: to supply the spectator with what he or she more or less expects from the two terms. In the end, in my view, Madden's film skims along the surface, giving us too much of what "Shakespeare" and "love" are likely to conjure up in the relatively superficial regions of our consciousness--sonnets and upraised skirts and daggers and keen wits; poetry and lust in taverns and courtyards and brothels. All of this presided over by a wise, gruff old queen. Stoppard applied his considerable skill in the end to producing a script that comes far too close to summing up the accumulated conventional wisdom about Elizabethan England. Fulfilling our expectations to this degree cannot be healthy.

And there are not only too many clichés about Shakespeare's day, there are too many in general. The love relationship between Will and Viola is not treated in an especially original or convincing manner. Although the actors make an effort and say all sorts of amorous and desperate things to one another, the intensity is lacking.

Some of that has to do with the generally well-heeled and complacent state of filmmaking. Can any of these people truly imagine sacrificing themselves for love, art or anything else? But there is perhaps another element to it.

Those who have worked variations on the Romeo and Juliet theme, from Arthur Laurents in *West Side Story* to Stoppard and numerous others, imagine quite sincerely they are improving on or even "radicalizing" Shakespeare by making ethnic prejudice or social difference the focal point of the story. After all, in Shakespeare the source of the difficulty is rather flimsy, even contrived. The substance of the quarrel between the two families is never spelled out, the young lovers are both of noble blood, they legally marry. What stands in their way, once a few formalities are cleared up? As Harold Bloom notes the play points to something more profound--even if all the immediate circumstances were different, "the odds are too great against the triumph of love."

In other words, while *Romeo and Juliet's* modern adapters direct the spectator's attention to what might be relatively easily altered (to the secondary, in fact), "primitive, naïve" Shakespeare concentrates on the essence of the matter: what produces the lovers' calamity is the depth of their feelings. If the spectator experiences above all that depth, intuitively he will begin to draw his own more profound conclusions, for what he knows--without realizing that he knows it--is that such love cannot survive in conditions so inherently hostile to it. The truth is, in a world built on such unfavorable foundations, it does not take much to destroy love; everyday life will generally do it. Shakespeare grasped this on the eve of the emergence of modern society. In my view, the danger represented to all parties, including the lovers themselves, by the intensity and purity of erotic love is, in the long run, a more universal and also more subversive theme.

No one is asking Stoppard and Madden to approach Shakespeare. But there must be some margin between his work and something so easily swallowed and forgotten. The difficulty today is that many works that seem or even consciously seek to go against the grain suffer from some of the same defects as those they implicitly criticize.

I will be accused of taking *Shakespeare in Love* and its implications,

or lack of implications, too seriously. I don't see why, even in a comedy, it is not possible to go more deeply into things. What is tantalizing in the present case is that the script hints at Stoppard's ability to do just that. Instead he has chosen, deliberately or not, to adapt himself to what he imagines the market will bear. Too bad.

Here is more Shakespeare:

*From Act 3, Scene 5

JULIET

*Wilt thou be gone? It is not yet near day.
It was the nightingale, and not the lark,
That pierced the fear-full hollow of thine ear.
Nightly she sings on yon pom'granate tree.
Believe me, love, it was the nightingale.*

ROMEO

*It was the lark, the herald of the morn,
No nightingale. Look, love, what envious streaks
Do lace the severing clouds in yonder east.
Night's candles are burnt out, and jocund day
Stands tiptoe on the misty mountain tops.
I must be gone and live, or stay and die.*

JULIET

*Yon light is not daylight; I know it, I.
It is some meteor that the sun exhaled
To be to thee this night a torchbearer
And light thee on thy way to Mantua.
Therefore stay yet. Thou need'st not to be gone.*

ROMEO

*Let me be ta'en, let me be put to death.
I am content, so thou wilt have it so.
I'll say yon grey is not the morning's eye,
'Tis but the pale reflex of Cynthia's brow;
Nor that is not the lark whose notes do beat
The vaulty heaven so high above our heads.
I have more care to stay than will to go.
Come, death, and welcome; Juliet wills it so.
How is't, my soul? Let's talk. It is not day.*

JULIET

*It is, it is. Hie hence, be gone, away.
It is the lark that sings so out of tune,
Straining harsh discords and unpleasing sharps.
Some say the lark makes sweet division;
This doth not so, for she divideth us.
Some say the lark and loathed toad changed eyes.
O, now I would they had changed voices, too,
Since arm from arm that voice doth us affray,
Hunting thee hence with hunt's-up to the day.
O, now be gone! More light and light it grows.*

ROMEO

More light and light, more dark and dark our woes.

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