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**Reading the sentence fully: a Shakespeare memoir**

Biographical note:

Professor Nigel Krauth is head of the writing program at Griffith University. He has published novels, stories, essays, articles and reviews. His research investigates creative writing processes and the teaching of creative writing. He is the General Editor of *TEXT: Journal of Writing and Writing Courses*. His book *Creative Writing and the Radical* (MLM, Bristol) is due for publication in July 2016.

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*2B or not 2B, that is the pencil*  
Spike Milligan

### **Ripple soles**

I first encountered Shakespeare in my third year at high school. In my only ever role in one of his plays, I was cast as Philostrate, the Master of Revels in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Philostrate employs the Mechanicals to put on their crazy play-within-a-play performance.

The play-within-a-play was something I vaguely cottoned onto between Latin and Science and cricket. When playing this guy Philostrate, I could not remember his name (and even now I had to look him up on *Wikipedia*). Philostrate may be one of Shakespeare's pithy satirical comments on Elizabethan theatre managers, but he was all Greek to me.

The main thing I remember was in rehearsal being dressed in a velvet robe and walking on stage stumbling over my feet and my lines while my English teacher – who directed the play – called out from the auditorium: 'Don't walk like that, Krauth! Walk like an Elizabethan!'

I had no idea what he was talking about. But I blamed it on my ripple-soled desert boots. I figured that in Shakespeare's time they had different sorts of shoes.

### **Jealous of Bottom**

I was jealous of my friend Howard. He got the role of Bottom. I too wanted to be one of the charismatic characters, although I didn't want to be cast as a girl, as other boys had to bear. This was Balgowlah Boys High School in the 1960s. We were famous for our macho sporting achievements, for having representatives in the State cricket and football teams, and little else.

Howard made a great Bottom. His gravelly voice boomed through the auditorium, stupid and loud and lovable all at once, as a fully bully Bottom ought to be.

Howard was dead from late-diagnosed throat cancer before he was twenty.

### **Depositing a midden**

In 1552, Shakespeare's father was fined 12 pence for depositing a midden in the main street of Stratford-upon-Avon.

This is my defining fact about Shakespeare. I love that Will's Dad was taken to court for shitting in the street. One did it in Elizabethan times, it seems – as the animals one kept in one's house did also.

Shakespeare spent a lot of his writing time depositing middens on the establishment, on the culture, on history and the language. By doing so, he brought us significantly towards the present.

In Elizabethan times, women got away with shitting in the street by simply stopping in their wide-hooped skirts, putting on a musing appearance, releasing the item, and then

moving forward. We have difficulty believing this scenario because we wear underwear. Elizabethans went commando. Underwear did not come into fashion until Victorian times. Women Shakespeare knew were free to let loose *in situ*.

### **At high school and at university**

At high school I read *Hamlet*, and I understood almost nothing. Shakespeare's words swirled and confronted me, attacked and derailed me. I was pissed off. I spoke the English language but this English wasn't the one I spoke. 'Shakespeare' wasn't a man or a set of plays or books, but code for schoolboy nightmare experience. I feared Shakespeare. I understood little of what he was getting at. I was just a boy in Australia.

And at university as an undergraduate I read *Macbeth* with the same fear attached. Reading at university, I could not tell the difference between *Hamlet* and *Macbeth*. Both were impenetrable for me. Shakespeare had defeated me at high school and he tried to wipe me out at university.

When later I undertook Honours and Masters projects in Shakespeare's major tragedies, I realised that *Hamlet* and *Macbeth* have the same story. The difference is that one of them starts earlier in the narrative and focuses on a different protagonist viewpoint.

No-one had explained that to me.

And I also realised that you don't read Shakespeare line by line. You read him from capital letter to full stop. His sentences make sense.

### **The Library**

For my Honours dissertation on *King Lear* I needed to consult a journal called *The Library*. I went to the University library and looked it up. It wasn't on the shelves. Instead it was in the University Librarian's office, way downstairs. The University Librarian ran the whole library, and he had all copies of the journal *The Library* on shelves in his office. I had to seek permission to view them there.

I knocked on the University Librarian's door in the bowels of the establishment. I explained my case. He invited me in. I consulted volumes on his shelves while he continued working at his expansive desk. I still remember my sense of reverence and privilege. It was like being in an Egyptian tomb with the Pharaoh alive and carrying on with business.

I found the article I needed and asked if I could borrow the bound volume. The University Librarian looked up from his work and said that I could.

In this way, Shakespeare assisted my entry to the deepest structures of academia.

### **Shakespeare in Papua New Guinea**

Before I finished my Masters degree on Shakespeare, I took my first job as tutor at the University of Papua New Guinea. Having elected to travel so far from civilisation, I arrived in Port Moresby without the faintest idea how to continue with my degree.

Surrounded by exotic greenery, intense humidity, and besser-block architecture, I went straight to the campus library and looked up ‘Shakespeare’ in the catalogue. Amazingly, on the shelves was just one book on the Bard: the one I’d had difficulty procuring at my university back in Australia. I decide then that PNG sorcery was on my side. Magic-men like Shakespeare either look after you, or they don’t.

I finished my Masters thesis on Shakespeare in a tight, rattling air-conditioned office in the tropics. There was nowhere, I thought, further from Stratford-upon-Avon or London’s Globe on Southbank.

I got my Masters degree on Shakespeare by writing in the third world.

### **The Globe**

When I visited the Globe Theatre at Southbank in London and paid for my tour, I was on the lookout for Elizabethan authenticity. Having waited in line for the assigned performance, my group was ushered into the wooden building and entertained by a couple of part-timers on stage, mainly a sword-fight, demonstrating the capabilities of Elizabethan actors and their theatre. I enjoyed being in the reconstructed space of Shakespeare’s world – and felt the closeness of the pit crowd, our farting and sweat and swearing, and raised my eyes to the Gods to see the privileged Elizabethans looking down on us.

But as the group moved forward on the timber stairways up and down between levels, I had cause for concern. There was no reference in our guide’s spiel to the fact that Elizabethan theatres did not have toilets, and patrons relieved themselves on the stairs midway between levels.

The timber stairs at the reconstructed Globe Theatre smell wonderfully like timber. This is not at all authentic.

### **Shakespeare in Barcelona**

I taught Shakespeare’s sonnets to students in Barcelona. My principal concern with my lectures was that students might not understand long words, such as ‘niggarding’, ‘succession’ and ‘posterity’, as the Bard used in the first three of his sonnets, etc.

But I found that Spanish students understood perfectly words we consider ‘long’ which come from Latin roots. Thus they did not have a problem with ‘succession’ and ‘posterity’, as some Australians might. They did, however, have a problem with ‘niggarding’.

Who can blame them? ‘Niggard’ is an English-ish word that few of us understand.

### **Nicol Williamson**

I didn’t understand Shakespeare until I saw Nicol Williamson play Hamlet. My Australian education insisted I read Hamlet’s ‘What a piece of work is man’ speech as if delivered by Sir Laurence Olivier – nobly, admirably, a celebration. But a

celebration of what? British colonialism? British class structure? British limited perception?

Here's how it goes:

What a piece of work is a man, how noble in reason, how infinite in faculties, in form and moving how express and admirable, in action how like an angel, in apprehension how like a god! the beauty of the world, the paragon of animals...

It's a great suggester of heroic humanity. But you get the point only if you read the sentence fully. The rest goes:

...and yet,  
to me, what is this quintessence of dust?

Shakespeare shows here how unimpressed he was with humanity. He also delivers a great lesson about not reading the sentence to its end. He meant the sentence that begins 'What a piece of work is man' to be delivered with the spitting, defeated, abhorrent, fuck-the-lot-of-you-and-thanks-for-nothing attitude that Williamson wonderfully gave it.

Put your mouth into the most sneering, turned down, aggressive, pissed-off attitude you can. Also, think negative and depressed, as if your most loved parent has just been murdered by another family member. Then deliver the line: 'What a piece of work is man...'. It should come out like 'What a [fucking] piece of [fucking useless asshole] work is man...'. As you say it, you are probably thinking: 'What a piece of shit is man...'

You got it. A 12-pence midden in the high street. Go Nicol Williamson. Go John Shakespeare!

### **Shakespeare's world 400 years later**

Having grown from a teenager with Shakespeare, having lugged his writing in my head and in my baggage from Sydney to Newcastle to Canberra to Port Moresby to Barcelona to London, and back again, I can only say I love the guy. He delivers to me the English part of the world I derive from – the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries – in the life I now live. He makes 400 years ago seem like today because I ask: What has changed? In his exquisite analysis of his own time, he lets me see how deeply we relate to our past and our forbears. He makes me perceive how humanity hasn't changed – at least not in the last 400 years.

If there wasn't still a law against it, we *would* shit in the street.

### **Reading the sentence fully**

The idea of *reading the sentence fully* emerged from the intense struggle I had with understanding William Shakespeare when I was a young man and would-be academic. *Reading the full sentence* is something like *living life to the full*. It's also like *don't get*

*hoodwinked by others* and *don't hoodwink yourself*. *The full sentence* is the narrative of your life right up to the end – that's the point at which it will have meaning. And, yes, we are sentenced to this.

I don't know who else said 'Read the sentence fully!' as a wise saw for life, and I won't google those four words in inverted commas for fear of finding that I did not coin them. (I already coined *2B or not 2B, that is the pencil* for this piece, only to check and find a Goon said it first.) Shakespeare knew about reading the sentence fully, but I don't think he put it so lamely, as I lay claim to.

Anyhow, my point is that memoir traces life. And if you write memoir in sentences you are likely to come up with advice to others while writing it. Memoir is not only about how your life went, it's about how others might learn from the mistakes you made and the perceptions you gathered. It's inevitable that in writing memoir you have not yet lived the full sentence, and the full meaning is probably not yet clear.

## Research statement

### *Research background*

Shakespeare's works are difficult to read and academic, educational and publishing/commercial industries are built on this question. Shakespeare is set on high school curricula – for individuals at the very start of their mature reading development – almost, it seems, as an enforced recipe for failure. In writing this short memoir, I trace my encounters with Shakespeare to explore how I moved from confounded schoolboy to research masters graduate (Krauth 1972).

### *Research contribution*

The most important fact I gained from my academic studies was simple: Shakespeare is effectively read by ignoring that he wrote in dramatic verse. Readers today are so distracted by verse breaks as to have severe difficulty with comprehension. Originally, of course, Shakespeare wrote for hearing, not reading. The three most popular advice websites available to students who google the question 'How do you read Shakespeare?' (Mabillard 2000, Ulen 2001-9, wikiHow), while giving much advice about word meanings and unusual words, do not recommend reading Shakespeare in sentences.

### *Research significance*

Although 400 years old, Shakespeare's world is full of marvellous facts useful for understanding ourselves today. Valuably, he focused on the opposites in our natures: the primitive roughs and the supposedly civilised smooths. My creative work recommends the best way to access the most central writer in the English language is: 'Read his sentences fully!'

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