

SHAKESPEARE QUARTERLY

John F. Andrews, *Editor*

May 24, 1984

Mr. Russell Baker
The New York Times Magazine
229 West 43rd Street
New York, New York 10036

Dear Mr. Baker:

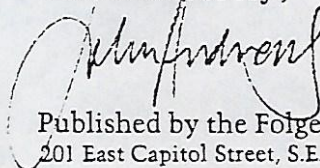
As a long-time admirer of your writing, I was delighted to see your meditations on "The Romeo Riddle" in last Sunday's New York Times Magazine. I'm not at all sure I believe you when you tell your readers that you've been sitting under a dunce cap for five decades, but I welcome the confirmation that Juliet's line is in fact a frequently misunderstood Shakespearean quotation. A couple of others you may have noticed are Hamlet's "to the manner born" (which is almost invariably rendered, or understood to mean, "to the manor born") and, from the same passage, Hamlet's observation that the Danes' proclivity to drunkenness is "a custom / More honored in the breach than the observance" (where the context makes it clear that Hamlet says, not that the pattern is more often breached than observed, but that it would be better if it were breached—precisely the opposite of the implication this phrase normally has in common parlance today). Sweet are the misuses of Shakespeare.

And while I'm commending you for the modesty implicit in your confession of puzzlement about the meaning of "wherefore," I'd also like to compliment you for your courtesy to Dr. Rowse. If you ever have occasion to see a tape of the MacNeil/Lehrer NewsHour program or review a transcript of it, I think you'll find that the only thing Dr. Rowse says in response to my observation that "wherefore" means "why" is that "wherefore" is a modern word. Judging from the way Juliet's line is rendered in The Contemporary Shakespeare—"O Romeo, Romeo! wherefore are you, Romeo?"—the only conclusion I can draw is that for Dr. Rowse, as for millions of others, "wherefore" is a modern word whose meaning is "where." The comma he inserts makes it impossible for it to mean "why" in his version of the speech.

But enough of Dr. Rowse. I have the impression that his "Caliban Shakespeare" has been so thoroughly discredited by now that we needn't worry about his compounding confusion further. And in any event, he's enlivened Shakespeare's 420th birthday and called our attention once more to the impression Shakespeare has left on our language.

Let me close with an invitation. If you're ever in Washington with an hour or two at your disposal, please stop by the Folger for a special tour. It's a wonderful library, and I'd love to share some of its treasures with you. In the meantime, thanks once more for your charming column on "wherefore," and thanks even more for what you do week after week, year after year, to bring a touch of civility to our common life.

Yours sincerely,



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RUSSELL BAKER

June 1, 1984

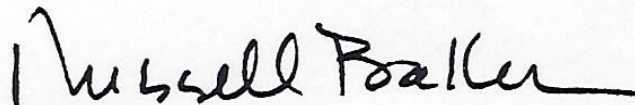
Mr. John F. Andrews, Editor
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Dear Mr. Andrews,

Thanks for your good letter. It doesn't do any good to get heated up about Rowse, I suppose. Since he has solved the problem of the sonnets and the Dark Lady to his utter satisfaction, we should probably be grateful that he hasn't undertaken to solve the riddle of the Sphinx. The comma before "Romeo," of course, makes him look like a complete ass. I'm surprised he didn't fall back on my faithful explanation for such embarrassments by blaming it on the printer.

Thanks too for your invitation. I haven't been in the Folger since I was a school lad in Baltimore. (We had good public schools in those days.) I may take you up on it.

Sincerely,



Russell Baker