

Education

New Fardels for the Bard

No thees or thous in a streamlined Shakespeare

Suppose you wanted to modernize Shakespeare, pull him up by his Elizabethan pantoffles and bring his 37 plays into our more streamlined age. Do not ask why you would want to engage in such a bootless enterprise; just assume it was your task. Well, first you would change the thees, the thous, the thys and the thines. Instead of "O Romeo, Romeo! wherefore art thou Romeo?"—one of the Bard's most famous questions—you would have Juliet ask, "Wherefore art you Romeo?" The archaic verb must go as well, of course, and what you wind up with is an up-to-date "O Romeo, Romeo! wherefore are you Romeo?"

Then there are the words that were current in 16th century England but are now familiar only to scholars. In his "To be or not to be" soliloquy, Hamlet asks himself why he should bear fardels. We would now say burdens and so, probably, would Shakespeare. Thus, in a *Hamlet* for 1984, "Who would fardels bear?" becomes "Who would burdens bear?" See? Anybody who has studied Elizabethan English, who has lots of time to waste and possesses a Falstaff-size ego can do it. Exit anybody. Enter A.L. Rowse, who proclaims himself "the world's leading authority on Shakespeare and his work" and who has made all these changes and more.

A distinguished if eccentric Oxford historian whose more than 40 books do include several about the Bard, Rowse, 80, began a tour of the U.S. last week to plug his *The Contemporary Shakespeare*. Six of the plays, including *Hamlet* and *Romeo and Juliet*, have just been published (University Press of America; paperback, \$2.95 each), and the remaining 31 will appear in installments over the next three years. People are losing interest in Shakespeare because the language has become too remote, Rowse contends, and all he has done is remove the "negative superfluous difficulties." Says he: "I want to keep William Shakespeare alive for the future of the whole wide world. My whole idea is to help the reader without getting him bogged down or buried under a mountain of footnotes."

A laudable attitude, but the reaction so far to Rowse's mighty effort comes close to finding madness in his method. Educators, critics and theater folk overwhelmingly dispute his claim that Shakespeare is losing popularity. On American campuses, at any rate, interest has never been higher. As for the merits of Rowse's specific alterations, John Andrews, director of academic programs for the Folger Shakespeare Library in Washington, says: "He is tone deaf, it seems to me. He has no sense of the music of verse." Al-

though Rowse usually retains the rhythm of Shakespeare's lines, some of his substitutions change it altogether. "We'll have no Cupid hoodwink'd with a scarf," says Benvolio in *Romeo and Juliet*; in Rowse's version he says "blindfolded," which adds an awkward syllable.

Other changes are inconsistent. In the "To be or not to be" soliloquy, fardels is replaced, but the word bodkin remains. Why? "I expect all the ladies to know what a bodkin is," says Rowse in the general introduction to his edition. ("A long pin, or skewer," according to Rowse; "a



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Rowse in Washington during tour

"I expect ladies to know what a bodkin is."

short pointed weapon" like a dagger, according to the appropriate definition in the *Oxford English Dictionary*.)

Andrews calls Rowse's Shakespeare the "Caliban" edition, after the half-man, half-brute in *The Tempest*. Maynard Mack, professor emeritus of English at Yale, tends to agree. Rowse's curious hybrid, Mack says, results in a "language that was never spoken by anyone—not by Shakespeare, not by us. People want the real thing. They don't want deodorized versions of the original. They read Shakespeare precisely because they realize that he belongs to a different world and time, and they want to taste and sense that time." Since last week marked the 420th anniversary of Shakespeare's birth, perhaps the final word (excerpted from *King Lear*) should go to the Bard himself: "Striving to better, oft we mar what's well."

—By Gerald Clarke.

Reported by Melissa August/Washington

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