

Melvin Landsberg
Department of English
University of Kansas
Lawrence, Kansas 66044
Telephone (785) 749-1766

Shakespeare's Montaigne

Of all the fellow students I knew at Columbia University, Robert Allister seemed most likely to make a mark on the theatre. More than a few times he dragged me along obscure streets in lower Manhattan to where he had discovered a converted food market. There a half dozen enthusiasts had improvised a theatre accommodating at most thirty spectators. I don't remember the plays there. They weren't Robert's, they weren't Ibsen's or O'Neill's—they weren't at all memorable to me. But I remember the producer-director there: a short hunchbacked man in formal attire, who kept repeating as prologues or epilogues to the performances: "I love the theatre," each time delivering the word *love* with the volume of an explosion.

Robert, like him, loved the theatre and dramatics. When he described a lecture of a favorite professor to me, he would sometimes give an impromptu dramatic performance, not only with his arms and legs, but also with all his body—flexing his knees and back to accompany certain lines even as he mimicked them verbally.

For his master's essay, Robert wrote a comedy of manners. I read it with disappointment—unjustly I now think—as I had expected to find in it some prophecy of the sparkle in Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Ernest* or George Bernard Shaw's *Major Barbara*.

I lost track of Robert for two or three years after that, but then encountered him again at Columbia. Strangely to me he seemed to have lost his former ebullience; he told me that he had

been out west, teaching English at the University of Nebraska, but he had been unhappy there, and he spoke too of a love affair in New York with a young actress, in whom he had been badly disappointed.

I didn't hear of him again for perhaps twenty-five years. We had never corresponded, not even when he went west. Nor could I find mention of him in the voluminous reports on Columbia alumni, though I knew that he had received his B.A. degree from the college, and his play was on deposit among the M.A. theses at the university library. Remembering his enthusiasm, his stimulating conversation—his near-genius as I thought, I feared that he might be dead. But then a long-retired professor at Columbia whom I encountered by chance—the very one who had supervised Robert's M.A. "thesis"—told me that he had married a wealthy woman and moved with her to Europe. Beyond that the professor knew nothing.

Four years ago in England, at London's Barbican Centre, where I had gone to see a performance of Shakespeare's *Henry IV, Part I*, I caught sight of a grey-haired man of about seventy, in a dark well tailored suit, who was waiting to see the same play. He so reminded me of my onetime friend that I approached and quietly asked him: "Are you Robert Allister?" The man looked at me in puzzlement—I too had aged—and then questioningly uttered my name. My friend—it was indeed he—then asked whether I was free to join him at a café after the performance. There over sandwiches and cups of tea we filled each other in on the past decades.

He had married another woman, Margaret by name. She turned out to be rich, greatly to his astonishment. She always dressed so ordinarily that he had thought her to be just one more impecunious student struggling to become a college teacher. Margaret had so much inherited money, from a great-grandfather's early investments in automotive stocks, that at whatever school she attended she was subsequently invited to become a trustee. Both he and Margaret

being enthralled by British theatre, they had moved to England, where they could get their fill of it.

Until Margaret's sudden death, ten years ago, the two had lived near Regents Park, in London, often enjoying the superb gardens, watching the waterfowl on the lake, and sometimes attending the open-air theatre. On Margaret's whim, they had purchased a large half-timbered town house in Stratford-upon-Avon, constructed in Tudor times, and had restored it. Would I be in England for a while, Robert asked? If so, I could be his guest there for a few days. He would be grateful for my company, for he had been immensely depressed since his wife's death.

One week later I visited him in Stratford. On the first night he took me to dinner at the Box Tree Restaurant, right in the Royal Shakespeare Theatre. But we did not attend a performance, preferring to go to his house and talk about our days in New York and bring each other further up to date on our lives.

"Margaret and I spent a lot of time, and money I must say, restoring and renovating this house," he told me. "It became our avocation, almost our vocation. Structurally it's now as sound as when it was built, so our architects say. But this led to a discovery that was the most dramatic event, for better or worse, in our lives.

"Poking around the ceiling in one of the upstairs rooms, we found a sizable crevice in the wall, one so unnoticeable from below that it might have been purposely disguised. Margaret probed about within it and pulled out a package in a sturdy cloth wrapper. On opening it we found three handwritten, sewn volumes. Surprisingly the writing was legible, to us at least, for we had both worked with Renaissance English manuscripts at Columbia.

To come to the point briefly, we found a collection of essays; in fact, the first page of volume one bore the title "Essais" and a note that they were for the author's eyes only and an

injunction that if found after the author's death they were to be destroyed unread. There was no name on the page.

By then it was late at night, and Margaret and he were hardly able to keep their eyes open. They rewrapped the manuscript volumes and he climbed a short ladder and redeposited them in the crevice. After breakfast the next morning, they hastened back to the room and took them down.

Robert seemed to me almost in a trance as he enacted from memory some of the discussion between them.

"I feel guilty reading the essays," Margaret said. "The author must have died unexpectedly and never gotten back to them."

"The statute of limitations has expired by now. Let's look at them some more."

"All right, have your way. But I feel guilty just the same."

As they read further, Robert told me, Margaret and he both realized that the author was superbly gifted. "These essays remind me of Shakespeare's plays," Margaret said. "The author uses his words so strikingly and compellingly. Let's put them aside please, Robert. I feel as though we are violating a trust."

"The writer wanted privacy, yes, but how can that matter after four hundred years?"

"Well you're logical about that," Margaret admitted. "Let's go on reading them. This may be the most fascinating event in my life."

"What about our falling in love with each other, Margaret?"

"Let's not compare apples with oranges, Robert."

Several of the titles at the heads of the essays seemed familiar, Robert told me: "Of Friendship," "Of Solitude," "Of Vanity," "Of Experience." "Right out of Montaigne," Margaret

exclaimed. But most of the titles were different, among them “Of Players,” “Of Sea Voyages,” “Of England,” “Of Puritans,” “Of Recusancy.”

After they had read in the manuscripts for over four days, Robert told me, Margaret shrieked: “Eureka!” . . . “Tell me if I’m crazy,” she said. “I’ve suspected this, but I came to the conclusion only today, early in the morning, when my thinking and imagination are best. The writer has to be Shakespeare. We have his signatures on his will, and we can compare the handwritings. We know that Montaigne retired from active life so that he could write down his thoughts and shape a verbal portrait of himself. There has always been a mystery about why Shakespeare retired. It’s almost certain that he read Montaigne—he put a passage from Montaigne’s essay “Of Cannibals” into *The Tempest*. Probably Shakespeare retired, near the height of his achievement as a playwright, because he was so impressed by Montaigne’s work that he too wanted to put his ideas into essay form and work out a portrait of himself. These essays we’ve found seem worthy of the plays.”

“But how would these volumes have gotten into the wall of someone else’s house?”

“That’s something we don’t know, Robert. Probably he came here to be able to think without being interrupted by his family, friends, and neighbors. Montaigne had a separate tower in his castle and used to go there to think and write.”

“Why should he have been worried about his essays being disclosed?”

“Why do you think he might have been worried, Robert?”

“All right, Margaret, throw the question back at me. . . . He probably was writing only for himself. He lived in an era when people were being imprisoned or beheaded for recusancy and treason. Montaigne had been a nobleman with influential friends to protect him, but Shakespeare was a mere commoner.”

“Besides,” Margaret added, “Shakespeare had his family and friends to protect.”

“But he was fascinated by Montaigne’s achievement—one great genius experiencing the ‘shock of recognition’ of another—and wanted in turn to explore and test and portray himself. That’s it in a nutshell, isn’t it, Margaret?”

“Yes, and because I now believe that our author was Shakespeare, who is so much alive to both of us, I feel even worse about violating his injunction. It reminds me of the one on Shakespeare’s tomb:

Good friend, for Jesus’ sake forbear
To dig the dust enclosed here.
Blest be the man who spares these stones
And curst be he that moves my bones.

“Do you still have the manuscripts that Margaret found?” I asked Robert.

“Before she died we compared the handwriting of the essays with the handwriting of Shakespeare’s signatures in his will. Of course, we had to use photographs of these signatures, but they were sharp ones, and we had magnifying glasses. There was little to work on in the signatures. Still, they and the essays could have been written by the same person, we concluded. Then Margaret and I returned the packet to its nook in the wall. Since that time it has remained there unopened.”

“Did you learn much about Shakespeare’s life from reading in the essays?”

“Well, I can divulge this much to you: they satisfied me that it was the author of these manuscripts—not Francis Bacon or the Earl of Oxford—who wrote Shakespeare’s plays.”

“Are you certain that you own the manuscripts?”

“Yes, I am. Margaret’s entire estate passed to me on her death. Our solicitor told me that everything in the house now belonged to me. If there were art works, though, there might be complications about taking them out of the country.”

“So what are you going to do?”

“God forgive me, I am going to destroy the manuscripts. I won’t be at peace with Margaret’s memory if I don’t.”

“God may forgive you, but a thousand Shakespeare scholars and countless other literati won’t if they hear about it. Why did you tell me about this, Robert?”

His voice grew tremulous. “It must be to get some kind of absolution.”

I could not sleep that night. The next morning as I walked downstairs to join Robert for breakfast, I still did not know what more to tell him.

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Letter to a Friend who Posed the Following Questions:

1. *Do you think that anyone in Margaret or Robert's position would actually destroy those manuscripts?*
2. *Do you think they would be right to do so?*
3. *Why would anyone construct a verbal portrait of himself unless he wanted others to have it?*

Thank you for your comments on "Shakespeare's Montaigne." Your questions are most intelligent and to the point, and leave me delighted that the story invited them.

In writing the story, I meant the ethical problem to be central: how much should the express desire of the deceased determine Margaret and Robert Allister's decisions?

Scholars fret that we know so little about Shakespeare. There should be no similar complaint from Montaigne scholars, for he told a huge amount about himself. I got the idea of bringing these two facts together in a story.

Stories write themselves to some extent and at times turn the writer into an amanuensis. It follows that an author isn't necessarily the best commentator on what he has written.

I reflected after the story was finished that Margaret had not destroyed the manuscripts—only stopped reading them and said that she didn't feel right about violating Shakespeare's injunctions. Margaret died ten years before Robert tells the story, and he has still not destroyed the manuscripts, only not read further, and has left them in their nook in the wall. Now an aging

man, he tells the narrator: “I am going to destroy the manuscripts. I won’t be at peace with Margaret’s memory if I don’t.”

The narrator and Robert were friends at Columbia University, and the narrator still cares about him. As Robert says that he has been immensely depressed for ten years, the narrator may link some of his strong depression to Robert’s feeling of guilt over letting the manuscripts survive. But the narrator knows that the prospect of destroying them also depresses Robert greatly. When Robert says that he has told the narrator about Shakespeare’s manuscript “to get some kind of absolution,” the narrator feels that much responsibility has fallen on him. He has warned Robert that large numbers of people won’t forgive him if they hear about his destroying the essays. Now, perhaps for the sake of Robert’s mental health, he justifies the course that Robert has announced to him. The narrator never says what he himself would do, but he obviously endorses as ethical the decision to destroy the manuscripts.

You ask why Shakespeare would have written the essays if he did not intend to publish them. We don’t know. Writing can be an act of self-discovery. It certainly was for Montaigne. Perhaps Shakespeare was responding to the challenge of a major genre so impressively developed by Montaigne; he was a prosperous man when he retired and did not need to write for money.

Perhaps the political situation in England was unstable, and he lost nerve about publishing the essays. Again, as the narrator suggests, Shakespeare may not have been satisfied with the essays yet. Virgil asked that the manuscript of his unfinished *Aeneid* be destroyed, but the Roman emperor Augustus countermanded his request, and assigned other poets to finish it.

Incidentally, I wrote the story concentrating on plot and the ethical question, not character. Then I realized that Margaret was a vivid and interesting character to me—more so

than the later Robert or the narrator. Maybe a couple of years of teaching freshman English in Nebraska had caused Robert to fizzle out. Does he subsequently destroy the manuscripts? He says no more to anyone about them.