

REMINISCENCES

Tagore at Oxford

This article by Shahid Suhrawardy, a scholar and diplomat, first appeared in the Calcutta Municipal Gazette in 1941. Star Literature reproduces it in the interest of its readers. This is the third and final part.

SHAHID SUHRAWARDY

I have seen him later once in Paris after a lively conversation in a company of which he was the very soul, for he could be humorous, playful, almost childlike, chill into a beautiful stone mel- lowed with age, making me think of what Hammurabi would have looked like had that great Babylonian law giver ever had the chance of being modeled by a Grecian master. On that occasion I was maliciously amused to see the consternation of the charming and exuberant Comtesse de Noailles, who was sponsoring the exhibition of the Poet's paintings in Paris and was treating him before all the assembled artists and writers as her special preserve.

I am not sure who was the president of the Majlis that year whether it was Shaheed (the writer's younger brother H.S. Suhrawardy) or Kiran Sankar Roy, but he was of short stature, for I remember how the Poet in his flowing robes loomed large above him as he alighted from the train at Oxford station. Beside the entire Indian colony on the platform there were a number of English people headed by Estlin Carpenter, vigorous and bearded, who was to be the Poet's host. The arrangement was that our visitor was to dine that night with the committee of the Majlis at the Randolph Hotel, breakfast in my rooms the next morning, deliver his address at Manchester College in the early afternoon and then attend the large reception the Majlis was giving him at a hired hall in the city. The whole of that morning we were busy fixing up details, the most important of which to us was to arrange to garland the Poet when he arrived by train. We gave, interrupting one another, instructions to the best florist at Oxford as to what kind of garland one uses on such occasions in India, carefully suppressing the fact of the sharpwire, which has lacerated the breast of many a distinguished Indian, and we were promised that a suitable object would be delivered at the station in time. Our horror can be imagined when the president turning to the florist's assistant, who had arrived breathless just at that very moment, unpacked the thing from tissue paper and held aloft in the air before the Poet's bowed head a funeral wreath, stiff in wireframe, decked with wide-staring white flowers.

One could not find anywhere a happier set of young men as during that evening in a private room at the Randolph Hotel. The Poet was in great form. He was talking to us all the time, commenting on the changes that had taken place since his last visits to Europe, he spoke of India, now solemnly and now playfully (we were too intense about India to enjoy that particular mood of his) and then listened with comprehending indulgence to our wild talks, in which we attempted to outshine one another. He ate little of the food, the menu of which I had prepared after careful thought, and I was a little glad to see how he banished one after another those culinary inanities which go under the name of vegetarian dishes in England. Rabindranath was a great connoisseur of the fine things of life, and also understood good food. In fact, he was not of

those, who glorify their failing digestion with reference to the high ideals of our traditional asceticism. I have always received encouragement at his hands for my frivolous advocacy of gastronomy. I remember him once at Santiniketan as he sat reclining on a low arm-chair and listened with smiling attention to a long confession of mine as a glutton in many lands. He was so interested that I am told it was one of those rare occasions when he did not order the meeting to be interrupted for the sake of the evening prayer, which it is customary to offer there.

The Poet came a little late to breakfast to my place the next morning as he had lost his way in Christ Church meadows and was full of the enchantment of Oxford. His visit had taken place during the summer term when Oxford was in her most beautiful month with laburnums hanging down in full bloom and the ivies on the old walls of colleges a mass of scarlet flame. It was a delight going round with him down the narrow lanes and along the broad stone thorough-fares and sharing in his joy at the sight of so much squandered loveliness. Only we were never alone as his unusual appearance attracted a large crowd that followed us about. That evening my landlady's little daughter told me she had seen me in the streets with Father Christmas. She did not know what treasures he had brought into our lives that year. Before luncheon, propped up on bright cushions, he sat on a punt, as we took him down that part of the river where it narrows under overhanging branches. He sat stone-still all the while in his shining garments of white and in the noon-haze I fancied to myself Orpheus, sculpted on the prow of some Hellenic boat, mirrored in the waters of the Ionian seas.

One thing I noticed that afternoon in the vast hall of Manchester College, cram-full with a brilliant and awe-inspired crowd of professors, dons and undergraduates, that the Poet's voice was ill-suited to large audiences. When he first spoke to me, I was struck by a certain discrepancy between his appearance, on which nature had showered her most exquisite gifts of beauty and dignity, and his voice, which did not seem to belong to his magnificent exterior. In itself the voice was melodious and expressive but it might have belonged to anyone else. It possessed a fine timbre but lacked in tonality. I have always wanted to ask members of his household whether a voice like his was capable of being raised in discussion or reprimand. I suspect, where he ever moved to anger, which I doubt, he would probably employ the subtler instruments of irony and humorous innuendo. I hope the newly-baked fanatics of the Poet will not accuse me of disrespect towards him for these observations of mine. That would be very unfair because my love and reverence for him, since I first met him, has bordered on adoration. I am trying with difficulty to delve into my memory and I am faithfully recording my first reactions to him before more frequent contacts made me get used to his ways.

I do not remember either the subject or the

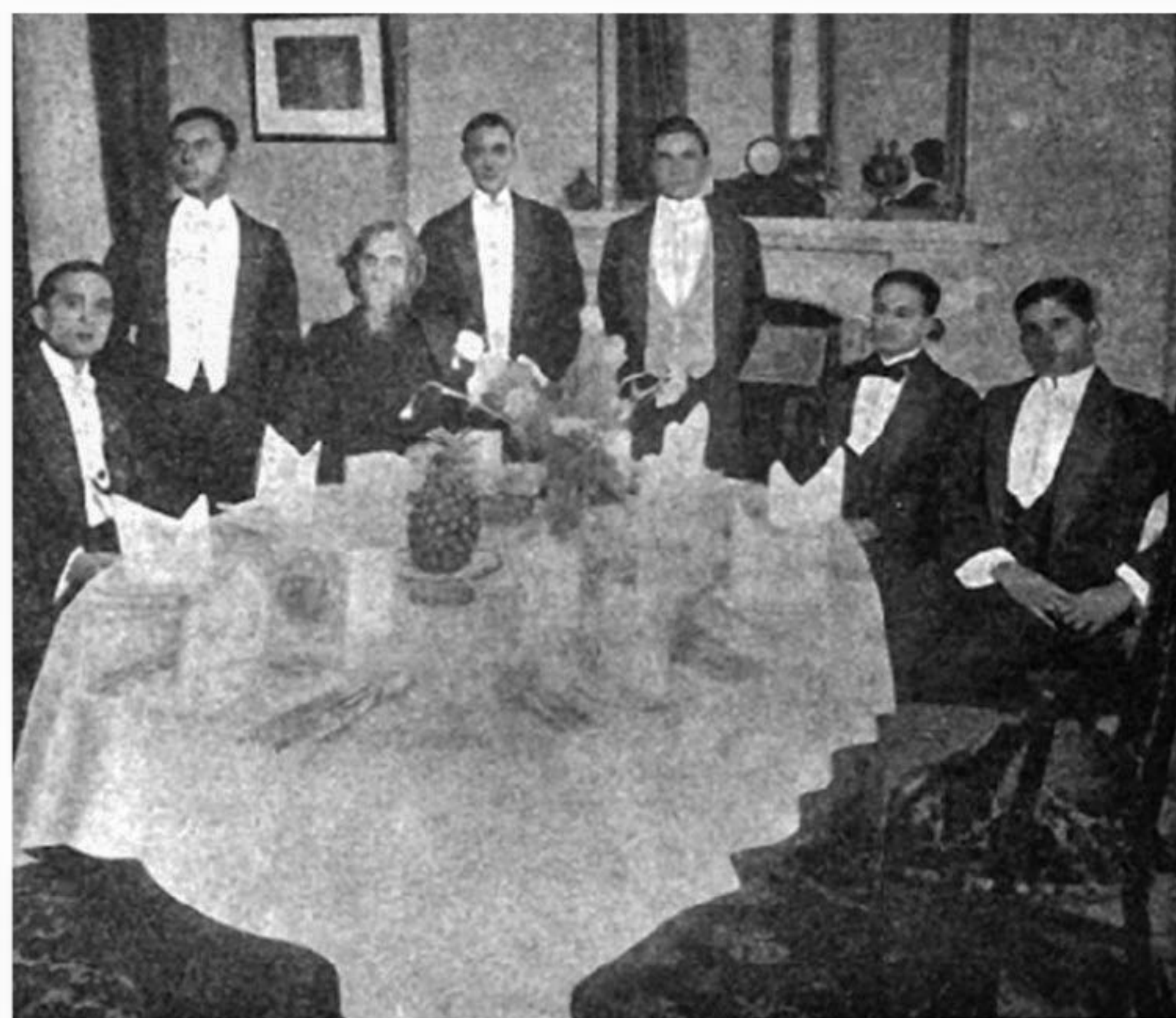


Photo: Gillman, Oxford

Dinner given at Randolph Hotel by the Bengali students at Oxford, May 23, 1913.

Left to Right: Shaheed Suhrawardy, Kiran Sankar Roy, Nobel Laureate Poet Tagore, S.K. Gupta, Shahid Suhrawardy, Surendra Kumar Sen and Basania Kumar Mullick

Photo restoration: Bangladesh Forum for Heritage Studies

gist of the Poet's lecture; I was too much under the influence of his enchanting personality, as he sat slightly-bowed on his high chair reading out from a manuscript, detached and patriarchal, to listen to his words. My eyes have always given me greater pleasure than my ear. I know that evening I felt serenely peaceful as I hurried along after the meeting to catch up the fast-striding figure of Robert Bridges, who had come all rigged up in his full academic robes to do honour to the Indian poet, and walked part of the way with him. Bridges did not speak, he evidently did not wish to share his impressions with me. He was a curious old man, garrulous on occasions and then suddenly silent. When parting from me he asked me in that kindly curt tone, which was so characteristic of him, to come to tea the next afternoon when he had invited Tagore to his house.

Robert Bridges lived in a large house on a hill six miles from Oxford. In those days the road to it was long and difficult and to come to him one had to traverse meadows, pass by farmsteads and then climb a wood within which ensconced lay his house. This gave to each visit to him the flavour of a pilgrimage. During his lifetime he

had already become legendary. There were plenty of stories about his whimsicality and crankiness and though he was the kindest of men, as some of us Indians had occasion to know, he had a reputation for being abrupt and rude. Of all men I have met he acted up to the injunction of Christ to his Apostles to be wise as serpents and harmless as doves. He would be often seen, like some large bird, ranging the hillside with his broad-brimmed hat closely set over his head and his loose black cloak flapping behind him. He rarely came down to Oxford, and when he did, people would stand about watching his tall figure slouching from the larger roads to the quiet lanes. He sometimes stood for hours before a bookstall in the street, reading a book he had picked up unmindful of the crowd behind him. He and Rabindranath Tagore were the two most beautiful old men I have ever seen. And yet I thought that afternoon when I saw them together how different they were in the quality of their attractiveness. There was nothing of the sage, rather of an overgrown schoolboy, about Bridges. With his splendid face marked accurately with wrinkles, like a perfect autumn leaf, his healthy complex-

ion and spare figure he looked as one who had always lived the outdoor life in touch with fields and animals. There was manly energy in his large frame and even in his long unkempt hair. In other ways too there could be no greater contrasts than he and Tagore and I thought that there in that house for once, physically, the East had met the West. For no poet in England was so indigenous as Bridges, so un-exotic, so classically free from the touch of the Orient. And Tagore in my eyes represented the melody, the abundance, the grace of the East; to him Beauty came as she flowed down streams or awoke on the sprays of the breeze-tossed corn; she came to him naturally as the cherished one to her lover. Whereas to Bridges she was a burden; with him there was a constant struggle to reduce the conflict between language and mood to the counterpoints of harmony, to force Beauty into the fierce shackles of tone and rhythm. I know this is not saying all. There is probably no deep difference after all between the East and the West, but it is true that each moulds in its own manner human passions and temperaments. Anyway, it is good that Beauty has many moods, she yields to him who fights for her as to him who succumbs to her.

I have seen Rabindranath Tagore at Chilswell, Bridges, home, twice, once then and about a dozen of years later. I cannot quite disengage in my memory the incidents of the two occasions. I remember, however, one evening when the two sat together on a jutting hillock in the corner of the garden, which commands a superb view of Oxford. In fact, in 1914, Bridges had once said to me that were Germans ever to occupy his house, what a wonderful emplacement that hillock would afford to artillery reared to destroy completely with one shattering shot the eternal beauty of Oxford. For it is true that from the bench on which the two poets sat all the ugly accretions of modern Oxford were hidden by rolling uplands and one could only see the proud towers and spires against the sunset. Such must have been the vision of the lovely city that first burst upon the sight of Erasmus as he trudged along the road from his distant home to find in her the solace of faith tempered with reason. Tagore had come over in a hansom-cab and I was going back to Oxford on foot. After he had left, Bridges excitedly spoke how that evening, more than he could from his works, he had come to understand Tagore's wise spirit. Then turning brusquely he added: Tagore is an extraordinarily good-looking fellow. There is something Assyrian, Old Asiatic. Do you think he puts gold in his beard? When I suggested that it was the colour of the sunset that had been playing on their faces, he broke into a loud schoolboy laughter and said: You cannot know the vanity of poets. And striding to the mirror on the wall of his vast study he carefully combed with his fingers his hair and beard tousled by the wind.

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Courtesy: Mahboob Alam
Former Ambassador and member,
The Reading Circle

ESSAY

Love in Shakespeare

MD. SHAFIQUIL ISLAM

William Shakespeare's glorious pastoral comedy *As You Like It* favours its notoriously melancholy character Jaques with this famous and most frequently quoted soliloquy, "All the world's a stage and all the men and women merely players". It sketches seven stages of a man's life --- infant, school-boy, lover, soldier, justice, pantaloon and second childhood 'sans teeth, sans eyes, sans taste, sans everything' (*As You Like It*, Jaques, Act II, Scene VII, lines 139-166). This essay deals with the most lovey-dovey, passionate, colourful and mysterious role of a human being as the lover.

On the third stage of the "Seven ages of man" delineated in *As You Like It*, he becomes a lover, a little remorseful and sad because he is not happy with anything. He likes to sing or listen to songs and he goes out for cultural activities. "And then the lover / Sighing like furnace, with a woeful ballad / Made to his mistress' eyebrow," Jaques underpins the very role that becomes a lover.

Should there be any more discourse on love to vex those that love? Shakespeare loved and married Anne Hathaway, who was eight years older than him. The modern film *Shakespeare in Love*, which entangles him with the heroines of his plays, is interesting but has nothing to do with Will's own life. Shakespeare draws wonderful lovers being in love, defines love from all angles, notes different expressions of love and depicts passionate love being cooled.

Shakespeare has portrayed love from all angles, encompassing all ages, myths and cultures. He has looked at love from the traditional lovers' point of view without being oblivious of it, criticizing it from the viewpoint of a father or a sage. Challenged by the father or society itself, a lover's usual definition of love should be "Love looks not with the eyes, but with the mind / And therefore is winged Cupid painted blind" (*A Midsummer Night's Dream* 1.1.234-235). Later in the same play

Lysander tells Hermia, "The course of true love never did run smooth."

Lovers have their own code of life not bound by space and time. Gratiano succinctly defines this to Salerio in *The Merchant of Venice*, "Lovers ever run before the clock" quite unaware of what others think of them as people committing mistakes. Jessica is all too clear about it in her dialogue to Lorenzo, "Love is blind, and lovers cannot see / The pretty follies that themselves commit". So "To be wise and love / Exceeds man's might; that dwells with gods above."

Shakespeare makes Rosalind ask Celia this universal question that every youth faces at least once in life, "What think you of falling in love?" And later she sheds light on how her sister and Orlando's brother fell in love in *As You Like It*, "For your brother and my sister no sooner met, but they looked; no sooner looked but they loved, but they sighed; no sooner sighed, but they asked one another the reason, no sooner knew the reason, but they sought the remedy."

Simply put, the inner meaning of this as stated above in Will's own words while Prospero observes the exchange between Ferdinand and Miranda, "At the first sight / they have changed eyes." Or when Cressida tells Troilus, "I was own..... / With the first glance."

Lovers live in a world of their own beyond the tantrums of day to day life and feel that heaven is their final abode. Who but Cleopatra can visualize such an eternal state of bliss except in the company of Antony, "Eternity was in our lips and eyes / Bliss in our brows' bent; none our parts so poor / But was a race of heaven".

Does love have any border or does it transcend all continental boundaries to merge the East with the West, uniting Cleopatra with Antony? *Antony and Cleopatra* is the most famous love tragedy of all time. Told that love is without any boundary, Cleopatra insists on installing a boundary to her love with Antony.



Here is a love-defining dialogue in which Cleopatra says "I'll set a bourn how far to be beloved." Antony's witty reply, "Then must thou needs find out new heaven, new earth," giving rise to Joyce Carol Oates's fiction a sweet name *New Heaven, New Earth*.

Which one of these is true love -- showing that one loves another too much or loving too much but not showing it all? The classic dilemma regarding the definition of true love will always remain unresolved for many more love stories to be written and scenes enacted in ages still sleeping in the womb of time. Here is a classic dilemma in the following dialogue about it in its finest and complete form:
Julia They do not love that do not show their love.
Lucetta O, they love least that let men know their love.

Shakespeare is so resourceful that a lover will love to quote him with heart's content and feel fully satisfied that he could bespeak his

heart fully. Here Polonius is reading a letter from Hamlet to Ophelia, "Doubt thou the stars are fire / Doubt that the sun doth move / Doubt truth to be a liar / But never doubt I love." Hamlet becomes sentimental in the grave scene of Ophelia and shouts out, "I loved Ophelia, forty thousand brothers could not with all their quantity of love make up my sum."

Love is expressed here in the most simple terms without any exaggeration or hyperbole of the above when the Duke says to Isabella, "What's mine is yours, and what's yours is mine." Goneril is not true to her heart but the expression if sincere could be a unique example of true love, "I do love you dearer than: eyesight, space and liberty."

Shakespeare's observations on love are some of the most beautiful and proverbial in the English language. Expressions like 'hearts of gold', 'honey of thy breath', 'sweet and honeyed sentences,' 'you alone are you' surpass any proverb for their depth and sweetness.

Romeo and Juliet is the timeless story of doomed love that has fascinated and delighted readers for centuries. Juliet was only 13 or exactly two weeks away from her fourteenth birthday when Romeo fell in love with her at first sight and Juliet required. She explains philosophically to her nurse, "My only love sprung from my only hate / Too early seen unknown, and known too late." Romeo aptly sums up the typical lovers' psyche, "Heaven is here where Juliet lives."

Romeo brings out the right condition of love, as how it begins with sighs for the would-be-beloved, develops through 'comfort and despair' and ends in sorrow, "Love is a smoke made with the fume of sighs / Being purged, a fire sparking in lovers' eyes / Being vexed, a sea nourished with lovers' tears / What is it else? A madness most discreet / A choking gall, and a preserving sweet." He also unwittingly foresees the sea of pangs leading to their self-immolation, "Is love a tender

thing? It is too rough / Too rude, too boisterous, and it pricks like thorn."

The sonnets are the repository of love with all the connotations and variety to soothe the hearts of the lovers. Sonnet 116 defines typical love emboldened by loyalty and steadfastness in any situation, "Let me not to the marriage of true minds / Admit impediments. Love is not love / which alters when it alteration finds / Or bends with the remover to remove / O no, it is an ever-fixed mark / That looks on tempests and is never shaken / It is the star to every wandering bark." In other words, love is tantamount to worship when Shakespeare urges his Dark Lady in Sonnet 105, "Let not my love be called idolatry."

How long can lovers sustain being in love? Does it not abate or get cooled too? Hamlet tells Ophelia, "I did love you once." Claudius, while referring to love says, "Time qualifies the spark and fire of it." Sir Andrew Aguecheek in a remorseful note recalls his love, "I was adored once too."

Love is not always applauded in Shakespeare as he looks at it very objectively. "Love is merely a madness." Not only that, Shakespeare has a character say "Love is a familiar; Love is a devil. There is no evil angel but love."

Shakespeare wrote comedies like *Twelfth Night*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *The Taming of the Shrew* and *The Tempest* having unique plots built on love on the one hand and with equal virtuosity composed, on the other, great love tragedies like *Romeo and Juliet* as well as *Antony and Cleopatra*. Men and women of all ages love to enjoy ingeniously woven love stories by Shakespeare because none, not even the wisest sage, can resist the temptation of love. To conclude in this vein, here are two lines from Sonnet 141, "My five wits, nor my five senses, can / Dissuade one foolish heart from serving thee."

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