

# CROSS CURRENT

PERRY NODELMAN

## *Is 'beauty' in the eye of the politically correct?*

**A**CCORDING to Ray Conlogue in a recent Cross Current, the greatness of Shakespeare is being desecrated by "politically correct" university professors — dangerous anarchists like myself "who believe that beautiful literature is ugly because its authors were male and lived in the wrong century." Unfortunately, Conlogue's own rhetoric about the "beauty" of Shakespeare is even more politically correct than the attitudes he attacks.

Of course, Conlogue would say it isn't political at all. But talking about the "beauty" of literature is just a sneaky way of dismissing the politics in it. I know, because I used to do it myself.

Oh sure, I used to say, on the surface it seems that *The Tempest* is a racist play: Shakespeare assumes that Caliban is a depraved monster simply because he looks different and has different values than the Europeans who have stolen his island from him. But on what we literature people used to call "another level," Caliban is actually a symbol for perverse savagery, as opposed to civilized order, maybe. I thought the fact that the order was represented by a white European male who pushes everybody around was merely superficial; as irrelevant as the fact that I, the person reading this way, was myself white and male and even sort of European.

But it's not so easy to dismiss the significance of the physical persons who supposedly represent more abstract ideas when one's own physical person is not in fact different from theirs. It's not so easy for blacks — or for women or non-Europeans — to do a sort of reading which requires them to assert that people like themselves represent the essence of stupidity or evil. It's so difficult that many refuse to do it.

Conlogue claims that the left wing he was part of 20 years ago fought "to bring the disenfranchised into the literary community, to have black professors teaching Shakespeare." To a depressingly small degree, that fight has been won. What annoys Conlogue is that these uppity folks are so ungrateful that they refuse to read the way he does — with a focus on "beauty" which suppresses the way in which texts often give status to the values and prejudices of whites, males and Europeans as normal and correct.

**A**s a Jewish undergraduate in an English department with sincere claims to tolerance and objectivity, I knew I had to suppress my uneasy feeling that the beautiful truths my professors found in writers like Shakespeare sounded a lot like their own Christian beliefs. I'm glad that my new non-white, non-male, non-European colleagues have taught me to acknowledge suspicions like that and think about their implications. I'm glad the students I now teach in the same university don't have to suppress their own similar suspicions in order to get through the courses I teach, that we can actually talk about it.

And we do talk about it, in regard to Shakespeare, and also in regard to all sorts of other fascinating writing of the sort Conlogue arrogantly dismisses as "testimonials written by oppressed Guatemalan women." We talk about it because we have noticed it, and feel no obligation to hoist ourselves up to some imaginary other level where the beauty supposedly exists and where our own real responses to what we read are insignificant. We talk about it because we know that focusing attention on "beauty" does, unwittingly or not, confirm the authority of the values that inevitably underlie the "beauty" — often values that continue to oppress vast numbers of our fellow humans, and therefore ourselves.

Calling Shakespeare "beautiful" is merely an unscrupulous way of reinforcing a particular faction's power by denying that it is factional; and as Conlogue says himself, "the upshot, as in most such contestations, is that the most unscrupulous wins." That those of us who, supposedly, desecrate Shakespeare by actually paying attention to what he wrote are the most unscrupulous ones; that we are distressingly belligerent in pursuit of our political goals, while he himself is above politics, interested only in "beauty" and therefore without political motivation. It seems far more unscrupulous to me that a supposed lack of political motivation confirms a right to tell women, blacks, Jews and other members of oppressed minorities what they should think and how they should teach.

Furthermore, Conlogue believes that what they should think is just what he thinks himself: the traditional perceptions of white, European males. Unfortunately, outside of a few university classrooms, that sort of belligerent self-interest is still just about as "politically correct" as it's possible to be.

*Perry Nodelman teaches in the English Department at the University Of Winnipeg.*