Seger Notes #3: SHAKESPEARE IN LOVE

Screenplay by Marc Norman and Tom Stoppard

Directed by John Madden

Academy Award, Best Original Screenplay and Best Picture

Shakespeare in Love is probably my favorite film of all time. I come out of theater; I took classes in Shakespeare as an undergraduate and then took a graduate course in Shakespeare at Northwestern University, where I received my M.A. in drama. I took another Shakespeare class from the viewpoint of theology when I was in seminary. And in 2015 I did a two-week course at Cambridge University, studying Shakespeare for five to six hours a day.

Shakespeare in Love is multilayered. If a viewer doesn't find a connection with one layer, chances are they'll connect with another layer. One of the primary layers is the exploration of the writer's process, which is really an exploration of the creative process.

The film makes Shakespeare human, because he is just like us. Like Will, what we want to accomplish creatively doesn't come easily. Like Will, we need a Muse. We meet objections from those who want to make us ordinary. We try to inspire through our writing, but sometimes we lack inspiration ourselves. By tuning in to these universal struggles of creativity, the writers of *Shakespeare in Love* were able to make somebody who lived long ago, who seems so much greater than us, relevant to our own creative lives.

Much of the humor in the film comes from the idiosyncratic way in which ideas wend their way into our creations. The creative process builds on ideas from our own experience, ideas that spring from discussions with others, and ideas that are stolen from somewhere else. Sometimes we get ideas by brainstorming, stretching ourselves

to think of unique solutions. Sometimes we get ideas by looking at art by other people and thinking how we might have done it. Sometimes an idea simmers for a long time before we see its shape. Sometimes we see the creative process starting out in one place and ending up in another.

The script of *Shakespeare in Love* is filled with observations of these processes, suggesting the leaps by which Shakespeare's ideas could have developed. Will tells Henslowe, the manager of the theatre, that he still owes him for the play *One Gentleman of Verona*—a play that, of course, became *Two Gentlemen of Verona*. When Will goes to the palace of Whitehall as Richard Burbage and his company are preparing for a performance of *Two Gentlemen of Verona*, comedian Will Kempe finds a skull in a prop box and holds it up—an action which does not go unnoticed by Will, who will use it several years later in *Hamlet*.

Like many writers, Will has his own writing ritual, designed to spur the Muse: "he spins round once in a circle, rubs his hands together, spits on the floor. Then he sits down, picks up his pen, and stares in front of him" (p. 20). He has a special mug by his desk, given to him by the folks at Stratford-upon-Avon. Writing is a constant process of searching for and sometimes finding the Muse, and letting her inspire us. Screenwriters Norman and Stoppard express the relationship between our own contemporary understanding of art and the artistic process, and the process that Will must have gone through as a young man starting in the Elizabethan theatre.

Where is the play? "It's all locked safe in here," says Will, tapping his forehead. Like many writers, Will knows that the play already exists; he just has to get it down on paper. Of course, there are little problems: the story isn't worked out, he thinks it's a comedy and it becomes a tragedy, and the Muse doesn't seem to be around to help him. But no matter. The search for the Muse is explored for much of Act One. Will has his psychoanalyst to help him—Dr. Moth—who is many things to many people: a mystic, an astrologer, a holder of numerous degrees hanging on his wall, a dispenser of pills and potions. Dr. Moth conducts his sessions with Will on the couch, and times his sessions with an hourglass—giving Will the full hour, rather than the fifty-minute hour of most modern therapists. Just like a modern therapist, Dr. Moth listens and responds with the famous line: "interesting . . . most interesting" (p. 10).

When Will feels a scene coming on, he runs to his room to write. And, when it comes, the writing is furious and fast, ending with excitement at his own cleverness. "Scene One! By God, I'm good!" And yet, doubts come back. Spurned by the woman he thought was his muse, Rosaline, he throws all the pages into the fire. How easily all our work comes to naught!

Adding the Insider Jokes

Shakespeare in Love abounds with insider jokes about the film industry, particularly the Hollywood film industry with its profit motive, its manipulations, its competition. The play begins with Henslowe, "a businessman with a cash flow problem" (p. 1), who believes he can solve his financial problems and escape the clutches of the moneylender Fennyman by producing Will's new play, *Romeo and Ethel the Pirate's Daughter*, which Henslowe sees as a "can't miss" commercial success. Like modern-day producers who believe that the presence of a star, a good chase sequence, and a few special effects add up to a winning formula, Henslowe has the winning formula figured out for the Elizabethan theatre. It's a comedy, a crowd-pleaser, with all the elements of the most popular entertainments of the day: "mistaken identities, a shipwreck, a pirate king, a bit with a dog, and love triumphant" (p. 3).

In the Hollywood film industry, competition abounds, with continual discussions and arguments about who is better than whom, or who is considered the "flavor of the month" or the "writer of the year." The savvy writers of *Shakespeare in Love* draw on this practice by showing how Will is often embarrassed and discouraged by the constant comparisons of his work to that of Christopher Marlowe, who was considered to be the great writer of his age. Fennyman's references to Marlowe continue to demoralize Will: "It was mighty writing. There is no one like Marlowe" (p. 53). In Elizabethan London, as in contemporary Hollywood, it seems like everybody is a writer. When the Boatman takes Will across the river, he reaches for his own manuscript and says, "Strangely enough, I'm a bit of a writer myself . . ." As he produces the manuscript from under his seat, he adds, "It wouldn't take you long to read it, I expect you know all the booksellers"(p. 67)—which is what every successful author

hears constantly. And yet, like many Hollywood producers, Henslowe considers the writer the least important part of the production. When Fennyman asks about Will, "Who is that?", Henslowe answers, "Nobody. The author" (p. 49–50).

As for the profits, well, it's the old Hollywood formula: promise the writer a good back-end deal where he'll get a share of the profits, knowing that after all the creative accounting, "there's never any" (p. 4). In the case of *Shakespeare in Love*, the producer's costs, which must be recouped before the writer sees any money, include the cushions to warm and soften the backsides of the audience. Besides, writers are supposed to think not about the small things, like money, but about the big things, such as writing the successful play. Henslowe asks Will, "What is money to you and me?" Of course, to producers, it's everything. To writers, well, they're supposed to be in it for love of the art.

The writers of *Shakespeare in Love* play with the many clichés of plays and films. "Follow that car" has been used in myriads of action movies. When Will gets into the boat to pursue Thomas Kent, he says, "Follow that boat" (p. 36).

Sometimes they add a pun to the cliché:

HENSLOWE
The show must . . . you know . . .

WILL
Go on. (p. 134)

Structuring the Story

These insider jokes, insights into the creative process, and plays on cliché add layers to the story. *Shakespeare in Love* is further layered by the intricate connections between its plot and subplots.

The "A" story (the main storyline) is the writing and performance of Shakespeare's famous, breakthrough play *Romeo and Juliet*. He is asked to write the play in Act One, he writes it in Act Two, and it's performed in Act Three. The process of writing

Romeo and Juliet leads Will to understand the nature of love. Before, he was content to find a lusty muse for each of his plays. Unconsciously, he was looking for something deeper about love and truth. He just didn't know it. Throughout Act Two, scenes show the intersection of the love story of Viola and Will with the love story and rehearsals of *Romeo and Juliet*. The scenes of one plotline push the scenes of the other, adding shading. We see how the reality of love pushes the play's exploration of love. The play is able to show the true nature of love because Will and Viola are living it.

During the Development of Act One, Will is able to finish enough of the play to begin casting. Thomas Kent (Viola in disguise) reads beautifully, and is clearly perfect for the role of Romeo. At the First Turning Point, at 32 minutes into the film, Will becomes inspired by Thomas, begins writing feverishly, and right after that, the play is fully cast. During Act Two, Will continues to write, and the actors continue to rehearse.

At the Midpoint, the play begins to take shape through a series of decisions that further define the play. Since the film is 117 minutes long, we would expect the Midpoint scene to come about 57–60 minutes into the film. Yes, the Midpoint is right on target. At 58 minutes, Will recognizes the true nature of the play he's writing: it's a tragedy, and the lovers are fated to be apart. At the Second Turning Point, at 92 minutes into the film, the play is ready to go on, but Viola has just been married and is ready to sail for Virginia. As she leaves her wedding, she sees the flyer for the play, escapes from the groom, and hurries to the theatre to perform. At the Climax, which comes at 107 minutes, the play is a great success, with all the appropriate and much-yearned-for response from the audience: tears, stunned silence at the brilliance of what they've just seen, followed by wild applause. Will has achieved what he set out to do: create a successful play.

And then there's the love story, which is structured as follows:

Setup: Will sees Viola at the theatre, mouthing the words to his play *Two Gentleman of Verona*. He's immediately attracted to her. (13 minutes)

First Turning Point: Will discovers that Thomas, a male, is really Viola, a female. They kiss. (45 minutes)

Midpoint: Viola must marry Wessex, by order of the Queen. (59 minutes) (Notice that the midpoint of this subplot is within a minute of the Midpoint of the "A" plot about the play. That is tight writing!)

Second Turning Point: Viola marries Wessex. (91 minutes)

Climax: Viola must leave Will, a teary goodbye. (115 minutes)

The structure of the play *Romeo and Juliet* also has a clear setup, turning points, and climax:

Setup: The Players rehearse the scene when Romeo meets Juliet at the dance. (41 minutes).

First Turning Point: Romeo is clearly in love with Juliet. They have their first kiss. (51 minutes)

Act Two: They pursue their forbidden, secret love.

Second Turning Point: Juliet is going to get married to someone else, and Romeo must leave his beloved. (100 minutes)

Climax: They both die. (103–104 minutes)

The real-life story and the written play are integrated throughout. Experiencing true love leads Will to write more deeply. His writing then expands and deepens the love of Will and Viola. Back and forth—always one plotline pushing at the other.

Shakespeare in Love layers its storyline with smaller subplots as well. Christopher Marlowe, the great playwright of his generation, is introduced in Act One, with a mention of his work. Will meets him at the bar and Marlowe says that he, too, is writing a new play. At the First Turning Point, Wessex, who believes that Viola has another suitor, asks Will, who's disguised as Viola's chaperone, who this suitor is. Without missing a beat, Will grabs at the first name that comes to mind: Kit Marlowe. At the Second Turning Point, Will learns that Marlowe has been killed in a tavern, and is profoundly shocked, believing that Wessex had him killed because of Will's lie. At the Climax of this subplot, Will learns that in fact he had nothing to do with Marlowe's murder, and he is comforted.

There are other small subplots. One deals with the competition between Henslowe's Rose Theatre and Burbage's more famous Curtain Theatre. Another tracks the relationship between Wessex and Viola. And there is a small subplot about a wager. When Queen Elizabeth first meets Viola, she contrives a bet that a play cannot show the true nature of love. Will, disguised as the chaperone Wilhemina,(Shakespeare did love disguises, a fact not lost to the film's writers), wagers 50 pounds, and Wessex is forced to match the amount. At the end of the story, Will wins the 50 pounds, which frees him from being a contract player and allows him to become a partner at the Curtain Theatre. In devising this wager, the screenwriters found a way to neatly and concisely express the themes of the movie: the true nature of love, and the triumphs and frustrations of the creative process.

Playing with Scenes

Screenwriters have a tool that other writers don't have for creating humor, surprise, and reversed expectations: they can play the cut from one scene to the next. Sometimes this is done by having what is said in one scene contradicted in the next.

In the first scene of *Shakespeare in Love*, Henslowe tells Fennyman he is sure that Will is completing the play "at this very moment." We then CUT TO Will's room, which has all the accoutrements of the writer: the favorite mug, the crumpled rejected drafts tossed on the floor. We see Will studiously writing and expect that he is doing exactly what Henslowe said he was doing, completing the play. But, upon closer inspection, we see that, like many writers when the Muse is far away, he is doing something quite different: in this case, practicing his signature.

Some scenes form a montage of true life leading to a rehearsal of the play. These scenes are often next to each other, smoothly flowing one into the next to show the passage of time and to reinforce the portrayal of the writing process: Will begins writing, then gives the manuscript to Viola, who reads the lines first in her bedroom, then at the theatre:

VIOLA (V.O.)
But soft, what light through yonder window breaks.
It is the east and Juliet is the sun.

VIOLA is in bed reading the lines from the manuscript page.
WILL is in bed with her, reading with her.

VIOLA
Oh, Will!

WILL
Yes, some of it is unspeakable. (pp. 78–79)

She has to speak through Will's kisses. He is nibbling at her neck and shoulders and she has to bat him away with the pages.

Viola continues the speech, now in rehearsal, with Viola disguised as a male playing Romeo and Sam disguised as a female playing Juliet sighing on the balcony above her.

The scene continues to move back and forth as Viola reads Will's newly written lines in bed and then they're rehearsed. Back to bed. Back to the theatre. The scenes comprise a montage with dialogue. Will says to Viola, in bed, "Stay but a little, I will come again." And Viola "slaps him playfully for his vulgarity, and then kisses him" (p. 83). This is followed by Sam-as-Juliet saying the same lines.

And as the rehearsal continues, with the lines being spoken in all seriousness, suddenly Sam stops the action to voice his complaint:

SAM as JULIET
I cannot move in this dress! And it makes me look
like a pig! I have no neck in this pig dress! (p. 85)

In the middle of playing some of the most beautiful lines ever written, comic relief comes into the action. This takes courage from the writers, who are confident that the overall tone won't be destroyed.

The Theme

The theme is, of course, about love. It's about the true nature of love, about the obstacles to love, about love found and lost. The theme is clarified by the Queen's wager that a play cannot convey the true nature of love, and reinforced as Will learns about love through his relationship with Viola and explores the theme in *Romeo and Juliet*. At the end, the Queen states forthrightly that the premise of the wager is clearly expressed and proven through the beauty of the play.

Perhaps we see ourselves in the play and the film. We may have also loved and lost, loved and found ourselves, and recognized certain eternal truths about love.

Both the play *Romeo and Juliet* and the film *Shakespeare in Love* show us that there are obstacles to love. The world, our society, our class, even we ourselves conspire against our ability to love truly and freely. In the case of Will, there is also another little obstacle: he's married. But no matter, love cannot be stopped.

In *Romeo and Juliet*, the duty to satisfy one's parents' wishes runs against the lovers' own sense of duty to the soul. Romeo and Juliet can only express their true love for each other if they "deny their parentage" (p. 80). A Montague and a Capulet can never be in love; their warring families forbid it. Will/Romeo says, "a broad river divides my love—family, duty, fate" (p. 88). Yet love, true love, "knows nothing of rank and riverbank" (p. 66).

As the play explores the nature of love, it finds another contradiction. Just as we sense the spirituality of love, which embraces that which is true and connects us to something larger than ourselves, we also know that there is that in love which can tempt us, limit us, and bring us down. In *Romeo and Juliet*, in the middle of great passion there is also a discussion of sin. To kiss, for them, is a sin—against parents, perhaps against God. Yet, it is sin that can be forgiven: "Thus from my lips, by thine, my sin be purged" (p. 74). While the soul expands between the Lover and the Beloved, in doing this it may cross the boundaries of traditional morality. The play raises the question of whether following our love is always right, or can be wrong. Does love lead us to that which is greatest in us, or that which is weakest in us?

There is no way to adequately describe the Beloved, except by similes that compare the Beloved to that which is most beautiful, most true, the highest the soul can attain. What is love like? It is like opposites: "sickness and its cure together, like rain and sun, like cold and heat" (p. 65).

Our understanding of the true nature of love finds a resonance in the multidimensional descriptions of love in *Romeo and Juliet*. It can be both tender and harsh. Sweet and bitter. Passionate and yet, when we feel betrayed, it turns us to cold stone. It is the sweetest of all emotions, the most expansive, and yet sometimes the most limiting. It can be both death-defying and death-embracing. And yet, to compromise love is to allow our souls to wither. We carry within us the spirit and recognition of that first love that will never age, and that, if allowed, blossoms within us to lead to other great loves. Love, for Will, and often for us, also leads to creativity. It is a muse. Will equates love, sex, and creativity as he discusses the loss of his gift with his therapist, Dr. Moth: "It's as if my quill is broken. As if the organ of the imagination has dried up. As if the proud tower of my genius has collapsed" (p. 10). The subtextual meaning of the physical nature of male love is not lost on us!

The writers of *Shakespeare in Love* explore this rich theme through the love between Will and Viola, through Will's play *Romeo and Juliet*, by contrasting the love of Will and Viola and the lack of love between Viola and Wessex, and by showing both the comedy and tragedy of love.

Researching the Story

Most writers write about what they know. Lawyers write stories about the law. Doctors write medical stories. Both Marc Norman and Tom Stoppard, although not Shakespearean scholars, were knowledgeable about Shakespeare. Stoppard was already famous for a play about characters from *Hamlet*, *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*.

But they needed knowledge of more than just Shakespeare's plays. To write this script, they needed knowledge of the historical period. They then could begin to play with historical dates and facts, being careful not to go against what was already known.

Norman, who wrote the original screenplay, chose to set the film in 1594. In rewrites, Stoppard changed the date to 1593, the year Marlowe was killed in a tavern brawl. The Marlowe subplot allowed Stoppard to complicate the action and to give Will further emotional depth. Although there is no record that Shakespeare met Marlowe, since Shakespeare's star as a playwright was just starting to rise when Marlowe's reputation was at its height, it's possible that they met since they both worked in the London theatre. Stoppard could take this liberty because it makes sense and nobody knows for sure.

Other historical information is slipped into the film. The little boy who feeds live mice to cats and loves the stabbings in Shakespeare's plays is John Webster—the writer of *The Duchess of Malfi*, *The White Devil*, *The Devil's Law-Case*, and *A Cure for a Cuckold*, all tales filled with blood and gore (and yes, the dates fit). Director John Madden called Webster the Quentin Tarantino of his day.

The famous Globe Theatre, which is associated with Shakespeare, didn't open until 1599, six years after the film is set, so the two rival theatres in the film are, accurately, the Curtain and the Rose. In the Elizabethan period, theatres could be closed for many reasons: for example, if a play contained sensitive political and religious subject matter, or if it depicted a living person. We see this research used when Tilney decides to close the Curtain upon discovering that the actor Thomas Kent is really a woman. And he decides to open the theatres in spite of the plague, as soon as he feels it is safe. Plays were performed for the pleasure of the Queen, and she was one of the main reasons why the theatres stayed open. She loved drama. This information is incorporated into her dialogue when she reminds Viola that the plays "are not acted for you, they are acted for me" (p. 93).

Integrating Shakespeare Quotes

Director John Madden told me in an interview that he wanted to reclaim Shakespeare for the masses. "In his own time," said Madden, "he wrote brilliantly and effortlessly for the entire social spectrum, and we need to reclaim that, to let the movie audience,

now one of the largest audiences around, experience first-hand the intoxication of his language, the depth and accuracy of his characterization."

The screenwriters of *Shakespeare in Love* drew on their knowledge of Shakespeare to add quotes from other plays to the script. Will uses words with Henslowe that Shakespeare would later use in *Hamlet*: "Doubt that the stars are fire, doubt that the sun doth move." To which Henslowe replies, "Talk prose!" (p. 6). Will refers to mandragora (p. 28), a medicine that promotes sleep, which is also referred to in *Othello* and *Antony and Cleopatra*. Will says "wonderful, wonderful" (p. 29), which Fennyman also says in Act Three; it also appears in *As You Like It*: "O, wonderful, wonderful, and most wonderful, wonderful!" Sometimes the writers spin a line around a line from another play, such as when Sir Robert, Viola's father, sells Wessex on the idea of marrying his daughter by saying, "She will breed" (p. 42). In *As You Like It*, Rosalind says "she will breed it like a fool." They play with the image of the nightingale and the lark, which appears in the famous balcony scene in *Romeo and Juliet*: Will mentions "none of your twittering larks! I would banish nightingales from her garden before they interrupt her song" (p. 66).

Other lines simply sound Shakespearean: "She has been plucked since I saw her last," says the Queen (p. 95); "Indeed, I am a bride short!" says Wessex (p. 149). Sometimes the writers use simile much like Shakespeare did: "It is like trying to pick a lock with a wet herring" (p. 11), or "You lie in your meadow as you lied in my bed" (p. 112). The writers also have fun with double meanings that recall Shakespeare's own lines, such as: "Where is that thieving hack who can't keep his pen in his own inkpot!" (p. 99).

The writers had to create language that has an Elizabethan flavor while still being accessible to contemporary audiences. They use terms common in the period—such as "prattling" and "vagabond"—and create poetic-sounding language using elements that would be familiar to Londoners, such as the Thames, with its width and its tides. This knowledge was worked into the dialogue by the writers: "The tide waits for no man, but I swear it would wait for you!" (p. 90); "Love knows nothing of rank or riverbank" (p. 66); "A broad river divides my loves" (p. 88). They also use the Rule of Threes in dialogue, such as when Will says, "I am unmanned, unmended, and unmade, like a puppet in a box" (p. 63).

Some lines which I thought I recognized from Shakespeare are in fact original to Stoppard and Norman. "Have a care with my name, you will wear it out," says the Queen (p. 147). "He was the first man among us. A great light has gone out," says Alleyn, one of the actors, speaking about Marlowe (p. 107). "How is this to end? As stories must when love's denied—with tears and a journey," says the Queen (p. 150). In each case, I was unable to locate the reference. Oh, it was made up—which is what creative people do!

Study Questions

1. What did the writers need to know about Shakespeare to write this story? What did they already know before they tackled this subject matter? What additional research did they need to do? Where did they take liberties with what is known about Shakespeare? What did they add, imaginatively, to what is known that doesn't contradict historical fact?

2. Read *Romeo and Juliet*. Are there other scenes in that play that you could intercut with a scene of Will and Viola?

3. It is said that even bad actors can read good dialogue well. Read some of S*hakespeare in Love* out loud, and see how easy, or how difficult, it is to read it well. Do the words flow? How do the writers create the flavor of Shakespearean speech? Feel the rhythm of the dialogue. Once you feel the rhythm, expand on the scene by writing additional dialogue that might have been written for the scene, to see if you can write a scene in this same style.

4. Have you ever experienced the loss of the Muse that Will experienced? What exercises did you do, or what therapists did you consult, or what love did you find, that helped you regain it?

6. What did you learn about the nature of love from this film? What do you learn about the nature of love from reading *Romeo and Juliet*? What other aspects of love might they have explored? Do you agree with the conclusion of the wager, as the Queen expresses it? Were you disappointed in the ending, feeling that Viola and Will should have lived happily ever after, together?

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