

Shakespeare competition

I was very surprised and flattered when Luigi asked me to judge this competition and it has been quite a daunting experience because of the high quality and variety of the entrants. I felt it important to judge the poems as poems for their craft and beauty and not as essays – our competition invited work inspired by Shakespeare not work constrained by him.

At the same time I felt I should be able to fully appreciate how that inspiration worked within the poems themselves. So I found myself reading and watching a number of the plays and travelling to see paintings in preparation. In the end I am certain that I would have chosen the poems I have regardless of this – but I may not have enjoyed them half as much.

So to the poems themselves, in alphabetical order:

As in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, a number of poets took minor characters and gave them voice. This was particularly affective where those characters had been rendered mute by needs of plot or through the violence of the action. The first shortlisted poem gives us the thoughts of Antony's wife, Octavia. In the play she is a political chess piece who is moved by her brother to secure a treaty - valued for her silence in Rome and mocked for it in Egypt. But in here Octavia's inner rage, Rome and Egypt are all beautifully captured in the most vivid language. **(Anthony's Wife – 24) Heather Harrison**

The next poem uses the strict form of the villanelle to rework a scene from Measure for Measure. The restrictions imposed by this form are particularly suited to the subject. Claudio is a young man sentenced to death for lechery. In the poem he is begging his chaste (perhaps overly chaste) sister Isabella to intercede on his behalf and to sacrifice her virginity to the corrupt Angelo in exchange for his life. The twisting, turning, repetitive structure of the villanelle is that of a caged animal pacing the walls of his cell **(Claudio and Isabella – Anne Ballard)**

In the eighteenth and nineteenth century Shakespearian characters became increasingly popular as subjects for paintings. These images have become as much a part of our culture as the original words so it came as no surprise that many writers had been inspired by Shakespeare via the intermediary of a work of art. There were a number of excellent poems based on Millais Ophelia; what set this poem apart was the close attention to the painting's details and the dexterity with which it moves between the river bank and the coal-heated fug of the artist's studio. **(Ophelia – Marilyn Donovan)**

The next poem is also inspired by painting, but this time the subject is less a particular work of art and more the act of preparation. Here I was particularly struck by how cleverly the poem became its own play. The colours are robust characters with their exits and their entrances; the action spills out from the canvas into the life of the artist and his family, before being sucked back in and nailed firmly down with a killer last line. **(Perfecting Lady M – Geraldine Clarkson)**

Many of us will remember Shakespeare from our English lessons at school, some with affection and others with dread. It will very much depend on the quality of the teacher and so I was particularly pleased by the final shortlisted poem. Shakespeare is alive and relevant in this classroom – although heroes may be unconventional and flawed and the real action may be taking place off stage. **(A Rogue and Peasant Slave - David Lukens)**