

# Clarissa Dalloway Remembers Cymbeline

By Edward Mendelson

Clarissa Dalloway, conscious of mortality, terrified of death, her hair white from illness, glances into a shop as she goes to buy flowers for her party, and reads from a book spread open in the window display:

Fear no more the heat o' the sun  
Nor the furious winter's rages.

During the rest of the June day in 1923 that Virginia Woolf records in *Mrs. Dalloway*, Clarissa again and again remembers these lines from the dirge for Imogen in *Cymbeline*. For Virginia Woolf, as for Shakespeare, the dirge is both a lament over death and a prelude to new life, simple and straightforward words that express a complex, profound truth.

The first few times Clarissa thinks of Shakespeare's lines, she thinks of them as a statement of endurance and renunciation, well suited to the sense of loss that afflicts her world and herself. "This late age of the world's experience had bred in them all, all men and women, a well of tears," she thinks as she reads. "Tears and sorrows; courage and endurance; a perfectly upright and stoical bearing." She remembers the lines again when she learns that her husband will be lurching out and leaving her alone, and again when she sits sewing in her room, accepting her emotional solitude, long past any hope of change: "Fear no more, says the heart, committing its burden to some sea, which sighs collectively for all sorrows, and renews, begins, collects, lets fall."

Later, the shell-shocked veteran Septimus Warren Smith, whom Virginia Woolf imagined as Clarissa's double, remembers Shakespeare's lines as he accepts the prospect of his death by suicide. Septimus chooses death in preference to being locked away in a mental hospital, where he will be forced to yield up his autonomy, his whole sense of himself. "Fear no more, says the heart in the body; fear no more," he thinks. The narrator continues, "He was not afraid."

Near the end of the book, when Clarissa remembers the dirge yet again, it means something very different. She has heard about Septimus's suicide from a guest at her party, Sir William Bradshaw, the psychiatrist who had arranged to have him locked away. Agitated, outraged at death's rude intrusion on the social triumph of her party, she steps into a little room, where she finds herself alone with her fears, and feels the party's splendor falling to the floor. She gradually begins to recognize that Septimus's death was a defense of his integrity—after she herself has spent her life sacrificing integrity and love for the sake of her parties. "A thing there

was that mattered," she thinks, not quite able to name what it is, although she knows it has something to do with the integrity of the self. "This he had preserved," she thinks. "Death was defiance. Death was an attempt to communicate." And now, having overcome through Septimus's example her terror of death, she returns to her party, not in order to resume her role as hostess but to find the friends whose love she has always refused, Sally Seton and Peter Walsh. "The young man had killed himself, but she did not pity him," she thinks, and adds, "Fear no more the heat of the sun." And as she returns to her old loves and a renewed life, "she felt somehow very like him—the young man who had killed himself."

Every great writer has understood that adult love requires a sense of the beloved's mortality. Homer's Odysseus prefers Penelope to the immortal and far more beautiful Calypso, partly because Calypso can never need him but only desire him. Mortals need each other's love; immortals can manage without it.

In both Shakespeare and Virginia Woolf, what is true about mortality is also true about human imperfection. Adults can only love those whom they know are imperfect like themselves, because without imperfection the mutual forgiveness that is at the heart of love could never occur. When Peter Walsh thinks about his love for Clarissa, he also reminds himself that she is "not beautiful at all; there was nothing picturesque about her; she never said anything especially clever." But, he concludes in the laconic vocabulary of true love, "there she was, however; there she was."

In contrast, Posthumus insists, in florid, extravagant words, that Imogen is morally perfect, and all the harm that he does to her through his wager with Iachimo issues from that insistence. (He is finally convinced of Imogen's moral imperfection when Iachimo names her physical imperfection—a mole beneath her breast.) Imogen is, in fact, morally perfect, but that is a bad motive for loving her, and Posthumus becomes worthy to regain her only when he teaches himself to forgive her, even if he is mistaken about the faults he learns to forgive. "Pardon's the word to all," says Cymbeline in the final scene, and pardon can be given and accepted only by those who have learned through suffering and error to fear no more the heat of the sun.

*Edward Mendelson is the Lionel Trilling Professor in the Humanities at Columbia University. He is the literary executor of W. H. Auden's estate and the editor of Auden's complete works. Among his previous books are Early Auden, Later Auden, and The Things That Matter. He lives in New York City with his wife and son.*