

It is I, Hamlet, King of the Crabs

by John Olson

Ronnie comes home carrying two sacks of groceries, one including a four-pack of Virgil's root beer. This is heavy stuff. It amazes me she is able to carry these items up our steep hill, nearly a mile in distance. I watch the news on our French cable station while she makes fettuccine Alfredo. It's all about the new pope, Joge Mario Bergoglio, who will be called Francis, after Saint Francis of Assisi, and who had been archbishop of Buenos Aires. He appeared at the white balcony overlooking St. Peter's Basilica as thousands cheered below, and said "I would like to thank you for your embrace." The crowd cheered back: "Habemus papam!" waving umbrellas and flags.

I don't get any of it. I fail to understand how one man can get so many people excited. I find their beliefs touching, it's moving to see so many people find faith in something, in anything, when the world seems so overwhelmingly in the grip of Mammon, of war, of evil. But I can't understand it. This man is just a man. How could one man have a direct line to God? And is there a God? Is there a single intelligent being responsible for moths and grass and oysters and diphenylamine? For human beings? For dinner theater? For mathematics and matrimony vines? One guy? With omniscience? One single supreme being who can hear the pleas of a banker in Athens, Greece, create storms of ammonium hydrosulfide on Jupiter and minister occasion to the birth of a star trillions of light years distant, and do all this simultaneously, including the trillions of other events and traumas and prayers and tragedies occurring throughout the known physical universe? An omnipotent being? A being who is responsible for good and evil? For epilepsy and polio? For facial hair and opium? Who created hawks and ladybugs and geraniums? Who created silence and space and tumefaction? Who also created

whatever extraterrestrial beings use for eyes and ears and mouths and whispers?

Whispering seems so quintessentially human. It is what human beings do when they want to say something without disturbing other human beings, or make an unflattering observation about someone in the same room, or issue a piece of provocative gossip. But is this trait really all that anthropocentric? Do extraterrestrials whisper?

Do extraterrestrials have popes?

Do extraterrestrials have countries and borders and trampolines?

Do extraterrestrials, any extraterrestrials, make movies about their planet being invaded? Or suffer xenophobia and racism? Dance? Pin nude pictures to the wall? Do extraterrestrials have a concept of nudity? Or drama? Do they act? Make speeches? Thunder invective? Carouse in gay apparel? Wallow in illustrious sorrow?

Or is the phenomenon of being human so uniquely and profoundly human that it is impossible to even envision what life for an extraterrestrial intelligence might be like?

And what, exactly, is intelligence, anyway? Most of the time, I don't feel intelligent. I feel stupid. I might be intelligent, but I don't feel it. Would visiting the pope alter my attitude about anything? Would I feel a sense of holiness in his presence? I wish I could share in the emotion all those people in the Vatican rain shouting *Habemus papam* were feeling.

During dinner, we watched Episode Six of Season Two's *Enlightened* on HBO, the one that ends with Amy (Laura Dern) glancing back through the passenger seat window at Levi (Luke Wilson), standing in the driveway, looking utterly incredulous and stupefied, as she and Jeff (Dermot Mulroney) go off on their dinner date. We watched *Questions pour un Champion* during dessert, then got ready to go see the Seattle Shakespeare Company's presentation of *Love's Labour's Lost* at the Center House.

It was warmer outside than I expected, and colder. I wasn't sure on the entire way to the theater whether it was colder than I anticipated, or warmer than I anticipated. March is like that. It is full of ambivalent weather and so makes the mind ambivalent,

flowering and crumbling in irrational equivocations. On the way, Ronnie told me that March 14th is Einstein's birthday, and that the number 3/14 is the number for pi, 3.14159265359, which is an irrational number.

This production of *Love's Labour's Lost* was set in the 1920s, which I initially found off-putting. It has become such a cliché. Why, I asked Ronnie, do directors like staging Shakespeare in the 1920s so much? Maybe it's because everyone drank so much. It was a time of brassy extravagance. Frivolity, enterprise, and tragedy. Extremes of behavior burned in luxurious disregard. Everyone spurned the obligations of the future. Doom stood outdoors in the midnight banishment of raffish soirées, austere and inexorable, an ominous spirit amid falling snow.

The Center House stage is semi-thrust stage. There was a white piano to the left of the stage, and a chaise lounge which appeared to be upholstered in Astro Turf off to the right. As the audience entered and looked for their seats and shifted their weight and adjusted their arms and legs and visited with their companions or played with their cell phones, the male actors stood on the stage drinking cocktails and conversing, all dressed in formal dinner wear, tuxedos and tailcoats. A constellation of mirrors hung above, just below the stage lights.

The presentation was terrific. The audience laughed heartily throughout. I had tears running down my cheeks. I've never paid much attention to this play. I've always found it tedious and confusing. But this time I really got it. There isn't much plot to it, it's all language. Shakespeare really let go on this play. It's full of flare and wit and surprisingly meaningful lines, streaks and flourishes of provocative thought, elegantly delivered. Considering the overall vanity and studied superficiality of the characters and situation, lines such as "Make us heirs of all eternity," "It adds a precious seeing to the eye," and "As love is full of unbecoming strains, / All wanton as a child, skipping and vain, / Formed by the eye and therefore, like the eye, / Full of straying shapes, of habits, and of forms, / Varying in subjects as the eye doth roll / To every varied

object in his glance," surprise the mind with pith and scope. I realized that this play is a feast of language. The story is negligible. It is the words, hot and prodigal, that make the play a play.

In bed, we talk about the play. I ask Ronnie what character in Shakespeare I most resemble and she tells me Hotspur, because I'm grumpy, quick to lose my temper.

I ask about Hamlet. Doesn't Hamlet qualify as a notorious grump? If I was younger, she says, I could be Hamlet. But Hotspur was a young guy, I correct her. That's true. I guess you could be Hamlet if Hamlet lived and got to be older.

You mean If Hamlet lived to be 65, and lived in a one-bedroom condo apartment, and collected social security?

Yes, Ronnie answers.

So that would be a viable Hamlet?

Yes, Ronnie agrees.

A contemporary Hamlet of existential angst vilifying cell phones and computers and Bill Gates and belligerent baristas?

Yes, Ronnie concurs. Ok, I'm going to sleep now, Ronnie announces. Good night, sweet prince, and flights of angels sing thee to thy rest.

What keeps me from being a total asshole, I wonder as I lie in the dark.

I'm not sure. I *am* an asshole, I know. I possess asshole qualities, though it might be something of an overstatement to say I'm a total asshole. I'm not a total asshole on the scale of, say Dick Cheney or Donald Trump. I'm not a sociopathic, megalomaniacal asshole with a golf iron and a country club. I've been horribly unfair and unfairly unpleasant to a lot of people a lot of the time. I've been stubborn and willful and selfish and narrow. My attitude about life tends toward the dark. My head is full of morbid soliloquies and the tangle of cypress vines draped with the kind of sickly moss that is nourished by gloom and swamp gas. I am frequently given to making howling declamations anathematizing the stink of humanity and the futility of life. This is me. This is *what* I am. This is *who* I am. It is I, Hamlet, King of the Crabs.

