

The Romeo Riddle

Come along to old Verona and pause with me beneath a lovelorn maiden's window. She speaks:

"O Romeo, Romeo! wherefore art thou Romeo?"

She speaks beautifully, but what does she mean? I put the question to the class: How many here think she is asking, "Where in the world is Romeo?"

Be honest now, because I'm not going to lie to you, but am going to tell you the humiliating truth — to wit, until just the other night I would have said she was inquiring as to Romeo's whereabouts.

If you agree with this reading, feel free to join me under the dunce cap on the stupid stool. Don't be too embarrassed, because we will form a large company. I have put the question recently to half a dozen persons who are not altogether illiterate, and each one has agreed the lady is saying, "Where are you, Romeo?"

This is nonsense, of course. What she is really asking is, "Why are you Romeo, rather than Harold, Norman or Sylvester?" I should have known that, and so should you, because she is about to get off those other great lines about the absurdity of names and a rose smelling just as sweet no matter what name it bears.

This enlightenment came to me recently not under a window in old Verona but by a television tube, on which Prof. A. L. Rowse, the Elizabethan-history scholar who has been modernizing Shakespeare's language to make it easier for present-day readers, was being cross-examined on "The MacNeil-Lehrer NewsHour."

An interrogator asked why Professor Rowse found it necessary to change "art" to "are" and "thou" to "you" in Juliet's opening line, but hadn't changed the "wherefore" to "why." What was the point? Mr. Rowse replied. Everybody knows "wherefore" means "why."

Professor Rowse, of course, is English, and in England 4-year-olds may drive parents insane by incessantly asking, "Wherefore?" but in America they do the trick with "Why?"

But is this justifiable excuse for a mature adult, a man with a degree in English

literature, a man who loves Shakespeare, to pass five decades of his life under the imbecilic impression that Juliet is asking Romeo's whereabouts? There can be no excuse, but there may be an interesting explanation.

If my theory is right, it has to do with the lifelong persistence of misunderstandings that are born in early childhood. Juliet's opening words in the balcony scene are one of the first Shakespearean lines encountered in childhood. To an unformed mind, incapable of grasping subtleties about the irrelevance of names, "Wherefore art thou Romeo?" can only sound like a call for Romeo to tell where he's hiding.

With maturity, one learns otherwise. I surely did in college when I studied this play closely, but after the requirements of scholarship were met, the persistence of the erroneous childhood impression overpowered acquired learning. This tendency of the mind to reject the fruits of its education and lapse back into childhood's happy ignorance may explain the difficulty of rooting out nasty irrational prejudices, but it is in small, trivial matters that it is most noticeable.

As a child learning to read, for example, I didn't know what to make of the word "misled" on first meeting it. I decided it was pronounced "mizled" (rhymes with "King Faisaled") and, be-

cause of the way it sounded, probably meant "puzzled." I still remember the astonishment of learning, well into my adolescence, that it was pronounced and meant "misled."

To this day, however, when encountering "misled" on the printed page, my mind insists on reading it to rhyme with "King Faisaled." Geography is another area of trouble.

Geography was still taught in school during my childhood, and every classroom was decorated with a large Mercator's Projection of the World. This showed Russia way over on the right-hand edge of the world and China way over on the left. Later, I learned that you could head to the right, reach Russia and then go straight on to China without having to come all the way back to the United States and head to the left, but my mind has never been comfortable with the idea, and I would be terribly uneasy about trying it.

Oh, I know intellectually that people have been circling the earth for centuries, and there's nothing to it. But the persistence of childhood misunderstanding is like a piece of scar tissue on the intellect, which may explain why, whenever I hear of a world traveler like my friend Salisbury, who has been out of touch in Asia for weeks, I find myself nervously asking, "O Salisbury, Salisbury! wherefore art thou, Salisbury?" ■

