

Sunday, April 11, 2004

## Finding poetry in Shakespeare's life

By David Brooks Andrews

After 15 years of struggling to write a novel about William Shakespeare, Michelle Cameron decided to turn the material into a long narrative poem instead, and within a year she had completed the manuscript.

The New Jersey resident will be returning tomorrow to Westborough, where she once worked, to read from the book, "In the Shadow of the Globe" at the public library. It was published by the Lit Pot Press, a small literary publisher in California.

On Thursday, she'll deliver the 21<sup>st</sup> annual Lillian I. Rolde Memorial Lecture at the Brandeis University Library. She has titled her talk "A Shakespeare for Our Time: An Interpreted Life in Verse." She will read poems from her book as well as set the stage for them with commentary. Both events are open to the public.

Cameron got the idea of writing about Shakespeare when she saw a BBC television show about the Elizabethan actors who first staged his plays. The fact that they would buy noblemen's castoff clothes for their costumes made her think there might be a novel in their lives.

Ten years later, when the film "Shakespeare in Love" was released, Cameron feared her own project would no longer be of interest to publishers. "But I was wrong," she said. "At least then people understood there was an interesting story in his life." She has seen more books published about Shakespeare after the film's release than before it.

Reading a long narrative poem, "Silk Elegy," about immigrants to Patterson, N.J., prompted her to shift genres. She sat down and wrote eight poems in one day. "I had lived with the material for so long, it just poured out of me," she said. She found with prose that it takes considerable time to get to the point of revealing something about your characters, whereas poetry is much more immediate.

She wrote the poems in the voices of the different characters, including Shakespeare himself. Her editor, Beverly A. Jackson, told her the poems in Shakespeare's voice were too timid in the first draft. "In the end, I found the voice really came through in those poems, once I gave myself permission to go ahead and speak as Shakespeare," said Cameron.

She invented the character of Mary Burbage as a narrative thread. "I needed someone who, on some level, would fall in love with Shakespeare, be infatuated with him for her entire life, even

though he wasn't free and she wasn't either," she said. As for whether they have a love affair, Cameron tells people to read her book to find out.

Mary Burbage may be fictional, but Cameron has placed her in a historical family. Her father, James Burbage, built London's first theater. Her brother, Cuthbert, managed the Lord Chamberlain's Men, the company for whom Shakespeare wrote his plays, and her brother, Richard, was the first actor to play Hamlet and Macbeth.

There are many novels for adults and young adults about Shakespeare's life, Cameron said, but she believes hers is the first long narrative poem about him to be published. As she researched his life, she has filled an entire bookcase with books about Shakespeare, and she and her husband have traveled to London.

She first fell in love with his plays when she read and saw them performed as a high school student. She has been attending productions of Shakespeare ever since. Her advice to people who have a hard time with the complexity of his language is, "Go see a play, and don't struggle, just let it float over you. People think they're not going to understand it, so they tense up, and they don't let it happen."