

NMU Commencement Address, Dec. 2017
Dr. David Wood

I can't begin to tell you what a revelation it was to learn that Tristan Ruiz and the ASNMU were inviting me to share my thoughts with you all this Saturday morning. As one who, for 8 years now, has donned a cap that says NMU Honors Program Director, I stand here pondering all the honors you graduates have achieved— all of you: whether in the ostensibly external sense, for those graduating with GPAs that propel you into the ethereal space of the cum laude, the magna cum laude, or the summa cum laude designations that will proclaim your achievements here with us on your resumes for a lifetime to come; or in the ostensibly internal sense, for those graduating in spite of the real-life challenges you faced, perhaps, in juggling multiple jobs, young children at home, aging parents, military service, or the full range of medical and social stressors that makes your achievement in joining us today a more private revelation of your own. It is a thrill to speak today as the voice of an institution that celebrates your accomplishments and sings your praises. Congratulations to you all!

But it is the other hat I have donned for 11 years now, as Professor of English, where an outsize portion of my work comes, too, day in/ day out. My teaching here has always involved encouraging my students— from the freshmen level through to the graduate level— to hone their perceptive capabilities through careful examination of what was thinkable in the languages and the literatures of the past: relating the fractiousness, frustrations, and possibilities of the 'there and then' to the fractiousness, frustrations, and possibilities of the 'here and now.' I do so by training people in the most valuable of portable skills: how to read as meticulously as possible, wringing texts for meaning; how to develop a position and support it effectively; and how to write with grace, with wit, and even with style. Much maligned we are these days, those of us in the arts and the humanities, and especially those of us in literary studies. But come on: if

engaging the relationship of powerful concepts and ideas to the rigors of rhetoric and linguistic form isn't training for a host of higher order jobs, then what is? Alongside plumbing the very depths of the human condition across time and space: that is what we do in literary studies!

My absolute privilege here is that my content area spans from Greco-Roman antiquity, through the medieval period, and into the European Renaissance. More specifically, I trace with my students the 16th century development of English as a literary language— where the hard work of names like Skelton, Wyatt, and Surrey; of Sidney, Spenser, and Marlowe, pursued the formation of an English that could be both flexible yet precise; expansive yet clear; detailed yet majestic. All that at a time when essentially noone outside of England yet, actually spoke English, or had any need to do so. As you've heard, it is the works of their inheritor, William Shakespeare, that have become my bread and butter on this campus. While the Shakespeare Industry thrives as a multi-billion-dollar world-wide venture, I admit I've seen that very name— Shakespeare— cause students to wince in sheer terror. And yet: his work, too, I've found, with guidance, can equally lead students into a sense of linguistic awe, and an intense and often startling empathy, of which they might not have realized that they were actually capable.

Living with Shakespeare, as I do, is a treat: from his classically-derived plots, to the individuated voice he grants each and every of his hundreds of characters. A principal highlight of my time here has hinged on bringing students— in groups ranging from 3 to 50 at a time— to world-class dramatic performances at venues such as Minneapolis's Guthrie Theater, the Milwaukee Symphony, the University of Chicago's Court Theater, the Chicago Shakespeare Theater, Shakespeare's Globe Theater in London, England, and the Royal Shakespeare Theater, in Shakespeare's hometown of Stratford-upon-Avon. But the most important educational gift to fall in my lap here at NMU involves an endowed fund established by retired Professor Emeritus

Bob Dornquast, which enables me each August to team up with History Professor Chet DeFonso and a dozen or so students to head to the Stratford Festival in Stratford, Ontario. There, funded in full by Professor Dornquast's impossibly generous gift, we harness the power of classical drama to blow our students' minds. When you receive those glossy NMU Alumni Magazines, do note that there is an actual student benefit to your giving, in whatever your area of interest. To my mind, there is simply no better way both to showcase and to interrogate the qualities that distinguish us as a species— in these dark times, or in any other— than to witness the shrewdest possible staging of Euripides' play, *The Bacchae*, of Moliere's *Tartuffe*, or of Shakespeare's *Richard III*: the last featuring that charismatic sociopath of a politician, who comports his face, he claims, so as to “smile and smile and murder whiles I smile.”

And so, we return to Shakespeare. I have thought long and hard about his dramatic depictions of personhood— his situating of character in time— and, in doing so, I have engaged his works over the last few decades through a range of fancy theoretical interpretive glasses. But the older I get, the more I see that Shakespeare's perception of time and character is often a quite simpler matter, really, than all that: it cleaves most closely, perhaps, to a broadly-conceived humanism that involves something I suppose we all ought to recognize, especially on a day like today: that regardless of who we think we are, time is less chronology than it is psychology.

This psychological type of time I mean involves something voiced best, perhaps, by arguably Shakespeare's greatest character: the Rosalind of *As You Like It*, who insists that “time [actually] moves in divers paces with divers persons,” that each individual carries within herself or himself an emotionally-inflected, inner or subjective form of being. This type of time might come as the anticipation we can enjoyably observe in the lovelorn Juliet's insistence, as she awaits her Romeo, that “in a minute there are many days”; or as politically charged, when

Hamlet, at a crux, insists that not only for himself, but for his entire state of Denmark, the “time is out of joint”; or as nostalgia, when the ineffective reign of Richard II collapses in his muted observation that “I wasted time and now doth time waste me . . . O call back yesterday, bid time return again”; or as time’s mercuriality, with Iago’s canny assertion in *Othello* that “pleasure and action make the hours seem short . . . though wit depends on dilatory time”; or in Feste’s triumphal reflection at the close of *Twelfth Night*, that “the whirligig of time [finally] brings in his revenges.” As masterful as Shakespeare was at constructing coherent characters through such attention to their ostensible perceptions of time, however, he also saw something more in such representations than is frequently given credit, another form of time, as it were. And that is what I will call, confirming my theme here today: Occasion.

To seize time by the top was a well-worn cliché in Shakespeare’s England. Many of his contemporary playwrights employ the phrase, which leads us to the pregnancy of this moment, as it were, for today’s graduates. It might seem a bit odd, perhaps, for me to stand here and to acknowledge that as I look back upon my own life— from the middle, as it were— what first leaps to mind are a painful series of opportunities blown; of possibilities forsaken; of might-have-beens utterly lost to time. I assume all of us of a certain age can do so. These quiet lamentations for me involve family I took for granted during my younger years; of various bridges needlessly burnt; of too many close friends now dead and buried; and of various regrets that continue to needle me these many years later. But great moments emerge, too, full of pith and marrow, that have led me to my marriage, to my children, to my job, and to this very platform: of students who take my teaching seriously enough to become more careful thinkers, more artful writers, and savvier theatregoers; of articles I’ve managed to place in just the right academic journals at just the right time; of book editors I’ve attracted, far wiser than I; and of a series of strong relationships with key advisors, including NMU’s Dr. Raymond Ventre. Ray

made clear to me as a job candidate the merits of Northern, in general, and specifically of the NMU chapter of the AAUP. I would not have taken this job in the first place if it weren't for him and for our union.

Indeed: as Lord Tennyson puts it in his poem, *Ulysses*: “I am a part of all that I have met.” That assertion— that your actions in the world become a part of you, and, reciprocally, that you become your actions in the world— offers us all a crucial truth, it seems to me, and especially to you graduates, as you peek ahead toward your own unimaginable futures. I had a wild time in my early twenties, as my students know: from teaching my way westward across China and into central Asia, over one year, to working myself northward, upon my return, over many years, to Fairbanks and the Arctic coast of Alaska; from working odd jobs in Canada's Maritime provinces, to crisscrossing the northeast for dazzling concerts by the Allman Brothers Band. These adventures, however, came to a sudden end, for me, in a terrible car accident and a long and painful year in a hospital bed. But all of these experiences, all of them, in their various ways, propel me in my current life, including my commitment to introducing students to travel and the arts, my pioneering Shakespeare scholarship in the field of disability studies, my obsession with improvisational artistic performance, and my confirmed belief in the life-transforming value of higher education. To be plain: the paths before you will not consist wholly of peaches and cream. But the resilience you display in making use of both the thrilling and the traumatic episodes you encounter, will ultimately come to define you. So here I stand, exhorting you: YOUR time, your time, is truly what you make of it. But what might Shakespeare have to say about such a conclusion?

In Renaissance English iconography, the formal emblem for Occasion features the embodiment of the concept as an individual with winged feet and a shaved head, excepting a

long forelock of hair: a sort of long braid of a pony-tail in the front of an otherwise bald pate. The image is unsettling, but so is Occasion itself, isn't it? The idea was that either you grasped Occasion by this forelock as She swiftly swept past you— you literally seized time by the top— or you missed it: you missed Occasion altogether. For those of you sure of your next steps, in graduate programs or in fancy jobs: Rock on. Go for it. But for those of you less sure, for those of you terrified about what to do now, I confess that it took me nearly four years of hard work and brazen adventure— to the age of 26— to decide to head to graduate school. By then, I was prepared; I was all-in. Sure, I drove my parents utterly crazy in the process. But as Shakespeare's noblest Roman, Brutus, reminds us "There is a tide in the affairs of [us all], Which taken at the flood, leads on to [good] fortune. Omitted, all the voyage of life is bound in shallows and in miseries.... We must take the current when it serves," he says, "or lose our ventures."

My concluding advice is simple, really: the planet you inherit today and the country you inherit today, are in equal measure wildly exciting, achingly beautiful ... and in almost limitless state of crisis. These crises, by the look and feel of them, will likely be the very ones you wrestle with in the coming decades. Of course, we want you to be well and to do well during that span, and over the course of your rich and fulfilling lives. But I also want to make a personal plea: Be good. Do good. You are indeed— and will continue to be— a part of all that you have met, and I urge you to rely on those experiences to serve others; to seek clarity; and always, always, to remain open to your own ability to construct a better version of yourself. May you, too, come to understand Occasion for what it is: the thing which, seen clearly and grasped in a timely fashion, can lead to all sorts of golden opportunities, even permitting you to stare down a world of self-regret in the process. I am thankful to the Occasions that presented themselves to me when, where, and how they did. But I am especially proud of the times I accepted those challenges, however much hard and lonely work they demanded, or how wrongheaded they might have

seemed at the time. I recount daily now the heady realization that I get to teach what I do, to write what I do, and to live where I do: along with the students and colleagues that I do.

To those of you in the winter graduating class of 2017: you will depart from the Superior Dome today as graduates of Northern Michigan University! You will depart today, recalling the magic of your lives lived to their fullest here in Marquette, full of experiences that will serve as the springboards for the limitless possibilities of your future. You will depart today, knowing that the educational achievements we celebrated with you here, confirmed your lifetimes of learning to come. You will depart today, eager to engage with the arts, and to support them, in order to continue to weigh and to examine your own views on human identity, human values, and human difference. You will depart today, knowing that you, too, in time, will give back to Northern in order to promote student learning experiences that align with your own areas of interest. And you will depart today, finally, armed with the knowledge, the skills, and the tenacity that will permit you to glimpse narrowly those keen moments of Occasion that only you will be able to perceive. I join with the faculty, the President, the Provost, and the Trustees in wishing you wisdom and luck in seizing upon all the very best of them.

Thank you.