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How to Read and Understand Shakespeare

Course Guidebook

Professor Marc C. Conner
Washington and Lee University

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Marc C. Conner, Ph.D.

Jo M. and James M. Ballengee
Professor of English
Washington and Lee University

Professor Marc C. Conner is the Jo M. and James M. Ballengee Professor of English at Washington and Lee University (W&L), where he also serves as the Chair of the English Department. Professor Conner earned his bachelor's degrees in English and Philosophy at the University of Washington and his master's and doctorate degrees in English Literature at Princeton University, where he received the McCosh Award for being an outstanding graduate student teacher. After one-year appointments at Princeton and at the University of Notre Dame, Professor Conner came to W&L.

In his 16 years at W&L, Professor Conner has taught a wide range of courses, including American and African American Literature, Modern Irish Literature, the Bible as Literature, and Literature and Philosophy. In 2005, he restructured the department's introductory Shakespeare course into a dynamic and interactive seminar on Shakespeare as both a poet and playwright, emphasizing the dramatic elements in the plays and producing an annual Shakespeare play performed by students. Professor Conner teaches a regular course on performing Shakespeare and has taught and lectured on Shakespeare to a variety of audiences. A dedicated advocate of global study, he created the Spring Term in Ireland Program, which he has directed six times, taking W&L students to Ireland to experience Irish literature, culture, and history. At W&L, Professor Conner received the Outstanding Teacher Award in 2004 and the Anece F. McCloud Excellence in Diversity Award in 2009.

Professor Conner's scholarship focuses on 20th- and 21st-century narrative in several national traditions. He is the editor or coeditor of four books: *The Aesthetics of Toni Morrison: Speaking the Unspeakable*, *Charles Johnson: The Novelist as Philosopher, The Poetry of James Joyce Reconsidered*,

and *The Selected Letters of Ralph Ellison* (in progress). A prolific scholar, Professor Conner has published more than 40 essays, articles, and reviews and has delivered more than 65 papers at scholarly conferences. He has served as Treasurer of the Toni Morrison Society and is a founding member and Treasurer/Secretary of the Ralph Ellison Society. ■

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How to Read and Understand Shakespeare

Scope:

William Shakespeare is considered the greatest writer of his age, the greatest writer in the English language, and perhaps the greatest writer of all time. For over 400 years, he has held the preeminent place in world drama. His plays are known the world over and are a standard for timeless art. He is taught at every level of education in every country, and it is a near-universal opinion that the plays of Shakespeare are great art and are something we should all read and understand.

However, how many of us really know how to engage with a Shakespeare play? How many of us feel confident in approaching Shakespeare, in reading his work, in viewing his plays? The fact of the matter is that although the world urges us to read and love Shakespeare, his plays are difficult, demanding, strange—indeed, most of us struggle just to make sense of Shakespeare, let alone to see the many reasons why he is held in such high regard.

This course seeks to make Shakespeare understandable to the general reader. It starts with a simple premise: Shakespeare actually teaches us how to understand his plays. He gives us clues and tools at every step of the way that can help us unlock the mysteries of his art. It's as if Shakespeare provides us a toolbox with a host of tools inside that can be used to understand not just one play, but all of his plays. Properly understood and utilized, these tools can help us read, understand, and love Shakespeare's work.

For example, virtually every Shakespeare play has a double plot, often a "high" and "low" plot that mirror or contrast with one another. By employing the double plot tool, you will see the ways in which a play such as *A Midsummer Night's Dream* parallels the human world with the fairy world or how a play such as *King Lear* explores two parent-children conflicts simultaneously. Similarly, at the heart of

Shakespearean comedy is the block to young love; by applying this tool, you will see that the response to this block can determine whether a play becomes a tragedy, like *Romeo and Juliet*, or a comedy, like *As You Like It*—or even a play that eludes such easy categories, like *Measure for Measure* or *The Winter's Tale*. You will see that Shakespeare's comedies often contain a "green world," which offers an escape from the negative society that would resist young love, whereas Shakespeare's tragedies show the inability to find such a green world, instead finding only places of terror, such as the witches in *Macbeth*, or places of chaos, such as the stormy heath in *King Lear*.

In these lectures, you will learn about Shakespeare's own stage, about its conventions, props, and particular tools that often dictated what sorts of scenes Shakespeare could compose. You will also learn about his staging practices and all the ways in which Shakespeare makes acting itself a theme of his plays. Such tools as the play within the play, place and person, and the character contrast will help you see how theatricality itself is at the heart of Shakespeare's imagination. You will explore the ways in which Shakespeare can be performed, the different ideas of acting that can be applied to a Shakespeare play, and how best to read Shakespeare and which techniques can bring out the meaning of his words when spoken aloud.

You will also explore Shakespeare's incomparable gift with language. The words are the primary tool for Shakespeare's expression, and while this may seem to be the greatest barrier to understanding Shakespeare's plays, in fact, you will see that with a few simple tools at your disposal, you can comprehend and appreciate Shakespeare's astonishing uses of language and truly see how he achieves his great works of literature.

Finally, you will put all of the tools to bear to understand the tremendous range and gravity of Shakespeare's ideas. Such key tools as appearance versus reality, the arc of character, and politics as theater will help you see the complex and penetrating ideas that inform every Shakespeare play.

Over the course of these 24 lectures, you will examine in detail 12 of Shakespeare's greatest plays—including *Hamlet*, *Twelfth Night*, *Macbeth*, *Romeo and Juliet*, and *The Tempest*—and you will be exposed to about at least another dozen. This means that this course covers two-thirds of Shakespeare's entire corpus of plays. Each lecture contains several specific tools that help you uncover the meaning in the plays, with detailed explanations of how the tools work and careful application of the tools to the play under consideration. You will also see how the tools apply to other plays. One of the guiding principles of this course is that a tool that works for one play will work for virtually every play; thus, as the lectures build, so too does your ability to analyze and understand all of Shakespeare's work.

Unlike many Shakespeare courses that seek to inform the reader of the lecturer's view of the plays, this course seeks to empower you so that you are able to understand Shakespeare's plays on your own. Whether reading the plays on the page or watching them on the stage or screen, you will be able to grasp the details of the play as well as the deepest, most compelling themes and structures. Your ability to comment on and explain a Shakespeare play will grow immensely. Most importantly, Shakespeare will become yours, and you will feel empowered to engage his plays and to have all the delight and drama of Shakespeare in your life. ■

Approaching Shakespeare—The Scene Begins
Lecture 1

The goal of this course is to provide you with a toolkit of ideas and approaches that will enable you to read or view any Shakespeare play with confidence and understanding. In trying to grasp a Shakespeare play, it's best to start with a single dramatic scene and branch outward. In this lecture, you will learn that the most important thing to keep in mind with Shakespeare is his use of language to attain the maximum amount of meaning. You will also learn that his use of stagecraft is crucial. Furthermore, to understand Shakespeare, you must participate actively in the play as you read or watch it.

What Makes Understanding Shakespeare's Plays So Difficult?

- The first tool for understanding Shakespeare is to start with a scene—a moment of action on the stage—and try to figure out what's going on right then and there. For example, start with a scene that many people are familiar with: the famous balcony scene from *Romeo and Juliet*.

- Start with this question: Where in the play does this scene occur? It's the start of the second act of the play—which means that it's time to move from the preliminary business of Act I into the real heart of the play in Act II.

- How does the scene begin? A young man, hardly more than a boy, looks up at a balcony where a young girl—whom he has just seen an hour before for the first time—is also looking up, toward the stars. The young man exclaims, softly, as if to himself: "But soft, what light through yonder window breaks? / It is the east and Juliet is the sun!"

- One of the essential keys for unlocking Shakespeare is the way he uses words. We will call this the "words, words, words" tool because when Hamlet is asked what he is reading, he responds,

"Words, words, words." How does Shakespeare use these words? Shakespeare uses language in figurative ways, meaning that the language is representative, symbolic, metaphorical; in other words, he uses words to mean something other than their literal meaning.

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Reading Shakespeare, although challenging, can be entertaining and satisfying.

- Romeo looks up and sees a light. Well, sure, Juliet's bedroom candle is burning. However, Romeo does not stop at that literal meaning. The window, he says, is the eastern horizon, and the light he beholds is the sun rising—which, he says, is Juliet herself.

- What is gained by using language in this way? What is gained is precisely a surplus of meaning—larger significances than the literal words would allow. If Romeo is telling us that Juliet is now his sun, this means that she has a cosmic significance to him, and indeed, a few lines later, he compares her eyes to stars and says that they could burn "so bright that birds would sing and think it were not night."

- Juliet even becomes a goddess to Romeo, just as primitive people once worshiped the sun. Indeed, later in the play, Juliet calls Romeo "the god of my idolatry," which is a dangerous confusion of the love one gives to a person with the love one gives to God.

- In almost the very last line of the play, the prince says, because these young lovers are now dead, "The sun for sorrow will not show his head"—as if the light that was embodied in Juliet has now been extinguished. All of these meanings are suggested in the first

small comparison Romeo makes with his language: "It is the east and Juliet is the sun."

- At this point, Romeo continues to elaborate on this metaphor, which is a comparison in words of one thing to another.

> Arise fair sun [speaking of Juliet] and kill the envious moon
>
> Who is already sick and pale with grief
>
> That thou her maid art far more fair than she.

- Romeo suggests that the moon itself envies Juliet's beauty, just as the moon must envy the greater light and glory of the sun. Romeo says one thing and means many things. It's one of the major tools to keep in mind with Shakespeare: His language means more than one thing and works on more than one level of meaning.

- Romeo says: "It is my lady, O, it is my love!" This simply means that the girl he beholds is the girl he adores. Shakespeare alternates lines fraught with condensed, poetic meaning with lines that mean pretty much exactly what they say. Usually, the characters that are most interesting move back and forth between figurative language and literal language.

- When Juliet first speaks from the balcony, her initial words are a succinct statement of the whole problem of the play: that she is of the Capulet family and Romeo is a Montague, the sworn enemies of the Capulets.

> O Romeo, Romeo, wherefore art thou Romeo?
> Deny thy father and refuse thy name.
> Or if thou wilt not, be but sworn my love
> And I'll no longer be a Capulet.

- "Wherefore art thou Romeo" means "Why are you named Romeo?" This problem of the name strikes Juliet as an odd thing: If she loves Romeo and Romeo loves her, why should mere names be such a problem? She moves into her own meditation on, in fact, language itself.

  What's in a name? That which we call a rose

  By any other word would smell as sweet;

  So Romeo would, were he not Romeo call'd,

  Retain that dear perfection which he owes

  Without that title. Romeo, doff thy name,

  And for thy name, which is no part of thee,

  Take all myself.

- Juliet is taking on the very problem of Shakespeare's words: Why use one word rather than another? What difference does the word make? What's in a name? If this play tells us anything, it tells us that we cannot simply abandon the meanings words have. Romeo and Juliet struggle mightily to escape the fate that their family names demand, and the tragedy of the play is that they cannot do it. Words, Shakespeare tells us, are of enormous, life-changing, world-shaping importance, which is another reason why Shakespeare tries to bring out their power through his figurative language.

The Page versus the Stage

- We don't simply read Shakespeare's plays; we watch them. One of the persisting questions about Shakespeare is whether he is best appreciated on the page or on the stage. Do we read him as a poet or watch him as a dramatist?

- People who are passionate about Shakespeare really get into this question. Some insist that no single production can truly do justice to the rich complexity of a Shakespeare play and that we must read the play to fully understand everything Shakespeare put into it. Others insist that Shakespeare wrote for the stage and that only in a performance do we see the real power and meaning of Shakespeare's work emerge.

- It's true that there is no single performance of a Shakespeare play that can possibly express all of the meanings inherent in that play. In performance, an actor or actress makes a whole series of interpretive choices that shape how he or she conceives of and expresses his or her sense of the character. Each performance offers a version of the character or play—but never the whole of it.

- There will always be meanings we find in the reading experience of Shakespeare that we won't find in any single performance. In fact, performance limits the play's meaning; with any particular performance of a Shakespeare play, there is some improvisation at work, so each show will be a little different from all others.

- However, Shakespeare wrote his plays primarily for the stage: They are, after all, plays—dramas—and if we don't keep this in mind while we read them, then we will miss all sorts of crucial elements in their meaning.

- For example, right after Hamlet delivers the "To be or not to be" speech, he meets his beloved, Ophelia. He suspects that her father and the king are spying on them, so he asks her, "Where's your father?" The text has her respond simply, "At home, my lord," though she knows that they are hiding right behind the curtain.

- How is this line delivered? Does she say it simply, as a straightforward lie? If so, we have an Ophelia who is more loyal to her father than to her lover. Or does she say it in agony, expressing her situation of being torn between her father and her lover? This gives us an Ophelia who is herself a tragic victim, caught between

these two irreconcilable forces. Or does she give Hamlet some clue of the spying—a wink, head nod, or gesture? Then, it's an Ophelia who pledges her loyalty to Hamlet, though she will be unable to sustain this loyalty once he kills her father a few scenes later.

- The language of the play doesn't tell us how to read it. All of these readings are available to you while sitting in your chair with the play, but in the theater, an actor or actress will determine his or her understanding of Ophelia and will give us a performance that expresses that understanding, and in that moment, Ophelia comes alive to us in ways that she may not in our private reading experience. This is the domain of stagecraft—a complex term that really refers to all the ways Shakespeare uses the tools of his trade to attain his dramatic effects.

Participation in Shakespeare's Plays

- One of the great guiding principles in approaching a Shakespeare play is that his work, perhaps more than that of any other great artist, requires our own participation. The more we can enter imaginatively into the theater experience, the more we will get out of a Shakespeare play.

- In his great play *Henry V*, Shakespeare tells us what it takes to really grasp what he's doing on stage. This play begins in an odd manner: A "chorus" (usually a single person) walks onstage and speaks what the text calls a prologue.

  O for a muse of fire, that would ascend

  The brightest heaven of invention:

  A kingdom for a stage, princes to act,

  And monarchs to behold the swelling scene.

- Speaking as if he were the playwright, the chorus asks for a muse of fire, a sort of holy spirit of the playhouse to inspire him to reach to

heaven itself for his words, and instead of a bare, wooden stage, he asks for a real kingdom—instead of hired actors, he wants princes to play his parts, and instead of commoners for the audience, he asks for monarchs to watch his play. Of course, none of this will happen, so the chorus asks then for our pardon and goes on to list all of the deficiencies of what we're about to see.

- The playwright notes from the start that the play can't match reality, but then tells the audience that it can work wondrously if they do their part: "Let us," he says, "on your imaginary forces work." That line is the key to the whole mystery of Shakespeare's art—called the imaginary forces tool, meaning that we must actively enlist our imagination in the play before us.

Reading Shakespeare

- If you go to your local library or bookstore or go online, you're going to find hundreds of editions, versions, and texts of Shakespeare to choose from.

- If you want to have the whole of Shakespeare in a single massive book—called a *Complete Shakespeare*—*The Norton Shakespeare* contains every play with pretty substantial explanatory footnotes, superb scholarly introductions, and many academic apparatuses. Similarly, *The Riverside Shakespeare* is edited by superb scholars and contains all kinds of helpful apparatuses and fine introductions and notes. *The Riverside Shakespeare* is a bit more elegant and readable than *The Norton Shakespeare*.

- If you want to read the plays in a handy paperback version, The Signet Shakespeare published by Penguin and The Arden Shakespeare are easily available at your local library, bookstore, or online.

- If you like audiobooks, there are tons of great recordings of Shakespeare plays available through iTunes or other audiobook formats.

- For the purposes of this course, you can read the plays along with the lectures, or you can choose to read the plays that most interest you based on the lectures.

Tools

start with a scene: The first step to getting past the challenge of Shakespeare is to start with an actual scene in a play. Ask yourself: Who is in this scene? What are they doing, and why? How might this scene be staged? Why would Shakespeare put this scene together in this way?

words, words, words: The most fundamental tool for understanding Shakespeare is the tool he himself used in his art: what Hamlet calls “words, words, words.” Pay close attention to how Shakespeare explores and exploits the many meanings of words. How does he use language in such a way that readers become aware of the rich complexity of meanings contained within these words?

imagination: Shakespeare wrote that these plays will “on your imaginary forces work.” Try to use your imagination to visualize how a scene might be set. Work to construct the blocking and action on the stage in your mind. Try to be as active as you can in constructing the play from the words on the page.

Suggested Reading

Adamson, Hunger, Magnusson, Thompson, and Wales, eds, *Reading Shakespeare’s Dramatic Language*.

Gurr, *The Shakespearean Stage*.

———, *The Shakespeare Company*.

———, *Will in the World*.

Schoenbaum, *William Shakespeare.*

Questions to Consider

1. We're told that a Shakespeare play will work "on your imaginary forces." Read one of the great soliloquies in Shakespeare—for example, Hamlet's "To be or not to be" (*Hamlet*, Act III, scene i.) or Othello's "It is the cause" (*Othello*, Act V, scene ii.)—and try to find places where your imagination is kindled by the words, where the scene starts to appear to you and become more real. What does Shakespeare do with the words to make this happen?

2. Select any Shakespeare play that you have read or watched before. Then, choose a scene within that play, preferably a scene that has struck you as potentially significant or interesting. (Good examples might be the first conflict between Petruchio and Kate in *The Taming of the Shrew*, Act II, scene i; or Macbeth's first encounter with the Witches in *Macbeth*, Act I, scene iii.) Read through the scene and ask yourself: What seems to be the main action? What conflicts can I see? Who is talking to whom, and in what manner? What seems to be the main tension? See if you can generate some ideas about what this scene means and how it functions in the play.

Shakespeare's Theater and Stagecraft
Lecture 2

The conventions of a Shakespeare play are 400 years old, and if you can understand the conventions—if you know what to look for and understand why it's there—then you are enormously empowered to understand the plays and to fall in love with the plays. In this lecture, you are going to learn about several tools, called tools of stagecraft, that you will apply to every play that you will read or study. If you can have an understanding of the theater Shakespeare himself wrote for, it will help you immensely to understand how the plays work, and why they work this way, today.

The Mirror up to Nature

- In the heart of *Hamlet*, in Act III, a play is being performed—a play within the larger play. Hamlet continues to doubt the words of his father's ghost, who has told him that his uncle Claudius killed his father and demands that Hamlet exact vengeance for this. "The spirit that I have seen / May be a devil," Hamlet muses. Hamlet needs to test his uncle's guilt, so he determines to perform a play before King Claudius in which the murder reported by the ghost is acted out. "The play's the thing," Hamlet concludes, "Wherein I'll catch the conscience of the King."

- Claudius's very conscience will be revealed by watching a performance. It's as if Shakespeare is suggesting that how we respond to a drama tells us much about our own character—it catches our own conscience. A key tool for us to employ as we study Shakespeare is to watch for the presence of the play within the play; some version of this happens in many of Shakespeare's plays, and it's crucial because it shows us how Shakespeare thought about drama.

- The play within the play in *Hamlet* is no ordinary play. It's called "The Murder of Gonzago," with a plot strikingly similar to Claudius's murder of King Hamlet. Hamlet is both the producer of

this play and, in a sense, the playwright. During the performance, Hamlet exclaims for the audience what the play means, who the characters are, what the plot is—as if he is the director, too.

- As we look at Hamlet's directions, it is really hard not to think that this is how Shakespeare himself wanted his plays to be performed: He says, "Speak the speech, I pray you, as I pronounced it to you, trippingly on the tongue." Hamlet's first piece of advice urges that most fundamental of skills for an actor—clarity and alacrity of speech. He then speaks up for the poets, urging the actors to let the words convey the meaning and to avoid absurd overgestures and excess of motion.

- The point is not to overdo it—let it be natural, as Hamlet explains in the most famous part of this speech.

> Suit the action to the word, the word to the action, with this special observance, that you o'erstep not the modesty of nature. For anything so o'erdone is from the purpose of playing, whose end, both at the first and now, was and is to hold as 'twere the mirror up to nature.

- "The mirror up to nature" sums up the clues of this whole episode, and it's as if Shakespeare himself is handing us a major tool for understanding his theater: Shakespeare's art (at least as Hamlet understands it) consists in mirroring reality—in mirroring or representing "nature," the world as it naturally is. This is what is called mimesis, or imitation.

- When we read or watch a Shakespeare play, we must read the language and imagine the performance as having a natural quality, as trying to imitate life. This doesn't mean the plays always have to seem realistic, but it does mean the acting should be natural, not overdone or ridiculous. The goal is to offer an image of what our own life is like, in some sense.

- This also gives us crucial clues for how we should read Shakespeare aloud. This is one of the most important tools for really making sense of what's happening in a Shakespeare play: Reading the words out loud, instead of just reading them on the page, is an enormous help in making sense of those words. Lines that on the page seem odd or confusing will, when read aloud, suddenly reveal their meanings, particularly if we combine the reading with a natural sense of how the characters would be acting.

- Hamlet's words tell us how to read Shakespeare: naturally, without affection or undue emotion. There's no way to know if this is Shakespeare speaking through Hamlet, but it fits so well with so many of Shakespeare's other ideas that it does make sense to interpret it this way. What is crucial to note is the emphasis placed by Hamlet, Shakespeare's most theatrical character, on matching performance with nature—as if the stage could reveal to us the deepest truths of our interior selves.

Shakespeare's World

- All art has a history; all artistic creation springs from sources, influences, and traditions. If we can understand something of where Shakespeare came from, then we'll be better able to understand the works he created. In addition, knowing what tools of the stage were at Shakespeare's disposal will help us understand how and why he wrote the plays that he did.

- In 1567, a man named James Burbage opened a theater in central London called The Red Lion. This is the invention of modern theater as we know it: a public space where people will pay money to watch a play performed. Within three decades, a host of theaters like this one would arise in London, including Shakespeare's Globe. These theaters were built outside of the original Roman walls that surrounded the city proper of London because the city was controlled by Puritan leaders, who outlawed theater within the city limits because they despised and distrusted theater.

- Shakespeare and his colleagues built their theaters across the river, on the south bank of the Thames. This was also the area of the bear-baiting pits, gambling dens, seedy taverns, and whorehouses. This was, in short, the area of illicit activity, and here is where Shakespeare was at home. Now, this doesn't mean that his plays are not absolute triumphs of high literary art. He could, at the very least, traverse both the high and the low of society.

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Shakespeare's Globe is a modern reconstruction of the original Globe Theatre, built close to its original location in London. The theater opened to the public in 1997 with a production of *Henry V*.

- As we study Shakespeare's plays, watch for how Shakespeare shows all the strata of society—from the most common workers to kings, queens, and even gods—what we will call the broad society tool. He wanted to know every aspect of his society so that he could present it truthfully on the stage—so that he could hold the mirror up to nature.

- The theaters would cater to a very mixed audience. There could be as many as 3,000 spectators for any play—a huge number for a city of about 200,000—and it would attract the whole range of the population.

- The interiors of these theaters were roughly round or octagonal in shape, and inside there would be seating going upward in boxes on at least three sides of the stage. The stage itself was a thrust stage, which is pushed out among the audience who would surround the

playing area. This is the opposite of a proscenium stage, where the actors are more on distant display from the audience.

- In Shakespearean theater, the actors could see and even interact with the audience, and vice versa. As you read or listen to a soliloquy, or solo speech, for example—keep in mind that those intimate speeches are meant to be a shared intimacy between the actor and the audience, who is brought into the scene through the soliloquies.

- The light would be natural daylight augmented by torches—no spotlights or scenes in the dark. There was virtually no scenery; Shakespeare's stage was quite bare. The idea of a highly elaborate, lifelike stage that really resembles the world emerged in the Victorian era. As you visualize these scenes and try to imagine how they might appear on stage, keep this in mind and focus on the heart of the play, which is its language. Shakespeare constantly tries to use language masterfully in order to conjure an illusion—an illusion that, if we participate in it, can almost become our reality.

- Over the last 20 years, there have been several theaters that have tried to return Shakespeare to his original conditions, and two have been particularly successful: the reconstruction of the Globe Theatre on the south bank of the Thames, completed in 1997, and the replica of the Blackfriars Playhouse, Shakespeare's more intimate indoor theater, which opened in 2001 in Staunton, Virginia. Each tries to return Shakespeare to his original staging practices.

- In Shakespeare's theater, there was very little scenery, and the audience would know what the few props meant. For example, a throne in the middle of the stage meant that the scene was set at court and a tree meant that the actors were in a forest. In short, the audience knew the conventions. This theater was not realistic, but rather, the illusion had to be accepted by the audience—this is the idea of Shakespeare's "contract with the audience."

- All of this can help us to visualize how the stage might have appeared and how the actors would use this space to create

the scene. This is how we bring the play to life in our minds—remember, "on your imaginary forces work."

- A good example of this "contract" is what the prologue who opens *Romeo and Juliet* says. He steps forward and basically gives away the whole plot of the play—with the purpose of bringing the audience into the play, making them participants in the action about to unfold.

> Two households, both alike in dignity,
>
> In fair Verona, where we lay our scene,
>
> From ancient grudge break to new mutiny,
>
> Where civil blood makes civil hands unclean.
>
> From forth the fatal loins of these two foes
>
> A pair of star-cross'd lovers take their life;
>
> Whose misadventured piteous overthrows
>
> Do with their death bury their parents' strife.
>
> The fearful passage of their death-mark'd love,
>
> And the continuance of their parents' rage,
>
> Which, but their children's end, nought could remove,
>
> Is now the two hours' traffic of our stage;
>
> The which if you with patient ears attend,
>
> What here shall miss, our toil shall strive to mend.

- Notice how the speech is also a sort of plea to the audience: Give us your patient ears, and together we'll make this work. The more active we can make our minds in reading or seeing the play, the more successful the whole adventure will be.

- If the Shakespearean stage were bare of scenery, costumes for the company would be quite elaborate and indeed would constitute the bulk of a company's budget. They could be reused from play to play, of course, and because this was a repertory theater—Shakespeare's company might be performing as many as 20 or more plays in a single season—such recycling would be essential.

- You can certainly imagine rich, elaborate costuming in these plays, and indeed at those theaters that try to stage the plays under so-called original staging practices or Shakespearean conditions, bare sets and rich costumes are the standard practice.

- The stage itself was flat with a trapdoor in the middle of the stage that would enable figures to rise up from or descend down into the area underneath, known as "hell." In *Hamlet*, the gravedigger scene might well take place in this pit, and in *Macbeth*, Banquo's ghost might rise up out of the floor in the banquet scene.

- There would be a structure at the back of the stage called the tiring house, where actors could quickly change their attire between scenes. It would have a curtain in front of it that could be pulled back to reveal a more intimate scene, such as the play within the play of *Hamlet*. A balcony—most famous for the balcony scene in *Romeo and Juliet*—would be above this area. Above the balcony would be "the heavens," where figures could be flown or descended downward on ropes.

Tools

stagecraft, or the play within the play: Shakespeare was a man of the theater and used every tool available to him from the stage to create his plays. How can a knowledge of the tools of his stagecraft help readers visualize the ways a Shakespeare play would have looked 400 years ago? Why would Shakespeare so often employ the play-within-the-play device? What does this tell you about Shakespeare's sense of the theater?

mirror up to nature: Hamlet proclaims that acting ought to be naturalistic—that players should follow "the modesty of nature" and speak and act in a way that mirrors the natural world. Try to put this into action as you read Shakespeare aloud. What does this sort of approach to reading Shakespeare do to help you figure out what the words and the play mean?

double plot: Virtually every Shakespeare play has a structure of "high" and "low" plots—that is, a plot concerning the upper-class characters and another dealing with the lower-class characters. How does this dynamic arise from Shakespeare's own theaters and audiences? Watch carefully for how these plots relate to each other: Are they parallel? Do they contrast? Do they mirror one another? Does each face the same dramatic obstacles, or do they differ? What does Shakespeare gain by structuring the plays in this way?

Suggested Reading

Bate and Jackson, *Shakespeare: An Illustrated Stage History*.

Cohen, *Shakesfear and How to Cure It*.

Davies, *Performing Shakespeare*.

Dessen, *Elizabethan Stage Conventions and Modern Interpreters*.

Gurr, *The Shakespearean Playing Companies*.

———, *The Shakespearean Stage*.

———, *The Shakespeare Company*.

Questions to Consider

1. Read through the play-within-the-play scene in *Hamlet* (Act III, scene ii) and try to imagine how it might be performed on the stage. What does Shakespeare emphasize about acting here? How does he use acting to reinforce Hamlet's own dilemma and desires?

2. How does a working knowledge of Shakespeare's stage and theater help us understand his plays? Choose any scene in a play that you're familiar with and try to envision how the actual stage would look in this scene. What might the costumes look like? What elements of the stage might be used?

A Midsummer Night's Dream—Comic Tools

Lecture 3

The truth is that the greatest writer in English history was actually not a great creator of new stories; rather, he drew upon all sorts of sources for his plays. In this lecture, you will learn how Shakespeare put his own spin on classic plotlines. You will also learn about four major tools for understanding comedy—the block to love, the altar or tomb direction, the friends to lovers tool, and the green world—that will illuminate all of the major themes and concepts at work in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

Shakespeare's Sources

- The curriculum at Shakespeare's grammar school included the Latin classical writers, and one way they would teach Latin would be to read and perform the plays by such Roman writers as Terence and Plautus.

- This is how Shakespeare uses his so-called sources: He draws upon a huge range of other materials—works of history, other plays, legends and folktales, material from classical authors—and weaves them together to form a new whole.

- Beyond some plot ideas, these Roman plays gave Shakespeare a form that he could follow in the early years of his career, roughly between 1590 and 1594, when he wrote a number of comedies that closely follow the classical models of comedy.

The Comedic Form

- The word "comedy" derives from the Greek word *comos*, meaning "revelry" or "merrymaking" and was related to ancient village festivals such as weddings. It is essential to keep in mind that comedy and marriage are always connected.

- The Roman playwrights that Shakespeare studied developed a style called new comedy, which focuses on the private life of families

and follows a standard three-part structure: First, young lovers are blocked in their love, usually by an older father figure termed the *senex iratus*, or angry old man; second, the lovers seek to escape from this block, resulting in all sorts of comic confusion, disguises, and disorder; and third, the disorder is sorted out, the block to love is overcome, and order and harmony are restored not just to the young couple but to society as a whole.

- Shakespeare's first great comedy was probably *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, and in fact, the block to love is found just 20 lines into the first scene: An angry father, Egeus, appears before Duke Theseus to complain about his willful, disobedient daughter, exclaiming: "Full of vexation come I, with complaint against my child, my daughter Hermia." At the heart of his anger is her refusal to marry the man he has chosen for her.

  Stand forth Demetrius. My noble lord,

  This man hath my consent to marry her.

  Stand forth, Lysander. And, my gracious Duke,

  This hath bewitch'd the bosom of my child.

  . . . .

  With cunning hast thou filch'd my daughter's heart,

  Turn'd her obedience (which is due to me)

  To stubborn harshness.

- We don't learn why Egeus is so opposed to Lysander. Indeed, part of the humor of the play is that Lysander and Demetrius are pretty much alike: They're both gentlemen, both well dressed, and both desirable. The difference seems only to be that Hermia loves one

and not the other—part of the mystery of love that this play seeks to explore.

- What so angers Egeus is the issue of disobedience, a matter that fascinates Shakespeare: the efforts of the old to control the young and particularly of fathers to control their daughters. This may well have been a matter of personal concern: Shakespeare had two surviving children, both girls, and the difficulty of controlling a young woman, as his early comedy *The Taming of the Shrew* also demonstrates, is a constant obsession of his.

- Egeus even begs the duke to kill his daughter if she will not relent.

  And, my gracious Duke,

  Be it so she will not here, before your Grace,

  Consent to marry with Demetrius,

  I beg the ancient privilege of Athens:

  As she is mine, I may dispose of her;

  Which shall be either to this gentleman,

  Or to her death, according to our law.

- Egeus's speech is fairly harsh, even in the patriarchal world of Shakespeare's day. This is a comic version of the central dynamic in *Romeo and Juliet*, when Juliet's father, Lord Capulet—who had seemed to be a loving, even doting father—bursts into rage when his daughter refuses to marry Paris, the man he's chosen for her. In that play, Shakespeare wrote of the tragic inability of young lovers to overcome the block to their love.

- In *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Shakespeare will write their comic solution. This key tool actually shows us the entire direction of a

Shakespeare play, which leads to the second tool: the altar or the tomb? As we pay attention to the direction of the plot, ask: Will the block to love be overcome, ending at the marriage altar? If so, the play is a comedy. Will the play show the failure to overcome the block to love, ending not in marriage but in death—in the tomb? If so, then it is a tragedy.

- In *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Theseus, though apparently a man of good will and sense, is not very sympathetic to Hermia. He gives Hermia three choices: obey your father's will, enter a convent and forever abjure the sight of men, or be executed. In all three choices, the autonomy of the woman is subject to the will and tyranny of the men.

- To complicate matters further, Theseus himself is about to marry, and his bride is Hippolyta, the Amazon queen whom Theseus conquered before the play begins. In the play's opening lines, Theseus expresses the play's mingling of love and conquest: "Hippolyta, I wooed thee with my sword, and won thy love doing thee injuries. But I will wed thee in another key, with pomp, with triumph, and with reveling." Hippolyta is certainly not content with how Theseus is dealing out law to another young woman.

- The lovers come up with their own solution: to flee Athens and its unjust laws. It's the classic new comedy plot: flee the sharp Athenian law for love and happiness. Shakespeare, never content with a single plot, now complicates it. Enter Helena, the other young woman whom Demetrius seemed to love earlier but now scorns—yet she still dotes on him.

- Hermia and Helena are great childhood friends, so Hermia tells her companion of their plan to flee the city for the forest. This leads to the third important tool for understanding Shakespearean comedy: the friends to lovers tool.

- As the scene ends, Helena—perhaps understandably peevish at seeing her friend so happy and herself so miserable—decides to

tell Demetrius of their flight. In Shakespeare's comedies, same-sex friendship, whether male or female, gives way to heterosexual love, which seems a necessary, though painful, shift.

- Into the woods go Lysander and Hermia to flee the harsh law and find love, and Demetrius follows, and Helena follows Demetrius, preferring his scorn and abuse to the alternative of loveless solitude. Shakespeare's audience must surely have anticipated much confusion and funny high jinks in the forest because it is the formula they had come to expect.

- In the second scene, Shakespeare introduces another set of characters. This is the standard Shakespearean device that is used in nearly every play: the double plot or the high and low plot. The high plot is the main plot of the play, involving the "high," or royal, characters. The low plot is that of the lower-class characters—the sort of people Shakespeare probably was much more familiar with.

- Shakespeare introduces the "rude mechanicals": Peter Quince, a carpenter; Tom Snout, a tinker; Robin Starveling, a tailor; and Nick Bottom, a weaver. Bottom's very name suggests that he occupies the lowest rung of the social ladder, and much fun will be made of these men. However, in Shakespeare's plays, the greatest wisdom often comes from those at the bottom of the social world.

- The low plot in a Shakespeare play always mirrors the high plot. In this play, the mechanicals have gathered in the forest at night so that they can rehearse the play they hope to perform for Theseus's wedding day—called *Pyramus and Thisbe*, a classical love story that Shakespeare probably read in school. This is a tragic story of blocked love: The fathers of Pyramus and Thisbe refuse to let the young lovers come together, and in their attempt to escape this block, the young lovers tragically die. It's the *Romeo and Juliet* story, the very tragedy that Shakespeare was writing perhaps concurrently with *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

- The comic effect of this double plot is heightened by the fact that the mechanicals don't know what they're doing with their play. Quince, the director, describes the play as "the most lamentable comedy, and most cruel death, of Pyramus and Thisbe," to which Bottom replies, "A very good piece of work, I assure you, and a merry." When, at the end of the play, Theseus hears this description of the mechanicals' production, he responds, "Merry and tragical? … That is hot ice and wondrous strange snow! / How shall we find the concord of this discord?" That's a very good statement of what this play, and all Shakespearean comedy, seeks to do: to find the concord out of discord.

- Into the woods go the two sets of young lovers, and into the woods go the ridiculous mechanicals to rehearse a play that mirrors, in a comic way, the situation of the lovers. Next, Shakespeare introduces a third plotline, something even his audience could not have been prepared for: Act II begins in the forest, which is peopled by the world of the fairies. These fairies are drawn partly from English folklore, partly from Celtic mythology, and partly from literary traditions.

- Like the low plot of the mechanicals, the plot of the fairy world mirrors the high plot of the blocked lovers. In the fairy kingdom, there is a conflict raging: Oberon and Titania, the king and queen of the fairies, will not abide each other's company. Oberon wants Titania to give him a "changeling boy" to be his servant, but she refuses. It's a battle of wills between man and woman—not unlike the battle between Theseus and Hippolyta and between Hermia and Egeus.

- Titania's refusal to obey Oberon is based on her loyalty to another woman—not unlike the sisterly bond between Hermia and Helena that is being challenged by the male suitors. The block to love and friends to lovers tools work in this part of the plot as well. Indeed, this is often true in a Shakespeare play: To understand one plotline, we must understand all the others and how they speak to each other.

© Artwork/Wikimedia Commons/CC BY-SA 3.0/Public Domain.

This painting, *The Quarrel of Oberon and Titania* by Joseph Noel Paton, depicts a scene from *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

- The entry into the forest brings all of these conflicts to bear in a single space for one night. This points us to the final tool for this lecture: the green world tool. This flight into nature is a standard device in Shakespearean comedy, and in this play, we see the range of meanings that Shakespeare attaches to this green world. It is far more than just an escape from the city. There are a whole range of oppositions that Shakespeare suggests between the world of Athens and that of the forest.

- Shakespeare, in effect, takes the warring parts of our very psyche and embodies them on the stage and tries, in his comedies, to balance these conflicting parts of human nature; the tragedies show the failure to balance them, resulting in madness and death—another version of the altar or tomb tool, based on the direction the plays follow.

- How do the humans interact with this fairy kingdom? As our double plot tool suggests, we get two levels of interaction: one by the lovers—Hermia, Lysander, Helena, and Demetrius—and another by Bottom and his fellow mechanicals. Again, the double plots mirror and comment upon each other. The lovers enter the forest and experience confusion, particularly of their identities and of love.

- Shakespeare then deepens the issues by using the comedy to pursue the very meaning of love. He does this through the sustained motif of the eyes—of sight and seeing and of blindness. Shakespeare suggests that it doesn't matter what you actually see; love is independent of sight. It is a kind of magical madness.

- As the confusion in the forest heightens, as the lovers even threaten one another's lives, the sense of fear and danger increases. In recent productions, the forest world is often portrayed as a nightmare, a surging forth of our deepest subconscious terrors and desires.

- In a radical way, Shakespeare portrays the highest figure in the land—Titania, the fairy queen—as the slave to the lowest figure, Bottom, who speaks the truth of this play: that reason and love keep little company together.

Tools

block to young love: The block to young love appears repeatedly in Shakespeare's work. Pay close attention to how this block comes about and what causes this block. Is it a father figure or a figure of law? Is the block external, coming from society, or internal, coming from within the lovers themselves? How does the response to this block determine the play's ultimate mode—that is, either comedy or tragedy? (This block occurs especially in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *The Merchant of Venice*, *As You Like It*, *Hamlet*, and *The Tempest*.)

altar or the tomb?: Track the direction of the love plot. Does it move toward death, or does it move toward marriage? The difference is the difference between tragedy and comedy.

friends to lovers: Notice how the close relationships between women and men tend to give way as the play progresses to different-sex, or heterosexual, relations between men and women as the play concludes. What is lost in this movement from friendship to romantic love, and what is gained? (This dynamic especially occurs in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *The Merchant of Venice*, *Much Ado about Nothing*, and *The Winter's Tale*.)

green world: In many of the plays, especially the comedies, characters flee civilization for a world of nature, often called a "green world." Pay close attention to these green worlds and how Shakespeare uses them: How are they described? What goes on in them? Do characters transform in them? How do these green worlds relate to the civilized world to which the characters must return? (This especially occurs in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *As You Like It*, and *The Merchant of Venice*.)

Suggested Reading

Frye, *A Natural Perspective*.

———, *Northrop Frye on Shakespeare*.

Garber, *Shakespeare After All*.

Questions to Consider

1. What effect does the block to love have upon a Shakespeare play? What does this block set in motion, and how do different characters respond to it? Choose any Shakespearean comedy you are familiar with and read through the first few scenes, trying to identify the block to love. How does it work in that play?

2. What is the significance of the green world in Shakespearean comedy? How does the green world affect or alter the course of the play? Can you think of other plays where the green world appears? How does it function in those plays?

A Midsummer Night's Dream—Comic Structure

Lecture 4

In this lecture, you will learn that when reading Shakespeare, you need to pay very careful attention to the third act of the play, which often determines the course of the play, and to plays within the larger play, which illuminate the most important themes of the overall play. You will also learn that Shakespeare's comic plays have a repeated three-part structure and that having this pattern in mind can help you understand the larger significance of his comic plays.

The Importance of the Third Act

- The nightmarish quality of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* reaches its peak in the third act, and this is important because the third act is nearly always the pivotal point—the hinge—in a Shakespeare play. In the third act, the action shifts decisively, and we can see the direction the play will follow—toward marriage and a comic ending or toward death and a tragic ending. This is a kind of companion tool to the altar to tomb tool: Pay close attention to the third act of a Shakespeare play.

- In *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, it's in Act III that all the confusion about identity, lovers, and even reality itself reaches its peak, and indeed the play could easily shift into a tragic mode here, just as *Romeo and Juliet* does at this same point. This is a helpful principle of comedy: that the closer the comedy approaches tragedy, the more powerful the sense of comic relief will be when it arrives.

- This is something that Shakespeare really understands in his mature comedies—the classic plays—and in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, he is moving toward that mature vision. But how does the nightmare turn into a dream? How is the conflict resolved and the chaos avoided?

- It's important to understand what is lost in the resolution of comedy. If comedy ends in marriage, then what must be left behind are the friendships and same-sex relationships that preceded the marriage.

The great comedies are filled with the friends to lovers dynamic, which results in a shift from friendship to romantic love.

- In *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, it's almost as if Shakespeare is coming to realize the cost of the comic ending—that is, the happy marriage—as he gives to Helena one of the play's loveliest speeches (right in the heart of the third act), in which, thinking that Hermia has conspired with the two men to mock her, she laments the loss of her childhood friend.

    Injurious Hermia! Most ungrateful maid!

    Have you conspir'd, have you with these contriv'd,

    To bait me with this foul derision?

    Is all the counsel that we two have shar'd,

    The sisters' vows, the hours that we have spent

    When we have chid the hasty-footed time

    For parting us—O, is all forgot?

    All school-days' friendship, childhood innocence?

    . . . .

    And will you rent our ancient love asunder

    To join with men in scorning your poor friend?

    It is not friendly, 'tis not maidenly;

    Our sex, as well as I, may chide you for it,

    Though I alone do feel the injury.

- By the end of Act III, Puck, a mischievous sprite, concludes the act with a simple nursery rhyme that actually sums up the whole complex movement of comedy.

  When thou waks't,

  Thou tak'st

  True delight

  In the sight

  Of thy former lady's eye;

  And the country proverb known,

  That every man should take his own,

  In your waking shall be shown:

  Jack shall have Jill,

  Nought shall go ill;

  The man shall have his mare again, and all shall be well.

The Resolution of Plots

- How are the mirrored plots of Bottom and Titania and Titania and Oberon resolved? Titania falls into a hopeless dotage over Bottom, but one of the most charming parts of Bottom's character is that, although he has the entire fairy kingdom at his command, he is completely unchanged from who he was before. When Titania orders her servants to tend to Bottom's every desire, his first command is not even a command, but a hearty country greeting: "I cry your worships mercy, heartily. I beseech your worship's name?"

- In a play so filled with chaos and transformation, Bottom's consistency and simple delight in his own person stand as a wonderful counterimpulse. Even though on the surface he's the most transformed character, in fact, Bottom does not change, though the whole world changes around him. The friendship and love of Oberon and Titania is restored as well.

- How does the restoration of love come about? We can trace this through a very important tool called the *basanos*, or trial. Each of the women has undergone a severe testing, or trial—what the Greeks term the *basanos*, an essential part of comedy. The women have endured hardship, yet their reward is the happiness of companionate love.

- Comedy is driven by the marriage plot, which overcomes the obstacles to love within the play. At the end of Act IV, when the lovers wake up on the edge of the forest in one another's arms, Egeus and Theseus come upon them in a kind of reprise of the opening scene.

- At first, Egeus is outraged, thinking that his daughter and Demetrius have tried to elope: He cries to Theseus, "Enough, enough, my lord; you have enough! / I beg the law, the law upon his head!" However, Theseus seems to sense that the young lovers have resolved themselves into two happy couples. He does not pursue the law against them, and he actually invites the couples to join him and Hippolyta at their wedding that very day. Alas, a play that began with the disruptions and tensions in every love relationship ends with a cascade of weddings, as three couples—as well as Oberon and Titania—are joined together in Act V. Clearly, the block to love with which all comedy opens has been overcome.

- Act IV ends with Bottom waking up and almost thinking that he's right where we left him before he was enchanted, but then he pauses and says aloud, "I have had a most rare vision. I have had a dream, past the wit of man to say what dream it was." This is the sense of wonder, almost of magic, that concludes every Shakespearean

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This scene from *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, painted by Henry Fuseli, portrays Titiania, queen of the fairies, and Bottom with some fairies.

comedy, and it's our first glimpse into another important tool for grasping Shakespearean comedy and, often, all of Shakespeare's plays: We need to watch for Shakespeare's uses of folktale and folklore elements in his work.

- Shakespeare was a country lad who came to the big city of London. Shakespeare was immersed in a world of folklore and folktale from his earliest days, and though he abandoned that world for the cosmopolitan world of London, he never left behind its powerful influence on his imagination. By attending to his uses of folklore and folktale, we can learn a great deal about the plays he composed and how his imagination works.

- In a sense of wonder at his experience, Bottom says: "The eye of man hath not heard, the ear of man hath not seen, man's hand is not able to taste, his tongue to conceive, nor his heart to report, what my dream was." This is what scholars call synesthesia, the blending

or mixing of the senses, and although it shows Bottom's confusion, it also suggests that indeed what he has experienced does go beyond what the human senses can accommodate.

- Bottom has experienced a night of magical transformation, of incredible interaction with an otherworldly realm, and this fits with the entire play: Is there really an explanation for how the couples could overcome all the blocks to love? Is there really an answer for why human beings love one another and why that love can overcome seemingly impossible obstacles?

- Even though Bottom stands for the somewhat foolish, lowest-order perspective in the play, he once again speaks the wisdom of the play. Rather than trying to figure this whole thing out, Bottom responds with the most insightful impulse of all: to turn the experience into art. "I will get Peter Quince to write a ballad of this dream," he determines. "It shall be called 'Bottom's Dream,' because it hath no bottom." The puzzle of love, the mystery of how man and woman come together against all odds, has no rational explanation; it can only be expressed in poetry.

- This is exactly where Shakespeare takes the play in its final act. In a way, Act V of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is superfluous: It begins with the three couples already married and the wedding feast concluded. Theseus and Hippolyta talk about the magical power of theater. The young couples have apparently told Theseus and Hippolyta about their enchanted night in the forest, and the older couple is trying to figure out what it all means.

- Hippolyta wonders at their story, but Theseus scoffs at it, calling it "more strange than true," saying, "I never may believe / These antique fables, nor these fairy toys." Then, he goes on to equate the lover, the crazy person, and the poet as all suffering delusion.

- In this play, Shakespeare has presented to his audience a series of worlds about which Theseus has no idea and over which he has no control. In fact, the play will end with the fairies returning to the

stage to bless the wedding beds, showing that their greater reality comprehends the very limited reality of Theseus. On the other hand, Hippolyta sees the limits of human reason and points us toward what the play has shown: that the transformations of the human hearts that make love possible are not subject to the powers of any human ruler.

- Then, as if to emphasize this point, Shakespeare has the lovers witness a play—Bottom's ridiculous play, the Pyramus and Thisbe tale—before they go off to their marriage beds. When his servant objects that the play is "nothing" and the players silly, Theseus defends their good intentions and tells Hippolyta that it doesn't really matter how good the players are—what matters is the good will the audience brings to it: "The best in this kind are but shadows / and the worst are no worse, if imagination amend them."

- Within the play *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, we have another play being performed, and that play within the play points us to the most important themes of the overall play—that very sensibility of comedy. Any time we see a play going on within the larger play, we need to pay very careful attention. This is the play within the play tool, and it applies to a wide range of Shakespeare's work. The key of this tool is to see the ways in which the inner play mirrors or relates to the larger play in which it occurs.

- In *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, we seem to have a play whose surface story is the very opposite of the larger play: Pyramus and Thisbe is a story of separation, loss, and death whereas this play ends in marriages and happiness. *A Midsummer Night's Dream* suggests that the tragic story is the smaller reality—that, in fact, a larger comic reality circumscribes death and promises the blessings of future life.

- In Shakespeare's comic plays, we see a repeated three-part structure: First, an obstacle is set up that blocks the love of young people; second, we see a revolt or escape from the society that sets up the block (an escape usually into the green world of nature); and third, we see a return to the social world, but that world is now transformed so that reconciliation can occur. The emblem of this reconciliation is

precisely marriage, which symbolizes not just the successful love of the young couple, but also the regeneration of the social world itself. As many scholars have remarked, this three-part structure seems to mirror or resemble the working of the natural world.

Tools

third act: pay close attention to the third act of a Shakespeare play, because here the play determines itself, often showing the decisive shifts that make it what it is—a comedy or a tragedy. As you read a Shakespeare play, bear in mind as you approach Act III that it's the decisive point in the play, and as you're viewing a live play, watch for the climactic elements in the middle, which can really help you see where the play is going and how it gets there.

friends to lovers: Notice how the close relationships between women and men tend to give way as the play progresses to different-sex, or heterosexual, relations between men and women as the play concludes. What is lost in this movement from friendship to romantic love, and what is gained? (This dynamic especially occurs in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *The Merchant of Venice*, *Much Ado about Nothing*, and *The Winter's Tale*.)

***basanos*, or trial:** Pay attention to the moments when characters are put to the test—when their true internal selves emerge under duress or in a scene of trial. Watch for how the characters respond to their trial. How do these testings connect to the major themes or dramatic moments in the play?

folklore or folktale: There are many examples of Shakespeare using folklore or folktales to structure or give meaning to his plays. Watch for these moments—the bed trick, the trickster figure, uses of magic or fairy lore, the caskets, etc.—and try to see how Shakespeare uses these apparently old-fashioned devices to give meaning to his plays. (This especially occurs in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *The Merchant of Venice*, *King Lear*, *Measure for Measure*, and *Pericles*.)

stagecraft, or the play within the play: Watch carefully for moments when a miniature play is actually performed within the larger play, and pay attention to how that miniplay comments on or mirrors the larger play in

which it appears. What does this tell you about Shakespeare's fascination with how theater works? (This especially occurs in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *As You Like It*, *Hamlet*, and *The Winter's Tale*.)

three-part structure of comedy: Shakespearean comedy is almost always characterized by a three-part structure of blocked love, escape or flight, and then the return or reconciliation. Pay careful attention to how a comedy works out this three-part structure. What variations are there on this structure? Why was Shakespeare so drawn to this concept? What else does it resemble in nature, religion, or mythology?

double plot: Virtually every Shakespeare play has a structure of "high" and "low" plots—that is, a plot concerning the upper-class characters and another dealing with the lower-class characters. How does this dynamic arise from Shakespeare's own theaters and audiences? Watch carefully for how these plots relate to each other: Are they parallel? Do they contrast? Do they mirror one another? Does each face the same dramatic obstacles, or do they differ? What does Shakespeare gain by structuring the plays in this way?

Suggested Reading

Barber, *Shakespeare's Festive Comedy*.

Bloom, *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human*.

Frye, *Northrop Frye on Shakespeare*.

Questions to Consider

1. Why does friendship get abandoned in a Shakespearean comedy in favor of love? What makes this necessary, and what does it make possible?

2. What sorts of ways does folklore function in Shakespeare's comedies? Consider, for example, the folklore device of the twins in *The Comedy of Errors*, the traditional figure of the soothsayer in *Julius Caesar*, or the myth of the foundling in *Pericles* or *The Winter's Tale*. Why would this great poet draw upon folklore and folktale in so many of his plays?

Romeo and Juliet—Words, Words, Words

Lecture 5

In this lecture, you will begin your in-depth study of Shakespeare's primary tool—words themselves—as you are introduced to Shakespeare's first great tragedy, *Romeo and Juliet*. You will learn that the best way to understand what he does with language is to see it in a scene, as dramatic expressions of character and meaning. You will also learn how Shakespeare uses language to distinguish class and how the greatest expressions of language in Shakespeare are his complex languages of love. Finally, you will learn about the specific poetic form of the Shakespearean sonnet and how it gives both flexibility and control to poetic expression.

Shakespeare's Mastery of the English Language

- Hamlet is without peer when it comes to seeing the complexity hidden in apparently simple questions. When Polonius comes upon Hamlet reading a book, he asks the young prince, "What do you read, my Lord?" Hamlet answers, "Words, words, words."

- The most fundamental tool that is needed to understand Shakespeare's work is the "words, words, words" tool. What Shakespeare presents to us is language—our own language, the English language—but put to uses that are extraordinary. We can sit in the audience and listen to a magnificent Shakespeare speech and be in awe at the majesty, meaning, and beauty of the words, but we can also learn how to take the speech apart, see the technical skills at work in the poetry, and analyze Shakespeare's uses of language in ways that will greatly increase both our ability to understand the plays and also our ability to enjoy what we are seeing and hearing on the stage and on the page.

- As you learned with the first tool for this course—start with a scene—the best way to understand Shakespeare's technical uses of language is to see them in a play, as dramatic expressions of

character and meaning. In the actual scenes, we see the language come to life.

- *Romeo and Juliet* is Shakespeare's first truly great tragedy, and it was probably written in 1595, either just before or just after *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. With this play, Shakespeare launches into an amazing artistic phase. Within *Romeo and Juliet*, we can see the shift in Shakespeare from a good Renaissance playwright into the greatest literary artist in human history. Somehow, Shakespeare learned in this play what language can do and what he can do with language.

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This poster, advertising Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, was created in 1879.

The First Act of *Romeo and Juliet*

- At the beginning of *Romeo and Juliet*, a "chorus" (usually a single actor) enters and speaks a 14-line speech that, in effect, gives away the whole plot of the play—he even reveals that the young lovers die at the end! Therefore, the play does not depend on plot because everyone knows how the play will end. Instead, the play explores all of the ways in which a budding genius playwright can use words.

- As soon as the chorus leaves the stage, the first proper scene begins. The words, words, words tool tells us that we must attend carefully

not just to what characters say, but how they say it and what this reveals about them.

- Enter two servants, young men who serve the house of Capulet, one of the two great feuding families in the play. Tragedies often begin with minor characters on stage first, and often they are characters of the lower classes. In a Shakespeare play, the speech of the lower classes is always harder to understand than the language of the upper classes. The speech of these lower-class folk is filled with bawdy humor—jokes about sex and violence, basically. This is one reason why these scenes are so much easier to understand when they are acted than just read on the page.

- In the first scene, Sampson and Gregory joke about how fierce they will be in battle and in the bed; then, two servants from the House of Montague enter, and the jokes get a bit more serious. Then, the stakes are raised as a more serious figure enters: Tybalt, of the family of the Capulets, comes and seeks a fight—and his higher seriousness is signaled by his speech. He does not make bawdy jokes, nor does he speak in prose—that is, nonpoetic language—as the lower classes do.

- In general, in Shakespeare's plays, the lower-class characters signal their lower status by speaking in prose, or regular spoken English, whereas the higher-class characters signal their higher status by speaking in poetry, or elevated and artificial English.

- Tybalt's lines are poetic, as you can tell just by the rhythm: "Turn thee, Benvolio, look upon thy death." "What, drawn, and talk of peace? I hate the word, / As I hate hell, all Montagues, and thee: / Have at thee, coward."

- Shakespeare alternates between prose and poetry. Shakespeare's poetic language is in fact quite close to natural, spoken English. That's another reason why we don't want to heighten or artificially poeticize our speaking of Shakespeare. That would run counter to his whole effort. It's also why Shakespeare doesn't introduce

a lot of artificial rhyme into his poetry, which is of course pretty unnatural.

- Then, a figure of true authority, the prince, stands before the men and denounces violence and bloodshed.

  Three civil brawls bred of an airy word

  By thee, old Capulet, and Montague,

  Have thrice disturb'd the quiet of our streets

  . . . .

  If ever you disturb our streets again

  Your lives shall pay the forfeit of the peace.

- This is a new poetic register in the play—not the angry but eloquent violence of Tybalt but, rather, the stern voice of authority and control. Note the emotional effects of these registers: After Tybalt's speech, we are prepared for violence to break out at any moment in this play, and after the Prince's proclamation, we know that such violence will lead to the death of whomever perpetrates it. There is a wide range of emotional tension at work, purely through seeing the varying uses of language.

- Shakespeare shifts registers again. Lord and Lady Montague remain on the stage, and they talk about their son Romeo, whose behavior has worried them of late. His friend Benvolio promises to find out what's going on with Romeo, and when Romeo then appears, the friends talk, and we learn that Romeo thinks he is in love with a girl named Rosaline. He tells his friend about the girl, and we learn that what Romeo calls love is really infatuation, or mere lust, which you can tell by closely attending to Romeo's choice of words.

… She'll not be hit

With Cupid's arrow, she hath Dian's wit,

And in strong proof of chastity well arm'd

From love's weak childish bow she lives uncharm'd.

She will not stay the siege of loving terms

Nor bide th'encounter of assailing eyes

Nor ope her lap to saint-seducing gold.

- Notice Romeo's language of so-called love: The images and metaphors are all of combat, battle, and assault. His complaint, really, is simply that Rosaline refuses to have sex with him. We see that Romeo is immature, adolescent, and wholly unremarkable in his view of love. Indeed, he does not know what love is at all. In contrast, in the next act, he beholds Juliet, and his language, his character, and the play's whole meaning surge upward toward a much higher plane.

- There is another register of language to engage in this first act: the ribald, bawdy, comic, and outrageously creative language of Romeo's good friend Mercutio, who also uses language in highly sexual, suggestive ways. However, for Mercutio, it seems less about seducing a woman into his bed and more about delighting in his own incredible imagination.

The Shakespearean Sonnet

- In the first act of *Romeo and Juliet*, Shakespeare essentially samples every register of poetic language. All that remains is for Shakespeare to discover the high poetic language of true love; when he can do this, he'll have shown his ability to match the highest human emotion with an equally high poetic language. He'll be the master of his craft.

- This occurs the instant Romeo lays eyes upon Juliet. This is exactly what we mean by "love at first sight"—in fact, the whole fervor over love at first sight in Western culture practically begins with this scene. Romeo sees her—and, of course, we see him see her on the stage—and he bursts into lines of perfect poetry that show how Juliet differs from the rest of the created world.

  O, she doth teach the torches to burn bright!

  It seems she hangs upon the cheek of night

  Like a rich jewel in an Ethiope's ear;

  Beauty too rich for use, for earth too dear!

  So shows a snowy dove trooping with crows,

  As yonder lady o'er her fellows shows.

  The measure done, I'll watch her place of stand,

  And, touching hers, make blessed my rude hand.

  Did my heart love till now? forswear it, sight!

  For I ne'er saw true beauty till this night.

- It's important to notice that the poetry of love works by opposites, or contrasts: Juliet is like a bright jewel against dark skin—like a white dove among black crows. She is already angelic; just touching her will make Romeo's hand blessed. We are meant to see the contrast to Romeo's infatuation with Rosaline, with whom he wants a purely earthly, physical embrace. With Juliet, he feels unworthy even to touch her. The emotion of heavenly love is reinforced by the very structure and form of the language of love.

- Romeo then approaches Juliet, and they speak this same language of elevated poetry. In fact, they compose a perfect sonnet—a 14-line poem that has three quatrains, or four-line sections, and a concluding couplet, or two-line finale—as they speak. At the end of the sonnet, Romeo makes his final move, ending in the kiss they both desire.

- In a sonnet, every other line rhymes, and the final two lines rhyme. This is what we now call a Shakespearean sonnet because this is the form that he used in the 154 sonnets he wrote during his lifetime. Understanding the sonnet is very helpful for understanding how Shakespeare uses poetic language.

- The sonnet is the form of love-at-first-sight poetry par excellence. The point of the sonnet is to praise the beloved woman, to express the poet's awful suffering for love of her, and to leave the reader with a sense of awe at the idealized beauty of the poet's love.

- Shakespeare probably wrote the bulk of his sonnets in the mid-1590s. Recently, scholars have suspected that he continued to write and revise the poems all the way up to their publication in 1609. He chose the three-part structure plus concluding couplet because it is dramatic and mirrors what happens in his plays—beginning, middle, and end.

- The idea of making the beloved immortal through one's poetic language is central to *Romeo and Juliet*. The lovers begin their lives together by composing spontaneous sonnets, and Shakespeare's audience would know that the tradition of the sonnet was being invoked—the whole meaning of eternal love in poetry. In fact, after their first sonnet together, Romeo and Juliet begin composing another sonnet, starting with four rhyming lines that bring about another kiss.

- It's as if these two young lovers could go on forever, composing perfect Shakespearean sonnets in spontaneous fashion—but then, Juliet's nurse appears, as if the outside world will not leave these young lovers alone, but will thwart their love and spoil it with the cycle of hatred and vengeance that dominates the play.

- The very heart of the play is expressed in these few lines: Romeo and Juliet have found in one another the very expression of pure, perfect love, but the world in which they live will not leave them in peace—but, rather, will ultimately destroy their love, as, in one of the final lines of the play, "poor sacrifices of our enmity."

Tools

words, words, words: Pay close attention to how Shakespeare explores and exploits the many meanings of words. Where does he make puns—that is, highlight the double meanings of words? Where does he employ obviously poetical language, and where does he use language that is quite ordinary and familiar? What does he gain by this? How does he use particular aspects of language—the speech of lower classes, prose versus poetry, high poetic language of true love, the Shakespearean sonnet, etc.—to attain his meanings? What do readers need to know in order to understand Shakespeare's language?

Suggested Reading

Adamson, Hunger, Magnusson, Thompson, and Wales, eds, *Reading Shakespeare's Dramatic Language*.

Kermode, *Shakespeare's Language*.

Vendler, *The Art of Shakespeare's Sonnets*.

Questions to Consider

1. How does Shakespeare use different kinds of writing—prose, poetry, tone, sound, rhythm, and so on—to show distinctions of character and class? Choose a scene from any Shakespeare play you're familiar with and try to see the ways in which different classes of character speak differently. What does this teach us about Shakespeare's uses of language?

2. What are the parts of a Shakespearean sonnet, and how do they work together to form his poetry of love? Take any sonnet from Shakespeare's collection of poetry and try to see how the different parts fit together. How does he use this form to express human thought and emotion?

Romeo and Juliet—The Tools of Tragedy

Lecture 6

In analyzing *Romeo and Juliet*, you will learn about the fundamental importance of Shakespeare's poetic language, how to watch for the introduction of characters and how Shakespeare builds the play person by person, how to see the way person and place interact, and how scene is tied to character and character is revealed by scene. You will also learn the importance of watching for a character's arc of development and for the key tragic dynamic of fate versus free will. These tools can help you unlock the power of Shakespeare's first great tragedy and, in fact, all of his great tragedies.

The Balcony Scene

- It may just be the most famous scene in all of Shakespeare: A young man, really not more than a boy, has just seen a young woman at a party, and now he has stolen into her walled garden to try to see her once more. The young woman comes out of her bedroom door onto her balcony, overlooking the garden. She doesn't know the young man is there. She addresses the night, the stars, herself, her imagined lover, and while that lover watches from below, she speaks these famous words: "O Romeo, Romeo, wherefore art thou Romeo?" With this scene, the whole sense of *Romeo and Juliet* suddenly shifts; the play itself is transformed.

- In a Shakespeare play, the order in which characters are introduced on the stage and the social position those characters occupy can give us essential insights into the deeper meanings of the play. This is referred to as the introducing characters tool, and it's a very powerful tool for understanding the way a Shakespeare play functions.

- In *Romeo and Juliet*, first come the lowest class of servants, mere comic figures; then higher manservants or friends, like Benvolio; then we move into the lower figures in the prestigious families, like

Tybalt; then the heads of the families, old Montague and Capulet, appear; and finally, the prince, the supreme head of social and political power. It's a pyramid structure, from the broad social base to the narrow social pinnacle—a hierarchy of authority.

- By watching carefully how the introduction of characters corresponds to their social rank, we can see a major theme of that play even before that theme is expressed in the play's language.

- In *Romeo and Juliet*, the first act of the play suggests that we are going to see a play that is concerned with the public rivalry between great ruling families; we are primed to see a contest between mighty opposites—Capulet versus Montague. In effect, Shakespeare had taught his audience what this sort of play ought to be like, so by the end of Act I, we might think we know how to "read" this sort of play. To an extent, we'd be right: The feuding families motif is the crucial backdrop to *Romeo and Juliet*.

- However, when we come to the balcony scene at the start of Act II, we see that Shakespeare is in fact writing a new kind of tragedy: intimate, personal, and driven by a profound sense of human character. In the balcony scene, the sense of the drama shifts from a public spectacle to a very private, intimate scene, and this is another important tool for understanding Shakespeare—the place and person tool: The main idea is that the setting of a scene often has significant thematic implication. What do we literally see, or imagine, in this scene?

- The walled garden where the action takes place functions symbolically as a haven for the young lovers, a place of innocence and protection where their fragile young love can flourish and grow. The world outside the garden is the place of violence, of the feud, of death and destruction, but inside the garden, the lovers have safety—for a time. This shift of the play's focus from the public to the private, from the exterior to the interior, is not unlike the shift in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* from the city of Athens to the green world of the fairy forest.

- This a new kind of tragedy, personal and driven by human character, through the uses of language—another version of the words, words, words tool. We see yet another level of poetic language that Shakespeare displays: When Romeo first sees Juliet walk onto the balcony, he expresses his most eloquent poetry of the play, offering a rich comparison of Juliet in an extended conceit, or poetic analogy.

- Shakespeare shows Romeo using the very cosmos for his comparison to Juliet.

  But soft, what light through yonder window breaks?

  It is the east and Juliet is the sun!

  Arise fair sun and kill the envious moon

  Who is already sick and pale with grief

  That thou her maid art far more fair than she.

- He continues this cosmic comparison, saying that her eyes are entreated by the very stars to go and shine in their place and that the brightness of her cheek and of her eyes could turn the night into day.

- This language is so different from Romeo's bawdy and earth-bound language of infatuation and sexual desire used in his speeches about Rosaline. The language is all about elevation, literally making Juliet into an angel of heaven and figuratively elevating their love into that heavenly sphere, away from this fallen world—which is one of the great themes of this play.

Fate versus Free Will and Character Development

- Two major concepts are crucial tools for studying Shakespeare: the role of fate versus free will and the arc of a character's development. *Romeo and Juliet* presents highly elevated, ennobling language of

love, which we might associate with the comedies, but the play is a tragedy.

- Shakespeare announces his argument about the tragedy of love: Juliet says she will have Romeo swear he loves her—not by the inconstant moon but, rather, "by thy gracious self, / Which is the god of my idolatry." We might think this is a further high poetic expression of love, and indeed it is: The Christian ideal of love claims that all love should ultimately tend upward toward God. If our love stops at the merely human level, then it is merely idolatry, the worship of the lower realm. This is what happens with Romeo and Juliet; they become one another's idols. This is characteristic of the great tragedies.

- Whereas in the comedies we see characters who can balance extreme emotions, in the tragedies, we see precisely the inability to achieve balance. This drive toward almost self-annihilating desires is one of the hallmarks of Shakespearean tragedy.

- In both *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *Romeo and Juliet*, there are young lovers whose love is blocked by the older generation. In both, the lovers attempt to escape the world of the authoritarian city. In both, the mythic play of Pyramus and Thisbe lurks in the background—the story of separated lovers, feuding fathers, confusion, and tragic suicide. However, the plays go in such different directions, and the difference begins in the third act.

- In *Romeo and Juliet*, Act III opens on a hot day in the public square, and amid this heat and tension, Tybalt kills Mercutio, and Romeo, in a rage, kills Tybalt—and this is just hours after Romeo has secretly married Juliet, thereby becoming Tybalt's kinsman. At this time, Romeo is the most hated person for Juliet's family, and the prince orders him banished from Verona on pain of death.

- When Romeo realizes what he has done, he cries out, "O, I am fortune's fool." This announces a major tool for understanding Shakespeare's concept of tragedy: Watch for the tension between

fate and free will in a character's life—the extent to which they are subject not to their own wills, but to the inscrutable and insurmountable powers of fate. The suggestion is that no matter what we do, we cannot escape the tragic path laid out for us.

- This tragic story is heart wrenching to watch from the audience because we know that the young lovers are so close to surviving, but the world they live in won't allow them to survive. Romeo's bitter despair by the play's end shows the degree of the play's tragedy: In effect, in this play, there is no "green world" to escape to. Tragedy shows us a world in which our human wills are puny and insignificant. Tragedy is dominated by the role of fate: We are what we have been condemned to be.

- However, we must be careful in assigning this category to Shakespeare too easily. Romeo feels himself to be "fortune's fool," but there is a higher register in Shakespeare's great tragedies, and his most stirring characters are the ones that rail against and resist being the mere pawns of fate. Macbeth, Hamlet, and King Lear all rise above mere fate, even if their efforts to resist might prove fruitless in the end.

- Even Romeo gives voice to this, though his actions don't reflect that fortitude. When he learns, mistakenly, that Juliet has died, he cries, "Then I defy you, stars!" This is the true tragic voice, the hero who resists his determined fate, even when he knows such resistance is futile. However, Romeo is not the great tragic hero of this play. Romeo's growth occurs in Act II, when he shifts from his adolescent lust to a more mature language of true love, but through the rest of the play, Romeo is caught by powers he cannot resist, and he alternates between a childish outrage at the world's injustice and a cynical resignation to it.

- Juliet, on the other hand, is a character who continues to grow throughout the play, reaching new heights of eloquence and power at every step. This is the next tool to emphasize when working with tragedy—the arc of character tool: Watch carefully the way that

Shakespeare's main characters develop and grow over the course of the play, and pay attention not only to a character's psychological rise and fall (that is, the internal changes), but also to the ways a character's external role changes (that is, how someone's status in or relation to society can alter throughout a play).

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This painting depicts Romeo and Juliet parting on the balcony in Act III of the play.

- The great characters in the tragedies go through an arc of development, beginning in ignorance and moving toward knowledge. Often, this knowledge is negative. Juliet begins in ignorance—an ignorance of the world of sexuality, an ignorance of what it means to make adult decisions, an ignorance of death and of the cruel ways in which the world works.

- By the third act of the play, she has grown so bold and brave that she will refuse her father's will to marry the man he chooses for her—another version of the scenario in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*—even when her father rages, storms, and swears he will throw her out into the street for disobeying him. By the fourth act, we see that it is Juliet who must decide things for the couple and who must brave the tomb and a drug-induced deathlike trance in order to save their love.

- The play's true tragedy is that this beautiful, profoundly hopeful young love will be killed by the hatred of the world surrounding it. By attending to the arc of Juliet's development, we see the way the play moves toward its tragic climax. In the end, Juliet takes her life not out of the weakness of despair, as Romeo does, but out of the firm commitment to be true to what she has sworn. That is the stuff of tragic heroes.

- It's this resolve that allows her to take the sleeping draught and be buried in the Capulet family vault, despite the terror of the ordeal. If Romeo shows us the character trapped in tragedy, confined to his fate and raging against an unjust universe, Juliet shows us the heroic effort to escape tragedy, to seek the liberation of love and free will, and to refuse to succumb to despair.

- These are the trajectories of all of Shakespeare's great tragic characters. Juliet stands at the start of a line of remarkable tragic figures, eloquent and daring to the end, and is the first of a series of remarkable tragic women. Watching the growth of the tragic woman is a key tool for understanding these great tragedies.

Tools

introducing characters: Pay close attention to the order in which characters are introduced on the stage and the social position they occupy. What meaning arises from this sequence? How does the order of introduction into the play affect the play's meaning?

place and person: Pay careful attention to the way the setting of a scene relates to the characters in the scene. How does Shakespeare use the setting or scene to reveal the nature of a character? How do characters change depending on the scene they are in?

words, words, words: Shakespeare's central focus on language also takes the form of an extended conceit, or poetic analogy, such as when Romeo meets Juliet at the ball. Pay close attention to how this comparison in words

functions. What does the comparison tell you about Romeo and how he feels toward Juliet? What does Shakespeare gain by using language in this way?

fate versus free will: Pay attention to the ways Shakespeare's characters are caught between the inexorable quality of fate and their own ability to choose their destinies. This is one of the central elements in all tragedy, from the Greeks onward. How does Shakespeare present this struggle? Are his characters able to overcome it? How does this dynamic fit into Shakespeare's concept of tragedy?

arc of character: Watch carefully the way in which Shakespeare's main characters develop and grow over the course of the play. Pay attention not only to a character's rise and fall—that is, his or her internal changes—but also to the ways a character's external role changes—that is, how his or her status in or relation to the social structure can alter throughout a play. What patterns do they follow? Is it a rise and fall, or is there a more subtle pattern at work? How is this arc related to power? How is it related to the movement from ignorance to knowledge?

tragic woman: Juliet is a great example of the tragic woman—that is, the central female figure in a tragedy whose character seems to define the play or much of it. Pay close attention to the role of the woman in tragedy. How does her status as a woman both limit and expand her possibilities? How does she function? How do the men respond to her? Why was Shakespeare so drawn to powerful women in these plays?

Suggested Reading

Adamson, Hunger, Magnusson, Thompson, and Wales, eds, *Reading Shakespeare's Dramatic Language*.

Adelman, *Suffocating Mothers*.

Jardine, *Still Harping on Daughters*.

Questions to Consider

1. How do the order and means by which characters are introduced affect meaning in Shakespeare's plays? Read the opening scene of any play by Shakespeare and try to see from the order and way in which the people are introduced how this might affect the meaning of the play.

2. What is the significance of a character's arc of development? What can this arc tell us about the character and about the sort of play in which that character appears? Choose one of Shakespeare's great characters—King Lear, Richard III, Cymbeline, Rosalind, Falstaff—and try to describe the dramatic arc, or trajectory, of that character.

Appearance versus Reality in *Twelfth Night*
Lecture 7

If you are to grasp such classic works as *Twelfth Night*, *As You Like It*, and *The Merchant of Venice*, you must understand that identity—and particularly sexual identity—is almost hopelessly confused. It's not unlike in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, when the lovers enter the forest and everything gets crossed up. In *Twelfth Night*, there's no forest, no green world, no enchantment, no fairy queen. Instead, it's as if confusion of identity is somehow written into the very characters—they can't help but get confused about who and what they are. In this lecture, you will learn that confusion of identity is a crucial determinant of tragedy and comedy.

The Crisis of Identity

- The man is in love with the lady—or at least he thinks he is. He's also falling in love with a young man, though he doesn't quite realize this, and the young man is actually wooing the lady on the older man's behalf. Unfortunately, the lady is falling in love with not the older man, but the younger man, who, it turns out, is actually a woman pretending to be a young man, which the older man doesn't know—or does he? Of course, the actor playing the woman who is herself playing the young man is himself a boy because in Shakespeare's day, no woman could perform on the stage. This confusion of identity is at the heart of Shakespeare's so-called mature comedies.

- If the confusion is not set right, if it worsens, then we have a tragedy, the greatest example of which is *King Lear*, where the old king loses his very sense of self. However, if the confusion can be sorted out, if we can find, as they say in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, the concord of this discord, then we have comedy.

- At the heart of Shakespeare's dramatic vision is the crisis of identity. This, in fact, is one of the great themes of Shakespeare; it is the crisis of Hamlet, Rosalind, and so many other of his great

characters. This points us to a major tool: to watch for, and try to sort out, the crisis of identity within the play.

- Shakespeare's early comedies include *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* and *The Comedy of Errors*. *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is the last of the early comedies—the play that begins Shakespeare's transition into the mature comedies. These later comedies are written at the same time that Shakespeare is writing his great tragedies: *Julius Caesar* appears in 1599 and *Hamlet* around 1600 while *As You Like It* appears in 1599 and *Twelfth Night* in 1601 to 1602. In fact, Shakespeare might have been composing a scene in *Hamlet* one morning and then a scene from *Twelfth Night* later that same afternoon.

- The comic structure and the tragic structure only differ in small degrees, though these differences are crucial. What we learn about Shakespeare's comedies can certainly help us understand his tragedies, and vice versa. Indeed, this is one of the guiding principles in this course: The more we learn about any Shakespeare play, the more we've learned about all of them because the tools we employ for one can be transferred to the others to great effect.

Early versus Mature Comedies

- The central device in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* was the block to young love, which comes from an angry old man figure (Egeus) who wants to control the autonomy of his daughter. In *Twelfth Night*, Viola, the daughter, has been washed ashore after a shipwreck that apparently has killed her twin brother, Sebastian, and we learn that her father has actually died several years before. Not only does the father not offer the block to young love, but he is actually absent from the play. Viola is, we might think, completely free to love whom and where she chooses—but she does not.

- For reasons that are not altogether clear, Viola decides to disguise herself as a young man and offer her skills in service to the local Duke, upon whose shores she has been cast up. Naturally, she falls in love with the Duke, Orsino, but she cannot tell him her true

identity. It's as if the love is blocked every bit as surely as it was in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, but instead of being blocked by an angry, living father, the restraint is internal—it comes from within Viola—as if she has internalized her father's will and restricts love of her own accord.

- Shakespeare seems to be revealing a fundamental human truth: that our self-mistrust brings about a block to our ability to love every bit as profound and powerful as if a real person were standing between us and the object of our love. This is an insight we often find in the mature comedies. Compared to the earlier comedies, the dynamics shift from the external to the internal. Instead of analyzing social conflicts, we need to look for and understand the play's dynamics as psychological conflicts.

- In fact, this conflict between the internal and the external is at the very heart of the mature comedies, just as it is in the great tragedies. The crisis each character in this play faces is to know oneself—to know one's interior, true self. Each character is in a state of excess, of a false existence, caused by not knowing their true, interior desires.

- Duke Orsino would say that his problem is that he is so head over heels in love with the Countess Olivia, but we quickly learn that Orsino is not actually in love with a woman. Rather, he is in love with the idea of himself as a lover; he is in love with the idea of being in love. Orsino opens the play, and his first three lines in a way express many of the major themes of this entire play.

  If music be the food of love, play on,

  Give me excess of it, that, surfeiting,

  The appetite may sicken, and so die.

- He's asking for the very stuff that love feeds upon—in this case, music—and hoping that by feeding and feeding, he will finally

grow sick of love, and his desire for Olivia will go away. Of course, however, the effect is the opposite: The more Orsino pines for Olivia, the more his obsession for her grows. Every word spoken to him he turns into a further thought about how in love he is. We can usefully compare Orsino to Romeo in Act I of *Romeo and Juliet*: a man who is a victim of infatuation and his own self-pitying suffering.

- Often, this opening scene in *Twelfth Night* is staged with Orsino's attendants getting very bored, restless, and impatient with their Duke, trying to get him to take up some pursuit or get active in some way, but Orsino reclines, sighs, and, very importantly, sends another to woo on his behalf. This is a key tool, called the active versus passive tool: We need to attend to who is active and who is passive in a Shakespeare play. It's a key clue to character. We fault Orsino for his passivity, for waiting and wailing while Olivia ignores him.

- Soon, he will send Viola, disguised as the young man Cesario, to woo on his behalf, and this sets in motion all the confusion and distress of the play. Only when Orsino becomes active and actually travels to Olivia's home in Act V do we move toward a resolution of the play's confusion.

- If Orsino's error is an excess of doting, a kind of wallowing in adolescent infatuation, Olivia's error is an excess of mourning. We are told that she will mourn and abjure the society of men for seven years because her beloved brother has recently died. Orsino, of course, turns all thoughts to his own ideas of love and translates this as a sign of Olivia's capacity to love him. Then, after imagining how wonderfully Olivia will someday love him, instead of going to woo her, he goes off to recline in his self-pity and infatuation: "Away before me to sweet beds of flowers! / Love-thoughts lie rich when canopied with bowers."

- At the play's opening, Olivia is opposed to the spirit of regenerative comedy. The wonder and beauty of this play

consists in how Shakespeare moves her from opposing comedy to being its very embodiment. The key figure to begin this is Feste, the clown. Shakespeare's clowns are often the voice of wisdom in his plays.

- A key tool that needs to be deployed when studying Shakespeare's plays is that, whether analyzing a comedy or tragedy, we must watch for the ways in which power and knowledge are reversed. In *Twelfth Night*, Feste functions to bring about these reversals, but because the structure is comic, his teachings are more nurturing and meant to instruct rather than chastise.

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In *Twelfth Night*, Olivia is in mourning.

- Feste's teaching has the effect of opening Olivia to the life-renewing possibilities of love and of moving her away from her excess of mourning—in Freud's terms, Olivia shifts away from Thanatos, the death drive, and toward Eros, the life drive, which is a good way of understanding the entire energy of Shakespearean comedy.

- Olivia's excessive mourning was mere appearance, and her true, internal self is a person capable of love and happiness. Certainly, Feste understands this, and part of his function is to bring this true inner reality to the surface and erase the false appearance. This is the most fundamental tool for all of Shakespeare's plays: We must work to distinguish the external appearance from the internal reality.

- In *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, we can analyze the high and low plots of a Shakespeare play, and *Twelfth Night* can be opened up with this same tool in very illuminating ways. In *Twelfth Night*, there is a low plot that actually is peopled by knights: Sir Toby Belch and Sir Andrew Aguecheek—whose very names suggest that they are not the noble Arthurian English knights of legend. In fact, they are what their names suggest: Sir Toby is a drunkard and a merry fellow, and Sir Andrew is a born follower, sickly and gullible.

- Sir Toby only keeps Sir Andrew around because Andrew has money, and Toby can trick him into paying for the parties by pretending that his niece, Olivia, will fall in love with him if he keeps wooing her. These two, along with Olivia's attendant, Maria, form a comic subplot that mirrors in humorous ways the more elevated plot of Olivia, Orsino, and Viola.

The Punishment of Malvolio

- Shakespeare complicates things in delightful, astonishing ways by introducing the character of Malvolio, Lady Olivia's steward. Malvolio mirrors the other characters in the play, but with a negative difference: He is repressed like Olivia, but unlike her, he wants to extend his repression to others and deny them all pleasures; he is narcissistic like Orsino, but unlike Orsino, he wants his self-love to come at the expense of others.

- Malvolio is the classic killjoy. He is opposed to the possibilities of self-transformation, which is what this play—really, all of Shakespeare's plays—is all about. Malvolio hates Feste and tries to have Olivia dismiss the clown from her service, and he hates Toby and Andrew and their revelry. Toby is a miniature, diminished version of Shakespeare's greatest comic figure, the irrepressible Falstaff. In both figures, we see an essential tool for understanding Shakespeare's vision of the world: We must observe how the opponent of mirth will be punished.

- Shakespeare puts much of the energy and power of *Twelfth Night* into Malvolio's punishment. Malvolio has sworn to have Olivia

throw Toby from the house because of his disruptive antics, and Toby, Andrew, and Maria have conspired to get their revenge. They'll convince Malvolio that Olivia is in love with him and get him to do all sorts of ridiculous things in response to this love. They take the play's high plot—a confusion of love and self-identity, a wallowing in excessive behavior, and an impulse toward reversal—and apply it not to heal someone, but in fact to punish.

- The whole subplot depends on the magnificent letter scene, in which Malvolio discovers a love letter to him, apparently written by Olivia (but in fact forged by Maria). In Shakespearean comedy, we see how close it is to tragedy, and the greater the comedy, the more this is true.

- After reading the letter, Malvolio makes one assumption after another until finally he is convinced to appear before Olivia wearing yellow stockings—her most detested color—and with his hose cross-gartered (a style she hates), smiling incessantly (though her mood is sad), and carrying on in such a way that she can only conclude that he has lost his mind. It's a moment on the stage that gathers up all of the tools from this lecture: a crisis of identity, a reversal of power and loss of self-knowledge, a case of appearance and reality being hopelessly confused, and a brutal punishment of the opponent of mirth.

Tools

crisis of identity: Watch for the ways Shakespeare makes the search for self, the confusion of identity, or the crisis of identity into a major element in the plays. In some form, this quest is at the heart of every Shakespeare play. What forms does it take? How do characters respond to uncertainty regarding their identities? How is the internalization of the play's conflicts connected to this dynamic? (This is especially dominant in *Hamlet*, *King Lear*, *Othello*, and *Twelfth Night*.)

active versus passive: Pay attention to who is active in a Shakespeare play, and who is passive, in regard to how they respond to the play's action. What

makes a character passive or active? How does the active person come across? Are they always positive, or are there negative attributes to activity?

power reversal: Watch carefully for the ways in which power and knowledge are reversed in a Shakespeare play. How do the foolish become wise and the wise foolish? How does this fit with the larger themes of the play?

appearance versus reality: This is the fundamental tool for all of Shakespeare. Pay close attention to how Shakespeare plays with how things appear on the outside or the surface and how they really are on the inside. Watch for how characters can appear one way to an observer while hiding their true selves behind a literal or metaphoric disguise. How does Shakespeare employ deceptive appearances at every level of his plays? What is the effect of this? What larger meanings does this almost obsessive element suggest? How does this get at the very heart of Shakespeare's art—which is, after all, all about disguise and acting and performance? (Characters who cut through appearance and get at the true reality include Hamlet, Rosalind in *As You Like It*, and Portia in *The Merchant of Venice*.)

opponent of mirth: Shakespeare's plays always criticize the killjoy, the figure of repression, the opponent of mirth. Observe how the opponent of mirth is punished in the play. Why is this a necessary device? What does this tell you about what Shakespeare might have valued?

stagecraft, or the play within the play: Watch carefully for moments when a miniature play is actually performed within the larger play, and pay attention to how that miniplay comments on or mirrors the larger play in which it appears. What does this tell you about Shakespeare's fascination with how theater works? (This especially occurs in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *As You Like It*, *Hamlet*, and *The Winter's Tale*.)

Suggested Reading

Frye, *A Natural Perspective*.

———, *Northrop Frye on Shakespeare*.

Garber, *Shakespeare After All*.

Questions to Consider

1. In what ways do you see the crisis of identity functioning in any Shakespeare play? How is this an almost obsessive concern of his? Look over any Shakespeare play that you are familiar with: How does the crisis of identity function in that play?

2. Why would Shakespeare's comedies insist on punishing the opponent of mirth? How does this fit with the very spirit, even the goal, of Shakespearean comedy?

Twelfth Night—More Comic Tools

Lecture 8

In this lecture on *Twelfth Night*, you will learn that there is a justice at work in the play and that everyone needs to be purged of their excess for health and happiness to be restored. You will also observe the remarkable ways that Shakespeare resolves all of the confusion of the play into one of his most profound comic resolutions. As you will learn in this lecture, *Twelfth Night* moves simultaneously toward regenerative, festive comedy and also toward scenes of malicious cruelty and rejection. Keep in mind that nearly all of the tools that apply to *Twelfth Night* also apply to the tragedies.

The Revenge Plot

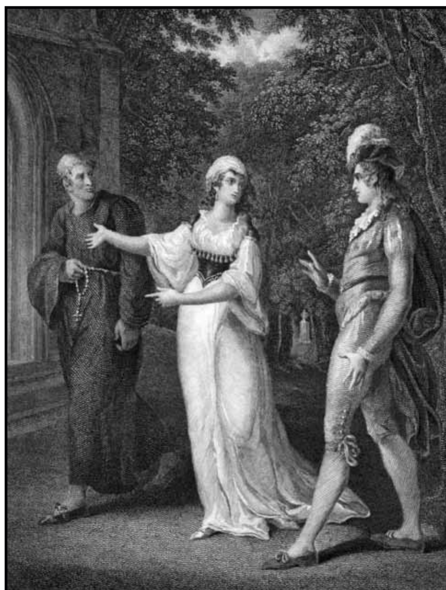
- Although Malvolio deserves to be pushed away from his vanity and resentment of the fun of others—indeed, he needs this education—the revenge plot borders on cruelty. As the play moves into Acts IV and V, this element increases. At the same time, *Twelfth Night* moves toward a beautifully redemptive and extraordinarily positive conclusion for some of the other characters, most notably the "high plot" figures of Viola, Orsino, Olivia, and Viola's twin brother Sebastian.

- A key tool for understanding Shakespeare's plays is the double plot tool. What's remarkable about *Twelfth Night* is that the high plot and the low plot mirror one another, but at the same time, the two plots go in opposite directions—which is a quality that is often found in the mature comedies.

- Antonio is a sailor who befriends Viola's brother Sebastian and forms a strong attachment to him—it may be a father-son attachment, a brotherly love, or even a homoerotic love that Antonio feels toward the young man. Regardless, Antonio befriends Sebastian and cannot bear to let him out of his sight, even though he follows the young man at some personal risk to himself.

- Antonio follows Sebastian throughout the play, giving him his money and even protecting him when he's attacked by Toby and Andrew—except that it's actually Viola, in disguise as Cesario, who's involved in the comic fight with the two drunkards. At the play's end, Antonio is left alone when Sebastian pairs up with Olivia and Orsino with Viola; there is no room for him in the happy ending story.

- In many productions, Antonio walks offstage alone, a sad figure of isolation and loneliness. He is a sacrifice figure, a person who is left outside of the happy ending even as he helps it happen. This is a very interesting Shakespearean tool to use: We must watch how these figures function and ask why they are excluded from the happiness at the end of the comedy and what is gained by their sacrifice. Not just in *Twelfth Night*, but also in *As You Like It* and *The Merchant of Venice*, such a tool will take us far in understanding Shakespeare's vision in his mature comedies.



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This scene from *Twelfth Night* depicts Olivia, Sebastian, and a priest.

- Malvolio is always an isolated figure; he neither has nor seems to crave friends. He prides himself on his demeanor, decorum, and restraint, but as Feste points out to him, this restraint is really repression. His absurd desire that Olivia might love him is the

channel for all his fantasies and hopes for promotion, rising in the world, and achieving a blissful love. When he thinks that Olivia really does love him, despite all evidence to the contrary, the humor becomes pathetic.

- Toby and his gang can hardly believe that Malvolio has taken the bait so completely, and then they determine to carry the jest too far. Toby says, "Come, we'll have him in a dark room and bound." There is a disregard for human feeling, a scorn for one's fellow creature, which unnerves the audience. When they put Malvolio into a prison, the scene is pitiful, even though we tend to laugh at it—which raises that great question of comedy, which Shakespeare's plays at their best constantly provoke: Why do we laugh at comedy? At what do we laugh?

- There is always a cruelty lurking beneath our laughter—always a sense of relief that someone else has stepped forth to be the butt of our jokes, which is the very essence of the scapegoat mechanism, a version of the sacrifice figure. Shakespeare realizes in his mature comedies that no matter how redemptive and life generating the comic vision is, there is also a dark undercurrent at work that shows that we laugh at others in order to keep the laughter and the isolation from turning upon ourselves.

- Consequently our view of Malvolio at the end of the play is deeply unsettling. Olivia pities Malvolio, but it is Feste, the figure of wisdom in the play, who steps forth and reminds Malvolio that at least the start of the plot was a just recompense for Malvolio's own ill will toward others. Feste speaks a line that expresses much of Shakespeare's deepest thought on what drives the human comedy: "And thus the whirligig of time brings in his revenges." Time will bring about a rough justice, and the cruelty we visit upon others will ultimately be visited back upon ourselves.

The Counterplot

- While plot of the outcast and the scapegoat is moving along, there is a counterplot of wonderful young people moving toward self-

knowledge and mutual love. The key figure in all of this is Viola, who represents a very important figure in a Shakespeare play: the boundary-crossing figure—another tool for our use in understanding these plays. Watch for the characters who are able to cross between the different worlds of the plays.

- Like Puck in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Viola can speak with everyone, and in almost every situation, her role is to teach the other characters who they really are or what they really want. In *Twelfth Night*, each character is in a state of excess—Orsino's excess of self-love, Olivia's excess of mourning, Toby's excess of mirth, Malvolio's excess of vanity—and part of Viola's role is to curb that excess and bring each character into a state of self-knowledge and harmony.

- In *As You Like It*, *Twelfth Night*, and *The Merchant of Venice*, the heroine dresses as a man, and this is central to the play's plot. This offers us a very important tool: We need to carefully observe the cross-dressing dynamic that we see in the mature comedies carefully and ask: What is the motivation for this? What do the women gain by cross-dressing? What does this enable them to do? How do they act and feel when dressed as men, and what happens when they must return to their role as women?

- Often, the disguised woman can become privy to secret confidences, bring out a person's inner desires, and somehow be everything to all people. In *Twelfth Night*, Viola is precisely the confidante that Orsino needs and cannot find elsewhere, just as she will become the beloved that Olivia needs but can only find after her eyes are opened to her true love for Sebastian.

- Viola's function, like Hamlet's, is to cut through appearance and get at what Hamlet calls "the heart of my mystery." This is an essential part of a Shakespeare play, and we need to watch for the characters who cut through appearance and get at the true reality. When Viola asks to see Olivia's face, which is covered by a veil, she doesn't just want the lady to drop her veil and show what she looks like;

she also wants her to cut through the pretense and masquerade and reveal herself for what she truly is. Only by this means, the play suggests, can healing and self-understanding—and, ultimately, love—be achieved.

- Viola says to Olivia that if she were the one who loved Olivia, she would not understand that lady's denials. Olivia, intrigued, asks Viola what she would do if she were the actual one wooing her. Viola's response is one of the greatest moments in all of Shakespeare's work.

  Make me a willow cabin at your gate,

  And call upon my soul within the house;

  Write loyal cantons of contemned love

  And sing them loud even in the dead of night;

  Halloo your name to the reverberate hills

  And make the babbling gossip of the air

  Cry out "Olivia!" O, You should not rest

  Between the elements of air and earth,

  But you should pity me!

- This is an expression of love that is simple, heartfelt, unadorned, passionate—it's like the difference between Romeo's false love of Rosalind and his true love of Juliet—and it calls out to the air and even the creation itself to echo and resound this expression of love. It's one of the most moving expressions of love in all of literature, and ironically, Viola is not expressing what she feels for Olivia but, rather, what Viola wishes she could speak to Orsino, the true object of her love.

- The complex layers of appearance and reality at work in this play involve the notion that Viola's expression of love is quite real, but not directed toward Olivia, and Olivia's response to it (she is visibly moved and aroused) is misdirected at a male version of Viola, and so is a mistake, but when that male version later appears in the figure of Sebastian, Viola's twin brother, it will find its true object and be fulfilled.

- This brings us to one of the most important concepts in Shakespearean comedy, and indeed in Shakespeare's work in general: the role or function of the "figure of grace," which is a religious term, and it has a religious function in Shakespeare, but also a dramatic function—in effect, the function of the figure of grace makes all the difference in how a Shakespeare play proceeds.

- By watching for the figure of grace, we also address such fundamental questions as: Will the play verge toward comedy or tragedy? Will love be restored or lost? Will the deception of external appearance be pierced and true knowledge attained, or will the characters remain in ignorance to the end? These are essential issues in any Shakespeare play, and by watching how the figure of grace functions, we can go far in our understanding of how Shakespeare's dramatic art works. In *Twelfth Night*, Viola is the key figure for this. Just as she opens Olivia to the possibilities of love, she accomplishes the same thing with Orsino.

- By the end of the play, all of the plot is able to work itself out—but only because of the remarkable figure of Viola, who opens all the characters to the experience of love through her selfless sacrifice, ability to remove deceptive appearance and get to the inner reality, and consequent function as the agent of grace. Various tools help us get right to the heart of this beautiful and moving play.

- In many ways, *Twelfth Night* is a more powerful and expansive comic vision than the vision of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and certainly more than we see in Shakespeare's early, rather formulaic

comedies. There is nothing formulaic about *Twelfth Night*; indeed, the plot is incredibly preposterous.

- What drives this play—what drives all of Shakespeare's mature comedies—is hardly the realism or plausibility of the plot. Rather, it is these fundamental ideas and principles that our tools have opened up for us: how the high plot moves toward redemptive love, but the low plot moves toward isolation and vengeance; how sacrifice is necessary for love to occur, but the impulse to find a scapegoat for our own suffering is sadly powerful; how crucial it is to see through deceptive appearances and find the reality within—especially the reality within our own selves; and how a remarkable figure like Viola, who can cross between worlds and cross-dress between genders, can be the agent of grace and redemption for the entire world of the play and move that world from deceptive appearance to redemptive reality.

- It's a powerful recipe for comedy—one that shows Shakespeare's expanding genius and sets a model that he will further develop and transform in the last plays of his career, the late romances.

Tools

double plot: Watch carefully for how the two plots often go in opposite directions. See how the high plot and the low plot can mirror one another, but can also oppose each other.

sacrifice figure: Pay attention to the figures who are excluded from the happiness at the end of a comedy. Why are they excluded? What is the gain by their sacrifice? What is Shakespeare suggesting about human society through these figures?

words, words, words: Shakespeare's language can at times depend on archaic or lost words for a contemporary audience. Readers need to look up some of his strange or historically distant words. Think about how these words contribute to Shakespeare's meaning.

boundary-crossing figure: Watch for the characters in the plays who are able to cross between the different worlds of the play. Pay attention to what sorts of characters can accomplish this. Why are they able to do this and others cannot? What special qualities do they have that allow them to do this? (Such figures include Lucio in *Measure for Measure*, Henry V, and Hamlet.)

cross-dressing dynamic: Often in Shakespeare's comedies, women will cross-dress as men. Watch carefully for these moments and try to see their motivations for doing this. What do they gain by cross-dressing? What does this enable them to do? How do they act and feel when dressed as a man, and how are they different after they return to dressing as a woman? Why would Shakespeare continually use this dynamic?

appearance versus reality: This is the fundamental tool for all of Shakespeare. Pay close attention to how Shakespeare plays with how things appear on the outside or the surface and how they really are on the inside. Watch for how characters can appear one way to an observer while hiding their true selves behind a literal or metaphoric disguise. How does Shakespeare employ deceptive appearances at every level of his plays? What is the effect of this? What larger meanings does this almost obsessive element suggest? How does this get at the very heart of Shakespeare's art—which is, after all, all about disguise and acting and performance? (Characters who cut through appearance and get at the true reality include Hamlet, Rosalind in *As You Like It*, and Portia in *The Merchant of Venice*.)

figure of grace: Watch for moments in the plays where you see a figure who brings grace and forgiveness to the play. What gives certain characters this power? How do they affect the outcome of the play? Think about what the play would be like without this figure. Good examples include Portia in *The Merchant of Venice*, Desdemona in *Othello*, Perdita in *The Winter's Tale*, and Miranda in *The Tempest*.

Suggested Reading

Barber, *Shakespeare's Festive Comedy*.

Frye, *A Natural Perspective*.

Garber, *Shakespeare After All*.

Questions to Consider

1. How is the idea of sacrifice important to Shakespeare's mature comedies? Who is sacrificed, and for what are they sacrificed? How can sacrifice coexist with the idea of comedy?

2. The comedies are famous for the cross-dressing dynamic, in which a young woman dresses as a man and has a crucial effect on the outcome of the play. Choose any of the famous cross-dressing plays—*As You Like It*, *Twelfth Night*, *The Merchant of Venice*—and ask yourself: What is involved in this cross-dressing? Why was Shakespeare so obviously fascinated by this? How does it fit into the larger ideas of comedy in his plays?

Richard II—History and Kingship
Lecture 9

In this lecture, you will learn about many tools that will be used in the investigation of Shakespeare's history plays: the understanding history tool, helping you comprehend the historical context and what Shakespeare does with it; the kingship tool, as you investigate what Shakespeare is really trying to get at in his depictions of monarchy; the drama of ideas tool, the key aid to seeing the rich intellectual depth contained in the questions Shakespeare raises; and the Cain and Abel dynamic, showing us the fundamental, almost biblical conflict that is at the root of history, politics, and even human culture.

Shakespeare-Era History

- Shakespeare's queen, Elizabeth, just six years before Shakespeare was born, had her sister, Mary, deposed and executed. When Shakespeare was born, there would still have been people living who remembered the long civil strife of the Wars of the Roses, when the great houses of Lancaster and York fought over who should rightfully rule the kingdom. Shakespeare's second monarch, James I, would hand the kingdom over to his son Charles, but Charles would be deposed and then executed in 1649 by the Puritan Revolution, led by Oliver Cromwell.

- Not until the end of the 17th century would the monarchy be firm once again, when William of Orange and his wife, Mary, daughter of James II, acceded to the throne and ushered in a period of stability.

- Not having at least a nodding acquaintance with these historical facts certainly does act as a block to understanding the history plays. A good production can overcome a lack of awareness about the historical facts, and Shakespeare himself plays fast and loose with historical accuracy. Nevertheless, it can really help to grasp these plays if we have in hand a basic understanding of the history

that lies beneath them. This understanding requires a tool called understanding history.

What Are the History Plays?

- In Act III, scene iii, the setting is an old castle, Flint Castle, on the border marches between Wales and England. An army is gathered before the castle, and they are waiting for the keeper of the castle to surrender. Then, atop the battlements, the keeper stands forth and addresses the army—but something is wrong. The speaker is King Richard II, King of England, and the army is an English army, but they are opposed to their own king. It's an emblem of civil war on the stage. The king stands forth from the battlements and looks down on the army.

  We are amazed; and thus long have we stood

  To watch the fearful bending of thy knee,

  Because we thought ourself thy lawful king:

  And if we be, how dare thy joints forget

  To pay their awful duty to our presence?

  If we be not, show us the hand of God

  That hath dismissed us from our stewardship.

- A crucial tool for understanding what is happening in the history plays is the kingship tool: We must watch for how these plays put kingship into question. The great question during Shakespeare's day was what his own sovereign, King James I, called the divine right of kings. The theory is that the king derives his office, and his power, from God himself, and only God can take that office and power away from him. It's an elegant argument for one to make who is holding power. To rebel against that power is to rebel against God himself.

- The army is led by Richard's cousin, Henry of Bolingbroke, whom Richard has banished for a time for his conflicts with other nobles, but who has come back to reclaim his family lands that Richard has seized for his own profit. Richard is the divinely anointed king, but the fact is, he's a very bad king.

- On his deathbed, Richard's uncle, his father's brother, delivers one of the most famous speeches in all of Shakespeare—the great England speech, which plays a crucial role at the early part of this play.

  This royal throne of kings, this sceptred isle,

  This earth of majesty, this seat of Mars,

  This other Eden, demi-paradise,

  This fortress built by Nature for herself

  Against infection and the hand of war,

  This happy breed of men, this little world,

  This precious stone set in the silver sea,

  Which serves it in the office of a wall

  Or as a moat defensive to a house,

  Against the envy of less happier lands,—

  This blessed plot, this earth, this realm, this England.

- John of Gaunt makes this litany of praise for one purpose: to then have it all come crashing down when he says "this dear dear land … is now leased out," that "England that was wont to conquer

others / Hath made a shameful conquest of itself." Richard's ruinous economic policies have rotted the land.

- Shakespeare often takes quite seriously the old medieval notion that "the land and the king are one," that the failure of the land means a failure of the monarchy. Therefore, one of the tests of the monarch is this: Does the land flourish, or does it perish, under his or her rule? In this play, we see that Richard's rule is ruinous.

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Richard II (1367–1400) was king of England from 1377 to 1399.

- Shakespeare has set up a dramatic conflict that sums up the entire political question of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance: Does the ruler derive his power from God's grace, or from his own innate worthiness? Is there something special about the king, or is it just a question of who is the most capable, and merely human, leader? In plainest terms, does worth, or birth, make the king?

- As Europe progresses into the 17th century and beyond, this question is answered in the human direction, as monarchy itself fades and we no longer believe that God divinely chooses our leaders. When writing this play, Shakespeare is in the late 1590s looking back 100 years to the very start of that question.

- We need a new tool to comprehend what is happening in this play and in so many of his plays: the drama of ideas. Shakespeare is

one of the major figures in intellectual history, and his plays are filled with serious contemplation of the great questions of religion, philosophy, and politics. We need to try to follow the larger arguments being carried on in the plays.

- Watch carefully for how Shakespeare dramatizes these ideas in the characters. It's part of his amazing talent that he never just states the ideas, as if he were writing an essay, but instead he gives them life in the scenes and the characters. We need to watch how the characters interact, what they say, how they act, and what they represent. In this way, we can see how Shakespeare works through complex intellectual arguments in his dramas.

- In *Richard II*, and throughout the history plays, we see Shakespeare provoking the great question: What is the relation of God to politics and to history? Pushed far enough, this becomes the ultimate question: Does God even care about human affairs? Is God even there? These are the ideas that will consume philosophers from Plato to Nietzsche.

- In the history plays, Shakespeare engages the most profound of issues—every bit as profound as what he explores in the comedies and tragedies. Holding these questions somewhere in the forefront of our experience of the history plays is an essential tool for understanding these plays.

Histories versus Tragedies and Comedies

- Shakespeare probably began his career with a history play, and he wrote eight major history plays in the 1590s; they are all concerned with English History only, with the kings and queens and historical events ranging from about 1377, when Richard II assumed the throne, to about 1485, when Richard III was deposed and the rule of Henry VII began.

- We generally talk about these plays in two groups: the first Henriad, or the first tetralogy, by which we mean the first four plays written, though they treat material that, chronologically, comes after the

second Henriad, or second tetralogy, the second cluster of four plays written about seven to ten years after the first group.

- The first Henriad includes the plays *Henry VI*, parts 1, 2, and 3; and *Richard III*. The second Henriad includes *Richard II*; *Henry IV*, parts 1 and 2; and *Henry V*. The second Henriad is by far the greater literary achievement, with *Richard II* showing a significant step forward in Shakespeare's art than the earlier history plays, and the two *Henry IV* plays standing as major accomplishments, and *Henry V* having an iconic status as the play about Shakespeare's ideal Christian king.

- In looking at this entire body of work, the eight main history plays, we can say that Shakespeare made a real study of this genre of the history play and that over time, he refined and evolved the genre from a rather loose form to the very accomplished form of the second Henriad.

- One of the key ways to distinguish the earlier and the later plays is to see how focused the play is on a single character: Does the play treat a wide variety of historical characters, a broad sweep of historical canvas? If so, it is almost certainly from the first Henriad. Or does it focus on a single figure, what we might call the hero of the play? If so, it is almost certainly from the second Henriad. This distinction is very helpful in understanding the differences between the two groups of plays, and it also supports the idea that what really kicks in for Shakespeare around the time of 1595 is an understanding that his drama will be character-driven, focusing on a great, compelling personage.

- Shakespeare's history plays are far less focused on an unquestioning glorification of his own monarch, and they even question monarchy itself in places. His view of history is filled with irony, distrust, suspicion of power, and a keen insight into the complexities of what it means to rule other human beings.

- This is why the kingship tool, with its focus on how these plays put kingship into question, is so important, because it helps us see Shakespeare's own attitude toward his material. That attitude is very hard to pin down because, in effect, Shakespeare is writing not just about a historical moment or figure, but also about history itself and its meanings, so his canvas is very broad. This is why we get obvious departures from strict historical fact in these plays.

- To help us understand this, it's useful to bear in mind the distinction between history and chronicle: If history is what we think of today, an adherence to the facts and events, then chronicle is an effort to follow the main contours of those facts but to bring into relief their larger patterns of significance, conflict, and character. Indeed, this is closer to how Shakespeare's own era understood history: What matters is not merely the facts, but the larger meaning of the facts.

- Shakespeare's effort to find the larger meanings behind the historical events is what makes *Richard II* such a brilliant play, and surely the most important historical event in this play is the deposition of the king: Richard actually resigns the crown, taking it from his own head and giving it to his cousin Henry. The deposition scene depicts the central historical crisis, and understanding of this scene can help us unlock all of the history plays.

- The drama of the deposition scene is increased by the fact that Henry and Richard are cousins, which makes them, in a sense, brothers to one another. This points us toward a crucial tool for seeing what is happening beneath the surface in the history plays—the Cain and Abel dynamic, the conflict between brothers—and we need to watch for this dynamic throughout these plays.

- Shakespeare realizes that the history plays are also meditations on brotherhood, on the bonds that can bring men together

and also make them murderous enemies of one another. Henry himself suggests that one of the guiding themes of this play is the biblical story of Cain murdering his brother Abel when he compares the assassination of his uncle, Gloucester, by one of Richard's supporters to this, saying: "That he did plot the Duke of Gloucester's death … / Which blood, like sacrificing Abel's, cries / Even from the tongueless caverns of the earth." This will be the major moral and religious theme sounded throughout the history plays, and it's what connects Richard III to Henry V.

Tools

understanding history: Often in a Shakespeare play, especially the history plays, it helps to have a basic understanding of the actual history that he is imaginatively re-creating. Using a wide range of easily available resources, how can you develop a modest understanding of this historical background? How does this help you understand the plays? Ask yourself: What is a history play*?* Shakespeare draws upon actual historical events for a large number of his plays, but he does not slavishly record history. How does Shakespeare use history in his dramas? Where does he depart from history and for what reasons? Does the play treat a wide variety of historical characters, a broad sweep of historical canvas, or does it focus on a single figure, what might be considered the "hero" of the play? How is history a meditation for Shakespeare in these plays?

kingship: Kingship is the dominant political model for Shakespeare's day. Watch carefully how he represents kings in the plays. How does he question kingship as a political model? Does he admire certain things about kingship? How does Shakespeare represent the relation between the king and the land? How does he conceive of the relation between the king and God? How does Shakespeare represent the making or the education of a king? Watch for how the play dramatizes how Shakespeare offers actual scenes of instruction for the king.

drama of ideas: Shakespeare is one of the major figures in intellectual history, and his plays are filled with serious contemplation of the great questions of religion and philosophy. Try to follow the larger arguments being carried on between characters. Watch carefully for how Shakespeare dramatizes these ideas in the characters—that is, he never just states the ideas, but rather, he dramatizes them in the scenes and the characters. Watch how characters interact—what they say, how they act, what they represent. Try to see how Shakespeare works through complex intellectual arguments in his dramas. In *Richard II*, focus on the relation of God to politics and to history. Does God even care about human affairs? Is God even there?

Cain and Abel dynamic: Shakespeare seems obsessed by the idea of brother betrayal. The histories, the tragedies, and even the comedies have versions of this dynamic. Pay careful attention to the relations between brothers or even close male friends in the plays. How does Shakespeare present this relation? At what point does betrayal enter into it? Why do brothers turn on brothers? (This occurs in *Hamlet*, *Macbeth*, *King Lear*, *The Winter's Tale*, and *The Tempest*.)

Suggested Reading

Frye, *Northrop Frye on Shakespeare*.

Kernan, "The Henriad."

Ornstein, *A Kingdom for a Stage*.

Saccio, *Shakespeare's English Kings*.

Questions to Consider

1. The drama of ideas tool seeks to bring to light the major intellectual elements in Shakespeare's plays. Think about any of the Shakespeare plays you have read or seen over the years. What major ideas do you see at work in them?

2. Richard II is known as the "poet king," particularly for his long and remarkable speeches, such as in Act III, scene ii, lines 140–173; in Act IV, scene i, lines 191–212; or his final speech in Act V, scene v, lines 1–66. Using the words, words, words tool, choose one of those speeches and see if you can find some of the poetic elements within it.

Politics as Theater in *Henry IV, Part 1*

Lecture 10

In this lecture, you will explore various tools that will help you understand the history plays that are discussed in the next few lectures: the contrasting characters; the ongoing issue of kingship, of how a king is made; the constant dynamic of appearance versus reality; and, connected to that, the idea of stagecraft and how politics is also a kind of theater. As you watch the education of the prince, keep in mind that you will also be watching Shakespeare's own growth as a playwright as he confidently portrays English history on the stage.

The Final Act of the Play

- Throughout the final act of the play, soldiers have been engaged in combat, kings and princes have struck at one another, and characters have run on and off the stage in great confusion and violence. It's a civil war, after all—a rebellion against the king—and, hence, against the very principle of social order, so chaos and mayhem illustrate the very theme of the play.

- The last single combat has ended, and one man stands alone, a young prince who has just vanquished his chief rival. On one side of the prince lies the dead body of his rival, a young man his same age, whom the prince has just slain. On the other side of the prince lies an old, fat man, a knight but hardly an impressive heroic figure—rather, a picture of excess and debauchery.

- This tableau defines the moral and psychological meanings of the first part of *Henry IV* and gives us a major tool for understanding Shakespeare's history plays: the character contrast tool. We must watch for the juxtaposition of characters—who is next to whom, quite literally, on the stage, and beyond that, who is coupled with whom, who is figuratively next to or opposed to another person. Shakespeare uses this technique to convey many of the larger truths

and ideas of these plays. This juxtaposition, of the prince, the rival, and the old man gets at the very heart of this play.

- In this scene, the prince is Prince Henry, or Prince Hal, the son of the new king, King Henry IV, who took the throne from his cousin, Richard II. Throughout this play, Hal seems to be a wastrel, a devil-may-care youth who is unworthy of the crown that his father hopes to pass to him. Hal hangs out in the tavern world, helps to rob travelers by night, and seems to have no regard for the weight of responsibility that is coming his way.

- However, with Shakespeare, we must not trust appearances; how Hal seems and how he truly is are two very different matters. The young rival whom Hal has defeated is Hotspur, the most noble and admirable of the rebels, who are opposing King Henry in this play. Hotspur is gallant, hot tempered—as his name suggests—a rash and bold young man who scorns Hal's apparent lack of manhood and is eager to defeat the young prince and show the world his greater character. In defeating Hotspur, Hal has revealed his own true gifts, courage, and skill and has given confirmation that he is going to become the great king that his father so desires.

- The old, fat man is Sir John Falstaff, a man of at least 60 years of age, more at home in the taverns than at court—the great friend of the young prince by his own account or the corrupter and destroyer of the prince by others' accounts. If Percy is Hal's brother figure, then Falstaff is his father figure, both of whom Hal must overcome if he is to become a great king. That is part of the tableau: Hal poised between his parodic father and parodic brother figures, standing triumphant against these challenges to his character.

- The central focus of this cluster of plays, from *Henry IV* through *Henry V*, is on the making or education of a king. The kingship tool focuses on the ways in which Shakespeare puts kingship into question. In *Henry IV*, Shakespeare refines this tool because he has an actual king in the making, Prince Hal, as his central character. Hal's progress is a kind of test study for Shakespeare in how a king

is made, so we need to closely attend to scenes of testing, instruction, and education.

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Henry IV (1366–1413) was king of England from 1399 to 1413.

- The central virtue for a king in the middle ages is courage. Hotspur, in a way, has too much courage. Falstaff, by contrast, has a definite lack of courage. Hal needs to balance the two, to have the courage necessary to lead and triumph, but also the practical, world-aware qualities that give him the needed caution and pragmatic skills to negotiate a complex, coded political world. This tableau of contrasting characters at the end of the play shows us where the next two plays are going to go, climaxing in King Henry V's triumph over the French armies in the great battle of Agincourt.

- What is so remarkable about Shakespeare's method in these history plays is the way he turns the education of a king into a dramatic study—that is, Shakespeare dramatizes this process, turns it into a theatrical enterprise. This is a version of the kingship tool. To really understand how the history plays work, we need to take this tool very seriously: how Shakespeare dramatizes the education of a king.

The Double Plot and the Double World

- One of the tools that we've been employing ever since the *Midsummer Night's Dream* lectures is the idea of the double plot, or the high and low plot. In *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, we learned that this often takes the form of an upper-class plot, dealing with the kings, and queens, and aristocracy, and a lower-class plot, dealing with workers and commoners. In *Twelfth Night*, we saw that this can also consist of two worlds—two contrasting scenes or settings, such as Orsino's court and Olivia's house.

- In the two *Henry IV* plays, Shakespeare combines these two concepts, setting up an opposition between the world of the court and the world of the tavern. By bringing these tools together—the double plot and the double world—we are able to see a whole range of implications, meanings, and motifs that are essential to understanding the history plays.

- For example, in the court world, the ruling figure is the king, Hal's father Henry IV; in the tavern world, the ruling figure is Falstaff—and these are precisely the two competing father figures for Hal's affection and obedience. Shakespeare brilliantly does not put the two figures, Henry IV and Falstaff, on stage at the same time. By using our character contrast tool, we see that by avoiding this, Shakespeare tells us that this would be too much—it would be like forcing Hal to choose between the two warring halves of his own psyche, something he can only do at the very end of *Henry IV, Part 2*, when he finally and decisively rejects Falstaff, but only after his own father has died.

- Henry is the embodiment of order, rule, and law; Falstaff is the embodiment of disorder and misrule, and he is an outlaw. However, in a curious way, Henry is the outlaw—because he got the crown through deposing the rightful king—and Falstaff appeals to something that is truly within Hal, so in a sense, Falstaff is closer to a certain kind of truth than King Henry is. These reversals and revisions occur at every level of this play.

- There is another way to view the contrast of these two worlds: The tavern world is a place of fun. One of the reasons Hal so desires to go there, and remain there, is because it's so enjoyable. Falstaff is an endless fount of jokes, pranks, humor, wit, and entertainment. The world of court is the place of duty, and even if Hal comes around to seeing that duty as honorable and fulfilling, there is never a sense that he finds it enjoyable.

- One of the remarkable things about the play *Henry V* is that Hal as King Henry is not seen as having a particularly good time; he's impressive, courageous, inspiring, enduring, and even brilliant at times, but his life there is not fun. It's no accident that Falstaff does not appear in that play. He dies early in its second act, but his death occurs offstage and is reported by another character. There is no room for Falstaff on the stage once Hal becomes King Henry V and takes on the mantle of duty and responsibility.

- By using the tool of the double worlds, we can see one of Shakespeare's overarching themes in these plays: that Hal progresses from boyhood to manhood, from outcast to civic leader, from rebel to social icon, and while much of this progression is necessary and beneficial, it comes at a cost—indeed, growing up comes at a cost. These plays are not just about history, they are about the very intimate and touching life of a young man who must leave behind the things of childhood and take up his manhood, a transition that is necessary but also in some sense regretful.

- Recall from *Twelfth Night* the tool that watched for the boundary-crossing figure, to see which character can cross between the two worlds. In these plays, it is Hal whose movement unifies the two worlds, as does his constant awareness that in both worlds he is always playing a role—indeed, multiple roles.

- The first time we see Hal, he is in the tavern world with Falstaff. We get a series of dramatic, tense scenes in the court during Act I, but Hal is not there; Act II is devoted to the tavern world, and of course King Henry is not there. It's only in Act III that we see

Hal at the court. He's been called before his father, the king, who proceeds with a litany of complaints against his son. Hal tries to defend himself, but his father rejects his defenses.

- The king then gives to Hal crucial advice on how to be a ruler: He tells him that what he really needs to be is an actor. In effect, Henry tells him to let the people see him sparingly; if they see him too frequently, he will lose his shine and they will no longer respect him. This was Henry's strategy, which takes us back to the tool of stagecraft. In effect, this is a strategy of politics as theater: The masses are the audience, and the king is the leading man. Studying the history plays—and indeed any of the plays—with this idea in mind is a powerful tool for grasping what Shakespeare is trying to suggest about the world of politics.

- What's ironic about this lesson is that Hal has already learned this. In Act I, scene ii, the first scene in which Hal appears, he closes the scene with a great soliloquy that is a virtual mirror of his father's advice about being seldom seen and that shows how Hal has a highly sophisticated sense of the theater of politics—indeed, he could instruct his father on a thing or two.

- What is remarkable about Hal's soliloquy is how thoroughly Hal has thought out his entire future plan: He will seem to be outrageous and irresponsible and reduce the expectations of his rule to the lowest level. Then, by showing his true qualities and kingly graces, he'll overwhelm his subjects with delight and they'll love him more because they thought so little of him.

- It's a calculated performance that is going to be rather rough on his tavern friends. When Henry becomes king, he will have to choose between the two worlds; the option of going back and forth will no longer be available to him. However, we need to sympathize with Hal's motivation: He calls the kingship "the debt I never promised." He didn't ask for this burden, but he will accept it.

Tools

character contrast: Watch carefully for who is next to whom on the stage in a Shakespeare play. How does this "blocking" of character affect or reinforce the meaning of the scene? How does Shakespeare use this juxtaposition to show alliances or enmities between characters? How do these characters set each other off, mirror one another, or explain one another?

kingship: Kingship is the dominant political model for Shakespeare's day. Watch carefully how he represents kings in the plays. How does he question kingship as a political model? Does he admire certain things about kingship? How does Shakespeare represent the relation between the king and the land? How does he conceive of the relation between the king and God? How does Shakespeare represent the making or the education of a king? Watch for how the play dramatizes how Shakespeare offers actual scenes of instruction for the king.

appearance versus reality: This is the fundamental tool for all of Shakespeare. Pay close attention to how Shakespeare plays with how things appear on the outside or the surface and how they really are on the inside. Watch for how characters can appear one way to an observer while hiding their true selves behind a literal or metaphoric disguise. How does Shakespeare employ deceptive appearances at every level of his plays? What is the effect of this? What larger meanings does this almost obsessive element suggest? How does this get at the very heart of Shakespeare's art—which is, after all, all about disguise and acting and performance? (Characters who cut through appearance and get at the true reality include Hamlet, Rosalind in *As You Like It*, and Portia in *The Merchant of Venice*.)

stagecraft: Pay careful attention to scenes in which politics is presented as a kind of theater—or, conversely, theater is presented as a kind of politics. The politics-as-theater dynamic is very prominent in the history plays, *Hamlet*, and *Julius Caesar*.

Suggested Reading

Garber, *Shakespeare After All*.

Kernan, “The Henriad.”

Ornstein, *A Kingdom for a Stage*.

Saccio, *Shakespeare’s English Kings*.

Questions to Consider

1. As you read or watch *Henry IV, Part 1*, look for scenes in which Prince Hal is receiving some sort of education from the other characters. How does Shakespeare dramatize the education of the prince? What is Hal learning, and who are his best teachers?

2. Where else in this play do you see scenes of acting, of performance, of a play within the play? Why do you think a history play is so obviously concerned with acting and performance?

Henry IV, Part 2—Contrast and Complexity
Lecture 11

Henry IV, Part 1 is almost universally considered a superb play. It's fair to say that *Henry IV, Part 2* suffers somewhat by comparison. Although it retains nearly all of the same characters as the earlier play—Hal, King Henry, Falstaff, and others—it doesn't seem as accessible as that play. Certainly, it is a more difficult play to understand—whether in reading or on the stage—and troubles readers more than its predecessor. In this lecture, you will use a new tool, called the play comparison tool, to make sense of *Henry IV, Part 2*, precisely because it's a continuation of the first play.

Henry IV, Part 1* versus *Henry IV, Part 2

- We need to place the plays *Henry IV, Part 1* and *Henry IV, Part 2* side by side, in effect, to look at what seems similar in them and to try to determine what, in fact, makes them so different. We can call this the play comparison tool, and it works for many of Shakespeare's plays. By viewing *Henry IV, Part 2* in this way, its meaning unfolds for us in complex and illuminating ways. It's a crucial play, and a wonderful one, for fully understanding Hal and Falstaff and, by extension, Shakespeare's commentary on history, kingship, and human nature itself.

- The first apparent similarity is that *Henry IV, Part 2* has basically the same cast of characters as *Henry IV, Part 1*. Hotspur is gone, having been killed at the end of *Henry IV, Part 1* by Hal. This implies that the virtues of Hotspur are absent from this play: Hotspur was impetuous, impolitic, and a poor leader, but he was also truly courageous, truly gallant, and a man of honor in many ways.

- With Hotspur gone, it means these same virtues are gone, and this is true of this play: There is little pretense toward traditional concepts of honor and courage. In *Henry IV, Part 2*, honor has no

place, and a leader must be ruthless and place his and his nation's interests above any other concern. This is the world that Prince Hal must soon assume.

- In *Henry IV, Part 2*, Lord Chief Justice is an interesting new character. We first meet him in Act I, scene ii, when he confronts Falstaff. We learn that the Chief Justice has had the prince committed to prison for a time because the prince apparently struck him in a dispute about the prince's tavern friends. This is amazing—a lord of the realm imprisoning the heir apparent.

- When the Chief Justice confronts Falstaff, the fat knight first pretends he cannot see him and then pretends he is deaf; it's like a child trying to avoid the stern and demanding parent. In fact, Falstaff's whole character has a childish element to it, which is another reason why the prince needs to break away from him: These plays are a coming-of-age narrative for Prince Hal, and that means he must, in the words of St. Paul, "put away childish things."

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Sir John Falstaff is one of the most famous comic characters in all of English literature.

- The first tool for working with *Henry IV, Part 1* was to look for the contrast of characters, deciphering who is standing next to whom for any given scene. In this early scene, the Lord Chief Justice and

Falstaff are on stage, face to face, and it's a striking tableau once again that depicts the battle for the prince's soul: Will he continue in his errant ways with Falstaff and the tavern world, or will he follow the path of the Lord Chief Justice—who is, after all, the very embodiment of law, order, and civic duty—and take up his burden and privilege of kingship?

- Another important element of this tool is seeing what is similar but then noting the crucial differences between the two parts of the *Henry IV* plays: The key scene in the first play is Act II, scene iv, when Hal and Falstaff take turns impersonating the king and the prince, a scene that tells us so much about the direction their relationship will eventually take. In the second play, Shakespeare seems to revisit that same scene in the same place, Act II, scene iv. Again, Falstaff and his gang interact in the tavern world with Hal and his friend Poins. However, as we look closely at this scene, we see the stark differences between the two plays—differences that tell us much about their deeper meanings.

- Most of Act II, scene iv deals with Falstaff and his interactions with a young working girl, Doll Tearsheet. Whereas in the first play Falstaff seems irrepressible, an icon of the comic impulse toward life and merriment, in this play, he is diseased, enfeebled, weary, and moving inexorably toward death. His arc of descent has crossed with the prince's arc of ascent, and the crossing point is these two plays; as they draw toward a close, Falstaff must fall, just as Hal must rise. As with *Romeo and Juliet*, following these arcs of character development is a very helpful tool for any Shakespeare play.

Expectations and History

- As a final tool for understanding how this play functions and achieves its effects, we will use the understanding history tool, focusing especially on the concept of hope and how it relates to history. In a history play, the whole focus is on a nation's hopes or expectations for its monarch and how that monarch fulfills, or fails to fulfill, those hopes. Shakespeare sets up a recurring dynamic

of overturning expectations—of refusing to fulfill the hopes of the nation or the heroes.

- Hal's whole strategy in *Henry IV, Part 1* is to set up extraordinarily low expectations and then reverse them as he shines like the sun in his reformation. What we saw as a covert strategy in the first play becomes a structuring principle throughout the second play. We see this in the actual reign of Henry IV: At the end of the first play, he has defeated the main host of rebels and looks forward to consolidating his reign, but in the second play, the king is weary, anxious, and—crucially—unable to sleep.

  O sleep, O gentle sleep

  Nature's soft nurse, how have I frighted thee,

  That thou no more wilt weigh my eyelids down,

  And steep my senses in forgetfulness?

- He muses on the cares and concerns a king must bear and concludes with a final couplet that will resonate throughout all four of these history plays: "Then happy low, lie down! / Uneasy lies the head that wears a crown." He then reflects on how, when he first took over the kingdom from Richard, Lord Northumberland was his most trusted ally, and now he leads the rebellion against Henry.

- At the heart of this is Henry's realization that if we knew what awaits us in life, we would often not want to go on. The ironies of history lay within this realization. Richard expected to rule as king. He was overthrown, and then Henry expected to rule as king, but his rule is marked by constant rebellion and his own inability to find peace and contentment beneath the crown. This is exactly what Prince Hal has been observing; this explains why he is reluctant to take on the burden of the kingship. However, if we think about the logic of this, of the reversal of expectations, then Hal is exactly right

to have such suspicious expectations of kingship—this suggests that his own experience of the crown might well be very successful.

- When King Henry IV dies, the crown passes to Hal, who becomes King Henry V. The court has decidedly low expectations of the new king—in particular, the Lord Chief Justice, who thinks he has become the new king's chief enemy.

- However, the readers (or audience) have a different, and expanded, view than that of the characters. Hal declares in *Henry IV, Part 1* that he has an ulterior plan: to lower expectation and then overwhelm it. Therefore, while the court has very low expectations of Hal, we actually have rather high expectations for him; we assume he is going to be far better than his reputation.

- Hal confronts the Lord Chief Justice, who defends his actions by saying that he was responsible for protecting the authority of the king and asks the new king if he would expect any less responsibility from his own servants. King Henry responds in a way that, as he realizes (and planned), defeats expectation in a grand way. Hal concludes by stating the tool of reversing expectation—of both defeating and surpassing all hope in history.

> You are right, justice, and you weigh this well;
>
> Therefore still bear the balance and the sword:
>
> And I do wish your honours may increase,
>
> Till you do live to see a son of mine
>
> Offend you and obey you, as I did.
>
> . . . .

You did commit me:

For which, I do commit into your hand

The unstained sword that you have used to bear;

With this remembrance, that you use the same

With the like bold, just and impartial spirit

As you have done 'gainst me. There is my hand.

You shall be as a father to my youth:

I survive,

To mock the expectation of the world,

To frustrate prophecies and to raze out

Rotten opinion, who hath writ me down

After my seeming.

- This speech gathers up many themes and tools from the earlier plays—Hal's understanding of theater as politics, for example, and how Shakespeare dramatizes the education of a king, an education that is now almost complete. Hal's soliloquy in *Henry IV, Part 1* first sets forth his strategy of appearing one way, and then he reveals his true self later in such a way that the low expectations are replaced by delight and marvel.

- In *Henry IV, Part 2*, we see Hal bedecked in royal robes and the crucial symbol of the crown, the very emblem of royalty and the embodiment of his own strategy. However, one more step remains, and one more set of expectations needs to be reversed. Hal says of the Chief Justice "you shall be as a father to my youth," so the Chief

Justice will replace Henry IV as Hal's father figure, and he will also replace Falstaff. It is time for the fat knight to recede from the stage and for Hal to leave behind the tavern world and become the king he is called to be. However, Falstaff has somehow remained blind to this reality.

- No matter how much we might sympathize with Falstaff—no matter how much we are carried away by his wit, exuberance, and comic spirit—it is difficult not to condemn him at this point. The final scene of this play, and the final scene of Falstaff on the stage, is brutal in its effect on the reader or audience.

- Falstaff, upon hearing the news that King Henry IV has died, rushes to London for the coronation. Falstaff cries to Hal, "My King! My Jove! I speak to thee, my heart!" After responding to Falstaff with scorn, the king marches away, leaving Falstaff stunned with the realization that his hopes and dreams are dashed. Then, the Chief Justice returns to take Falstaff and all of his company to prison. It's a devastating conclusion to Falstaff's reign in these plays, but it confirms Shakespeare's own ongoing argument about politics and kingship.

- Recall that we began our investigation of the history plays with this essential question: Does the land flourish, or does the land perish, under the king's rule? Under Richard II, the land declined; under Henry IV, it has seen ongoing rebellion and unrest. Now, Henry V takes the throne, and for the land to thrive under him, he must cast out the part of him that would follow Falstaff and commit himself to the course of justice and order. If we lament this exchange, even a bit, then we are like generations of readers who wish the world could accommodate both Falstaff's misrule and the Chief Justice's rule. However, when we turn to the concluding play in this cycle, *Henry V*, we will see the remarkable ways that Hal performs in this new role as king.

Tools

play comparison: Place two plays side by side, in effect, to look at what seems similar in them and try to determine what in fact makes them so different. This sort of comparison can be very illuminating: Try this with *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *Romeo and Juliet*, for example, or *Hamlet* and *Othello*—or a straight comedy such as *Much Ado about Nothing* and a problem play such as *All's Well That Ends Well*.

arc of character: Watch carefully the way in which Shakespeare's main characters develop and grow over the course of the play. Pay attention not only to a character's rise and fall—that is, his or her internal changes—but also to the ways a character's external role changes—that is, how his or her status in or relation to the social structure can alter throughout a play. What patterns do they follow? Is it a rise and fall, or is there a more subtle pattern at work? How is this arc related to power? How is it related to the movement from ignorance to knowledge?

understanding history: Often in a Shakespeare play, especially the history plays, it helps to have a basic understanding of the actual history that he is imaginatively re-creating. Using a wide range of easily available resources, how can you develop a modest understanding of this historical background? How does this help you understand the plays? Ask yourself: What is a history play? Shakespeare draws upon actual historical events for a large number of his plays, but he does not slavishly record history. How does Shakespeare use history in his dramas? Where does he depart from history and for what reasons? Does the play treat a wide variety of historical characters, a broad sweep of historical canvas, or does it focus on a single figure, what might be considered the "hero" of the play? How is history a meditation for Shakespeare in these plays?

Suggested Reading

Garber, *Shakespeare After All*.

Kernan, “The Henriad.”

Ornstein, *A Kingdom for a Stage*.

Saccio, *Shakespeare's English Kings*.

Questions to Consider

1. We can learn a lot about a Shakespeare play by comparing it to another Shakespeare play. Choose any two plays that you've read or seen and try to set them side by side and see how they match up. What scenes or characters seem to parallel one another? How do they differ? What do the similarities and the differences tell you about these two plays?

2. Hopes and expectations are key factors in the Henriad plays. Read with care the scenes between Hal and his father, King Henry IV, in this play—particularly their final discussion in Act IV, scene iii. What does the king try to teach his son about expectations, and how can they be both a curse and an opportunity for a king? How does this fit with many of the other themes in the history plays?

The Drama of Ideas in *Henry V*
Lecture 12

Henry V is the fourth and concluding play in Shakespeare's second history cycle. In this lecture, three tools will help you understand the climactic play in the tetralogy: from *Richard II*, the drama of ideas tool, looking closely at the rich intellectual context of the play's engagement with history and focusing specifically on the play's religious implications; from *Henry IV, Part 1*, the stagecraft tool and, specifically, the approach of watching for a strategy of politics as theater; and from *Henry IV, Part 2*, the understanding history tool and, specifically, examining the ways expectations are set up and then defeated or reversed.

The Role of Religion

- What role does God, or religion, play in *Henry V*? How can a focus on this relationship help us understand the heart of this play? The first speaker in the first scene of the play is the Archbishop of Canterbury, the highest church official in the land. However, this priest does not take us into the domain of prayer, miracle, or religious faith; rather, he and another churchman are discussing earnestly a complicated bill that is going before the commons that threatens to confiscate up to half of the wealth of the church.

- Desperate to thwart this bill, they come up with a plan: If the King will reject the bill, they will "give a greater sum / Than ever at one time the clergy yet / Did to his predecessors part withal" to the King to fund his war with France. They also will shortly present a very complex, legalistic argument to the king that apparently justifies his invasion of France and his claim to the French throne.

- In this first scene, we have the presence of church figures, but they are not spiritual leaders—rather, they are ruthlessly worldly, prepared to sacrifice fortunes and thousands of lives to defend their own power and property. It seems the role of God in history, in politics, is essentially null and void. *Henry V* begins in a

secular, diminished world with God absent from and unconcerned with human affairs—a realization closer to Nietzsche than to the medieval worldview of Shakespeare's day.

- Henry gives us an opposite view at crucial moments in the play. The night before the great battle of Agincourt, when the outnumbered, weary English will defeat the superior forces of the French, Henry shows a desperate need for God's mercy and pardon—not merely for giving his soldiers courage—but because Henry still knows that he holds the crown unjustly, that his father took it from God's anointed king and even though Henry received it in proper succession, he still doubts his own legitimacy.

- We might see this as evidence of Henry's religious faith and dependence upon God for all his hopes, but with this religious impulse, he pays other people to pray for him. This may have been a standard medieval practice, but we might wonder if Henry's penance is merely skin deep or if his religious faith is only one more role he plays rather than a deeply felt faith that informs his life and actions.

- Nevertheless, when the battle of Agincourt is over and Henry has learned from the French herald that the day belongs to the English, he instantly praises God. It's very difficult to know where Henry stands on the question of God's actions on his behalf. In some places, he appears to be a cynical manipulator of faith and religion, and then he seems sincerely devout and humbled before the grace of God.

- By focusing on the religious element of the play, we see one of the key themes of *Henry V*: that Henry is one of the most difficult and ambiguous of characters to finally interpret. Like Hamlet, Henry eludes easy definition and seems to have as many interpretations as he does guises.

The Role of Stagecraft

- The second tool for this play involves Shakespeare's uses of stagecraft and, specifically, examining the dynamics of politics

as theater. Henry has learned the arts of theater from a true master: Falstaff, who is almost never at a loss for a response, an improvisation, or a control over the scene.

- In *Henry V*, we watch Henry employ all the elements of a good director, playwright, and actor in almost every major scene. Indeed, this becomes one of the great questions of this play, a question that arises in the earlier history plays and in the tragedies: When is the king acting, and when is he "sincere"? Can we even tell the difference between the two? Can the king even tell where his interior self ends and his acting or performing exterior self begins?

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Henry V (1387–1422) was king of England from 1413 to 1422.

- The cynical reading of King Henry is that he is only a masterful manipulator who sacrifices everything to his own political ambition. We see some evidence of this in Henry's cruel rejection of Falstaff and his willingness to use every person and event for his own gain and calculated superiority as a ruler.

- No one is more aware of the potential quality of Henry being inauthentic than Henry himself. He knows full well the sort of world he is condemned to rule and understands how easy it is to lose himself in the part of king.

- The night before the decisive battle of Agincourt, while Henry walks among his camp, he meditates upon what truly separates a king from his subjects, and he realizes that it is nothing intrinsic, no special quality or grace from God, but merely "ceremony." "And what kind of god art thou," he asks, "thou idol ceremony?" Henry realizes that ceremony is nothing: If he is sick, ceremony cannot cure him; if he is anxious, ceremony cannot give him rest. In fact, ceremony is the very cause of a king's grief—the lowliest peasant in the field "had the fore-hand and vantage of a king" because he can sleep soundly at night, when the King is consumed with worry.

  > No, thou proud dream, [Henry reflects]
  >
  > . . . .
  >
  > 'Tis not the balm, the sceptre and the ball,
  >
  > The sword, the mace, the crown imperial,
  >
  > The intertissued robe of gold and pearl,
  >
  > The farced title running 'fore the king,
  >
  > The throne he sits on, nor the tide of pomp
  >
  > That beats upon the high shore of this world,
  >
  > No, not all these, thrice-gorgeous ceremony,
  >
  > Not all these, laid in bed majestical,
  >
  > Can sleep so soundly as the wretched slave.

- It is crucial that we keep in mind that in this speech, Henry is alone; he has no audience, and no crowd witnesses his performance. It's hard not to conclude that here we get the "real" Henry, the interior person who struggles with the role of king. It's at this point that

Henry drops to his knees and gives a prayer to the "God of battles," expressing his own intense anxiety about his role as king and his own past deeds.

The Role of History

- The last tool for the history plays is the understanding history tool, especially focusing on the ways in which expectations are set up and then reversed or defeated. We see this in the second scene of Act I. The ambassadors from the French prince arrive at the English court in response to Henry's claim to French lands. The message from the French prince, who serves as a double or rival to Henry—just as Henry and Hotspur were doubles of each other in *Henry IV, Part 1*—mocks the new English king because the French assume that he is still the "madcap prince" of his earlier days.

- The ambassadors from the French prince then reveal the tribute they have brought the new king: tennis balls, a clear mockery of Henry, suggesting that he is fit only to play youthful games and is not a serious military threat to France. This is what they can expect, given the history of the king's passage to the throne.

- The whole court looks to Henry to see how he will respond, and Henry knows this; he's a master of the stage, of the art of politics as theater, so here's his first chance to deliver a public speech to a rapt audience. Henry performs masterfully—not threatening, but stating that he is coming to France not to play games, but to "play a set / Shall strike his father's crown into the hazard."

- Henry understands where the prince's mockery comes from. He explains what we as readers of the Henriad plays know: that his madcap days were all a careful, calculated preparation for assuming the throne and dazzling expectations. He concludes with a devastating prediction—that generations of Frenchmen will lament the mockery of the prince when they see what conquest Henry will visit upon them.

Henry's Greatest Speech

- All of these tools—the relation of God to history, the dynamics of politics as theater, the confounding of expectations—illuminate the greatest speech of Henry's career, one of the most famous of all of Shakespeare's work, the magnificent St. Crispin's Day speech, delivered just before the great battle of Agincourt begins.

- The scene starts when one of Henry's soldiers voices the English army's grim despair, exclaiming, "O that we now had here / But one ten thousand of those men in England / That do no work today." The English are exhausted and outnumbered and fully expect to be slaughtered by the French.

- Henry enters, and in front of his entire army, he delivers his grand speech of motivation. He starts by telling them not to wish for any more men, and in fact, he says that if anyone is afraid, he can leave now and Henry will pay his journey homeward. He states: "We would not die in that man's company / That fears his fellowship to die with us."

- Henry then goes on to explain that he hopes they are outnumbered—because, he says, "the fewer men, the greater share of honour … I would not lose so great an honour / As one man more, methinks, would share from me." This, of course, makes his hearers realize that their honor depends on staying and fighting with the king.

- He then shifts registers from this incentive not to flee to perhaps the greatest incentive of all to stay and fight: In doing so, they guarantee their place in history—the very theme of these plays. In this speech, Henry incites courage in his men, tells them that they will carve their place in English history by taking part in this battle, and even says that after today they will be kin to the king himself, brothers to the greatest man in the land.

    This day is called the feast of Crispian:

    He that outlives this day, and comes safe home,

Will stand a tip-toe when this day is named,

And rouse him at the name of Crispian.

He that shall live this day, and see old age,

Will yearly on the vigil feast his neighbours,

And say “To-morrow is Saint Crispian:”

Then will he strip his sleeve and show his scars.

And say “These wounds I had on Crispin’s day.”

Old men forget: yet all shall be forgot,

But he’ll remember with advantages

What feats he did that day: then shall our names.

Familiar in his mouth as household words

Harry the king, Bedford and Exeter,

Warwick and Talbot, Salisbury and Gloucester,

Be in their flowing cups freshly remember’d.

This story shall the good man teach his son;

And Crispin Crispian shall ne’er go by,

From this day to the ending of the world,

But we in it shall be remember’d;

We few, we happy few, we band of brothers;

For he to-day that sheds his blood with me

Shall be my brother; be he ne'er so vile,

This day shall gentle his condition:

And gentlemen in England now a-bed

Shall think themselves accursed they were not here,

And hold their manhoods cheap whiles any speaks

That fought with us upon Saint Crispin's day.

- It's a magnificent speech, and even if we are cynical of Harry, it is nevertheless difficult not to feel roused by this speech—not to feel that Henry is absolutely committed to his men and their mission. Henry is true to his conviction, secure in his faith that God will guide his destiny, confident that he will overcome all expectations against him, and content that his performing, exterior self and his authentic, interior self are one and the same. It's a triumphant portrayal, one that has resonated throughout theater to our own day, and it brings the Henry plays to a conclusion that is unforgettable indeed.

Tools

drama of ideas: Watch carefully for Shakespeare's investigation of the relation of God to politics, to history, and to kingship. This issue dominates the history plays and also appears in the tragedies.

stagecraft: The politics of theater and the theater of politics.

understanding history: Often in a Shakespeare play, especially the history plays, it helps to have a basic understanding of the actual history that he is imaginatively re-creating. Using a wide range of easily available resources, how can you develop a modest understanding of this historical background? How does this help you understand the plays? Ask yourself: What is a history

play? Shakespeare draws upon actual historical events for a large number of his plays, but he does not slavishly record history. How does Shakespeare use history in his dramas? Where does he depart from history and for what reasons? Does the play treat a wide variety of historical characters, a broad sweep of historical canvas, or does it focus on a single figure, what might be considered the "hero" of the play? How is history a meditation for Shakespeare in these plays?

Suggested Reading

Bloom, *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human*.

Cohen, *Shakesfear and How to Cure It*.

Kernan, "The Henriad."

Ornstein, *A Kingdom for a Stage*.

Rabkin, "Rabbits, Ducks, and *Henry V*."

Saccio, *Shakespeare's English Kings*.

Questions to Consider

1. We've looked at many examples of politics as a kind of theater in the history plays, and certainly this is a major theme in them. Where else in Shakespeare do we see this dynamic? If we look at *Julius Caesar*, for example—or *Antony and Cleopatra* or *Troilus and Cressida*—how does this dynamic work in those plays? Do you think this insight still applies to politics in our modern day?

2. Why do the history plays keep showing us the reversal or defeat of expectations? We see this in every play from *Richard II* through *Henry V*—obviously, Shakespeare felt that this dynamic was somehow at the heart of his argument about history. Why do you think this was? What do you think this dynamic meant to Shakespeare?

Macbeth—"Foul and Fair"

Lecture 13

In this lecture, you will examine how the great tragedy of *Macbeth* uses reversals, questions, and oppositions as its main structure and also its moral and political content by using the foul and fair tool. You will also use tools from *Romeo and Juliet* and the Henry plays—including the appearance versus reality tool, the understanding history tool, the kingship tool, and the arc of development tool—to understand what Shakespeare is doing in *Macbeth*. In addition, you will learn about a new tool, comic relief, which shows how Shakespeare heightens the effect of horror and madness through the use of humorous moments.

The Foul and Fair Tool and the Appearance versus Reality Tool

- It's one of the iconic scenes in all of Shakespeare: three witches, stirring a pot, cackling and reciting their bizarre spells, awaiting their prey. Then, two soldiers approach, still hot and bleeding from battle, both great Scottish generals—one named Banquo and the other his close friend, Macbeth.

- The first words spoken by a character are so often essential in understanding that character, and when Macbeth first speaks, he says, "So foul and fair a day I have not seen." The day is foul because of the bloody deeds of the battle and the death on both sides and also because of the storm and darkness all around them, but it is fair because they have won the battle—they have defeated the rebellion against King Duncan—and Macbeth has been that king's greatest general.

- However, this is how this play works: What seems foul is actually fair, and what seems fair is actually foul, and just when we think we have that figured out, it reverses itself again. This works on every level of this classic play, including morally, politically, spiritually, and even in terms of love between man and woman—everything becomes its opposite until the surest foundation is laid open to question.

- The key tool for approaching *Macbeth*, and indeed every great Shakespearean tragedy, is the foul and fair tool, which operates by way of sudden reversals: Something seems fair and then is revealed to be foul, or something seems foul and then we realize that it's fair. It dominates this play and, indeed, many of Shakespeare's plays.

- Banquo's first words when he sees the witches are a question: "What are these, / So wither'd and so wild in their attire, / That look not like th'inhabitants o'th'earth, / And yet are on't?" This is a moment of questioning the evidence of his own eyes, which will occur again and again in this play.

- Banquo says that the witches don't look like inhabitants of the earth, but he must admit that they are indeed "on" the earth. The witches seem unearthly, but here they are among us. This opens up a huge theme in this play—really, one of its great questions: What are these witches? They certainly contribute to the dark, haunted atmosphere of the play. They can't just be illusions because both Banquo and Macbeth see them.

- Do the witches cause Macbeth to kill Duncan, his king? If so, how? Do they wield magical power—or is it more of a malevolent, psychological influence? If they don't cause the events, do they foretell them? Are they somehow privy to what the future holds?

- This certainly reminds us of the great tragic question of fate versus free will, which appears in *Romeo and Juliet* and resurfaces in all of the tragedies. The witches also pose one of the great challenges in staging this play: How will you conceive of, costume, and dramatize the witches? The foul or fair tool points us toward this major issue in the play.

- This should remind you of seeing the tension between appearance and reality. The witches exclaim, "Fair is foul and foul is fair," which is another way of saying, "seems Madam? Nay, it is," as Hamlet states. It's the same tension between external appearance

and internal truth that we traced in Prince Hal's evolution from the madcap prince of the tavern world to the resplendent Henry V at the battle of Agincourt.

- In *Macbeth*, this dynamic has its political dimension, too. In the fourth act, the scene shifts to England, where Duncan's son, Malcolm, speaks to Macduff, one of the Scottish thanes. Malcolm is wiser than his father—in this respect at least: He knows not to trust Macduff just because he appears to be loyal and friendly.

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This is a poster for an American production of *Macbeth*, starring Thomas W. Keene, that took place in about 1884. Featured on the poster are Macbeth, Banquo, Banquo's ghost, and Macduff.

- "All things foul would wear the brows of grace," Malcolm states, and we see that he understands the foul device quite well. Indeed, he proceeds to test Macduff's loyalty by pretending that he himself is corrupt, lascivious, avaricious, unjust, and even tyrannical—despite his fair appearance.

- In disgust, Macduff prepares to leave Malcolm's presence, but we know that there's a twist coming: Fair is foul, but also foul is

fair. Malcolm pretends to be foul, but he is actually fair within. He admits to Macduff that he only wanted to be certain of Macduff's loyalty to Scotland, and he is confirmed in this by Macduff's refusal to support Malcolm if Malcolm were indeed so wicked.

- The foul and fair tool helps us see into a repeated dynamic in the play, yes; but also if we keep noticing the prevalence of this dynamic, we realize that the world of *Macbeth* is ultimately a world where nothing is certain—the apparently foul is actually fair, but that fair can easily and rapidly shift to foul once again. Nothing is known, no one is to be trusted. It's a radically skeptical world, a representation of humanity in its most fallen state, as far from clear moral goodness as any representation in Shakespeare.

The Understanding History Tool and the Kingship Tool

- The concept of kingship was a fascination of Shakespeare's, and it was certainly the dominant question of the politics and history of his time. Just as *Richard II* daringly showed the deposing and assassination of a divinely anointed king, *Macbeth* has at its heart the act of regicide, the killing of a king.

- The tools that we used for the history plays—the understanding history tool, focusing on how Shakespeare uses, adapts, and interprets history in his plays, and the kingship tool, examining how Shakespeare puts kingship into question—can help us understand the meanings of *Macbeth.*

- When analyzing Shakespeare's history plays, some awareness of history is a great help in understanding them. Elizabeth I, the only monarch Shakespeare had ever known, died in 1603 and was replaced by her cousin, James VI, who is king of Scotland. He became James I of England, but his Scottish heritage was always a part of him.

- Indeed, Banquo in this play was historically an ancestor of James, so when the witches tell Banquo that "Thou shalt get kings, though

thou be none," they are actually predicting the long reign of Banquo's line all the way to Shakespeare's new king, James.

- Similarly, in the fourth act, Macbeth again comes to the witches to demand knowledge of his fate and asks them, "shall Banquo's issue ever / Reign in this kingdom?" The witches caution him, "Seek to know no more." However, Macbeth is adamant: "I will be satisfied," he insists, so they show him a line of kings, and the last one is holding a mirror in his hand. Scholars have long speculated that the mirror would have been placed in front of King James to show the long lineage that points directly to him.

- The prevalence of witches and the supernatural are further elements of this play that would interest James and would both confirm his fears and reassure him in his sense of the world. Just as the Henriad plays worked ultimately to support this divine ideology of kingship, *Macbeth* also engages with these grand questions of kingship—with the king's role in human affairs and his relation to the divine scheme for the creation.

The Arc of Character Tool and the Comic Relief Tool

- If *Romeo and Juliet* represents Shakespeare's first entry into a more mature, nonformulaic concept of tragedy than his earlier efforts, then *Macbeth* shows Shakespeare working at the height of his powers in a fully realized tragic vein. We can use one of the tools of tragedy we developed for studying *Romeo and Juliet*, the arc of character development from ignorance to knowledge, and see how well it works in analyzing *Macbeth*.

- As soon as we look for the dynamic of ignorance and knowledge in this play, we see that Macbeth's relation to the witches is always that of ignorance, seeking the knowledge they provide. Every time he speaks to them, he seeks information. However, the more Macbeth seeks to know, the more mistaken he becomes—his efforts to move toward knowledge result in his growing ignorance. It's as if there's an inverse relationship between the seeking of knowledge and its attainment; indeed, this is one definition of

tragedy: that the tragic hero cannot attain the knowledge and understanding that he seeks.

- We've been emphasizing the dark, tragic, horrific elements of this play, and there are a lot of them. However, there is one short, bizarre scene, the famous drunken porter scene, right in the middle that doesn't fit with this mood—or does it?

- This scene is often described as providing comic relief in the play, suggesting that the humor in the scene provides a contrast with the reigning horror and darkness of the rest of the play. The comic relief tool will help us understand these sorts of scenes in the tragedies by asking: What is the function of comic scenes in the tragedies?

- Recall our need to pay attention to where a scene occurs in the play. What immediately precedes the porter scene (which is Act II, scene iii) is the killing of King Duncan by Macbeth, the most grisly and horrifying scene of the play. The prelude to the porter scene is extreme horror: the stark images of bloody hands, the terrible sense of guilt and wrongdoing, and the knocking on the door—which is associated with that guilt, as if the knocking is not external, on the door of the castle, but internal, within the mind of the guilty murderer.

- Then, it is a jarring switch to the porter, who comes to answer the door in the dead of night. He's apparently hungover, or perhaps still drunk, from the festivities of the night before, and he's not that happy to have to get out of bed to answer the door. "Here's a knocking indeed," he proclaims. Then, throughout his speech, he utters the refrain "knock, knock, knock," which has the effect of reminding us of the guilty knocking of the prior scene.

- The porter then makes an act of the imagination: "If a man were Porter of Hell Gate, he should have old turning the key." He proceeds to imagine himself the porter of the gate of hell itself. The previous scene has already suggested that this castle is indeed hell,

the place where both human and divine order are overturned, so the porter does indeed keep the gate of hell.

- Finally, he turns away and calls over his shoulder, “I pray you, remember the Porter.” This is both a joke—don’t forget to tip me—and a grim reminder that everyone in this play, and indeed everyone reading or watching this play, will sooner or later see the porter again. Put differently, the gate of hell is a threshold we all must cross, the porter suggests. It’s a suggestion of universal damnation, and indeed that’s a negative theology that has much purchase on this play.

- In many ways, the so-called comic relief is even more horrific than the horrors of murder. Indeed, there is a parallel, or even a doubling, between the porter scene and the darker scenes of *Macbeth*. In *Hamlet*, the gravedigger scene, for all its humor, functions in much the same way.

Tools

foul and fair: Watch carefully for moments in the plays where reversals, questions, and contraries structure the play. When does someone appear fair and virtuous, and then it is discovered that the character is actually treacherous and foul? When does the reverse occur? What is Shakespeare trying to say about human nature?

appearance versus reality: This is the fundamental tool for all of Shakespeare. Pay close attention to how Shakespeare plays with how things appear on the outside or the surface and how they really are on the inside. Watch for how characters can appear one way to an observer while hiding their true selves behind a literal or metaphoric disguise. How does Shakespeare employ deceptive appearances at every level of his plays? What is the effect of this? What larger meanings does this almost obsessive element suggest? How does this get at the very heart of Shakespeare’s art—which is, after all, all about disguise and acting and performance? (Characters who cut through appearance and get at the true reality include Hamlet, Rosalind in *As You Like It*, and Portia in *The Merchant of Venice*.)

understanding history: Often in a Shakespeare play, especially the history plays, it helps to have a basic understanding of the actual history that he is imaginatively re-creating. Using a wide range of easily available resources, how can you develop a modest understanding of this historical background? How does this help you understand the plays? Ask yourself: What is a history play*?* Shakespeare draws upon actual historical events for a large number of his plays, but he does not slavishly record history. How does Shakespeare use history in his dramas? Where does he depart from history and for what reasons? Does the play treat a wide variety of historical characters, a broad sweep of historical canvas, or does it focus on a single figure, what might be considered the "hero" of the play? How is history a meditation for Shakespeare in these plays?

kingship: Kingship is the dominant political model for Shakespeare's day. Watch carefully how he represents kings in the plays. How does he question kingship as a political model? Does he admire certain things about kingship? How does Shakespeare represent the relation between the king and the land? How does he conceive of the relation between the king and God? How does Shakespeare represent the making or the education of a king? Watch for how the play dramatizes how Shakespeare offers actual scenes of instruction for the king.

comic relief: Watch carefully for scenes of apparent comedy or humor in the midst of the tragedies. What is the function of these scenes? Do they actually divert readers from the tragedy, or do they enhance the tragedy? How do they relate to the major themes of the play?

Suggested Reading

Bloom, *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human*.

Bradley, *Shakespearean Tragedy*.

Questions to Consider

1. How do you think the witches should be portrayed on the stage? Try to imagine what you think they should look like: How would they be costumed? What properties should they use? How would they deliver their lines? What actions, gestures, and movements would help communicate their role in the play?

2. We've seen that Shakespeare's use of the so-called comic relief scene actually heightens the horror of this play. Look carefully at another famous comic scene in a Shakespeare tragedy—Lear's interactions with his fool in *King Lear*, Act I, scene iv—and see how apparent comedy actually reinforces and augments the tragic elements in that play.

The Tragic Woman in *Macbeth*

Lecture 14

The previous lecture concluded with the idea that as a member of the audience, you must journey into Macbeth's "heart of darkness" and look into the same abyss that Macbeth enters. In this lecture, you will go further into this heart of darkness idea and plumb the depths of one of Shakespeare's most powerful, imaginative figures by using the tragic woman tool, the embedded stage directions tool, and the drama of ideas tool.

The Tragic Woman Tool

- She walks on the stage, alone, reading a letter aloud. This alone is daring: Few women in Shakespeare's day were able to read, and there was an anxiety about the literate woman—about the woman who could wield the power of language. Such women were often condemned as witches; what is the casting of spells but the powerful use of language?

- This woman is reading the words of her husband, which report to her that three witches have appeared to him, apparently promising him the kingdom of Scotland, though how this can be, he does not know. He wanted to share this news with his wife, whom he calls "my dearest partner of greatness," and to alert her to "what greatness is promis'd thee."

- It is sort of a joke that the happiest marriage that Shakespeare ever depicts throughout his work is that of the Macbeths. These murderous, devilishly ambitious people seem to have a real love for each other: passionate, intimate, and equal in many ways.

- Lady Macbeth is without a doubt one of Shakespeare's most remarkable characters, but all of the tragedies are peopled with magnificent, powerful, unforgettable women: Juliet; Lady Macbeth; Lear's three daughters, Regan, Goneril, and Cordelia; Gertrude and Ophelia in *Hamlet*; Desdemona in *Othello*; and, of course, the great

figure of Cleopatra. These are the most unforgettable women in world literature, and they seem intrinsically tied to the tragic vision that gave them life.

- Whereas in the comedies the great female figures such as Viola, Rosalind, and Portia bring reconciliation, regeneration, and mutual love, in the tragedies, the female figures are often sacrificed to the play's ambition and power struggle, and/or they actually participate in and increase that deadly power struggle. These are women of great complexity, and their actions and character are clearly intimately tied to the plays themselves.

- The tragic woman tool that we introduced in *Romeo and Juliet* is so important because we need to watch for how the central female figures behave in the tragedies. Their behavior, and the ways others respond to their behavior, is central to how these tragedies function.

Lady Macbeth

- Lady Macbeth's response to her husband's letter is telling. She says that she fears his nature: "It is too full o'th'milk of human kindness, / To catch the nearest way." Already, this woman's mind has leapt to the idea of assassination, and she fears that her husband—the greatest warrior in Scotland—is too kind to do this. Already, she is trying to see how she can inspire, cajole, threaten, or manipulate Macbeth into the killing of their king.

- Before we condemn her too quickly as the culprit behind the whole thing, note what she says about her husband: "Thou wouldst be great; / Art not without ambition." She knows that he wants greatness, but the problem is that he might lack the conviction to act on his desire.

- In a way, Lady Macbeth is the more sincere and honest of the two: She says that Macbeth wants the kingship even though he knows it's wrong for him to have it, so her solution is to give him a bit of her own character, her own honesty, her own resolve. She says,

"Hie thee hither, / That I may pour my spirits in thine ear, / And chastise with the valour of my tongue / All that impedes thee from the golden round."

- We can read Lady Macbeth from the start as perhaps the more bold and the more blatantly honest of the two; indeed, Macbeth himself comes off as a bit of a hypocrite and coward for a moment. When we look closely at the great female figures in the tragedies, we will often see this shift of the power balance between the man and the woman.

- At this point, the servant enters and announces that her husband and the king are heading to the castle. Now, Lady Macbeth reveals another side to her character, or perhaps more accurately, she reveals the full extent of her own ambition and desire in a remarkable speech that is unsettling and also thrilling to hear from a woman—no matter what era one lives in.

  Come, you spirits

  That tend on mortal thoughts, unsex me here,

  And fill me from the crown to the toe top-full

  Of direst cruelty! make thick my blood;

  . . . .

  Come to my woman's breasts,

  And take my milk for gall, you murdering ministers,

  Wherever in your sightless substances

  You wait on nature's mischief! Come, thick night,

  And pall thee in the dunnest smoke of hell,

That my keen knife see not the wound it makes,

Nor heaven peep through the blanket of the dark,

To cry "Hold, hold!"

- Lady Macbeth prays to spirits, to "murdering ministers," surely akin to the witches in some sense, though she never sees them in the play. She asks them to "unsex" her, to make her masculine or to make her without gender in order to do the dark deed she plans. She then asks them to nurse themselves on her milk and for that milk to become "gall," the bitterest of substances—not the stuff of life, but of anger and murder. She asks for a night dark as hell to hide the wound she intends to make in Duncan's body and for heaven not to see what she does and not to stop her. This is a formidable woman, and as we attend to this intense portrayal of powerful womanhood, we see that this is somehow at the heart of Shakespeare's tragic vision.

- When Macbeth commits the murder, he is nearly overwhelmed with guilt and shame for his bloody deed. Lady Macbeth mocks him and urges him to complete the plot: "Infirm of purpose!" she cries to him, and after she has returned the daggers to the bedchamber, and now has bloody hands herself, she remarks, "My hands are of your colour / but I shame / To wear a heart so white." Then, she makes her famous, erroneous prediction: "A Little water clears us of this deed: / How easy is it then." As her own trajectory will show, it is hardly so easy.

- By focusing on this powerful female figure, we see how her arc of development crosses with that of her husband: Up through the murder, it seems that Lady Macbeth is more bold and courageous and Macbeth more uncertain and hesitant, but as the play continues, Lady Macbeth will descend into guilt-ridden madness whereas Macbeth will become increasingly certain, determined, and unrepentant. This tool gets us into the very heart of this tragedy.

Embedded Stage Directions

- Other than the banquet scene—in which Macbeth sees the ghost of Banquo, his friend whom he has killed, and Lady Macbeth tries to quiet her husband's fears—we do not see Lady Macbeth again until the opening of the fifth act of the play. This is the very famous sleepwalking scene, a crucial scene in the play, though it is actually very brief.

- The scene opens with two new characters being introduced, a gentlewoman and a doctor. It is rather bold to throw two utterly new characters at the audience so close to the play's conclusion, but in fact, Shakespeare will do this frequently: He bends the rules of drama to suit his own imaginative needs—not the other way around.

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As Lady Macbeth walks in her sleep, carrying a candle, a man and woman observe her from a nearby bench.

- These two characters are watching late at night to see a sight that the woman has told the doctor about: the sleepwalking of the queen. She also says she has heard the queen speak awful things, but she refuses to repeat them—the doctor must hear it for himself.

- Then, Lady Macbeth appears, and the speech of the two minor characters actually tells us what Lady Macbeth is doing; this is a tool that actors and directors call embedded stage directions, meaning moments in the play when characters' speech reveals what the characters should be doing with their bodies or their props.

- Because Shakespeare wrote virtually no stage directions into the printed versions of his plays, this is immensely useful to actors in conceiving a scene and, of course, a very powerful tool for readers to understand the actions of the play.

- As Lady Macbeth enters, the doctor exclaims, "How came she by that light?"—telling us that Lady Macbeth has to be carrying a candle. The woman responds, "She has light by her continually; 'tis her command." This is a brilliant line: It tells us that since the murders, Lady Macbeth has been literally afraid of the dark, commanding light to be by her side constantly. We get in this brief observation a wealth of understanding of the guilt and nightmare that wracks this proud and powerful woman.

- The doctor then exclaims, "You see, her eyes are open," but the woman responds, "Ay, but their sense is shut," telling us that Lady Macbeth walks with open eyes but without seeing the immediate world around her. She is in a kind of daze, unable to encounter the actual, living world because she remains trapped in the nightmare world of the awful deed she and her husband have committed.

- Then comes the most telling stage direction of them all: "What is it she does now?" the doctor asks. "Look, how she rubs her hands." This is one of the iconic images of this play: Lady Macbeth, anxiously and obsessively washing her hands, trying to get the blood off of them but unable ever to do so. It is such a brilliant, powerful gesture for Shakespeare to give her—an emblem of the diseased, haunted mind and a descent from the apparently confident and headstrong female figure.

The Drama of Ideas Tool

- Somehow, all of us who watch or read *Macbeth* risk becoming infected by its horror—or, perhaps, by looking into the depths of hell with the Macbeths, we come to a more acute sense of our own need for forgiveness and grace. This play, like all of Shakespeare's truly great tragedies, is also a profound exploration of the greatest ideas in world philosophy, and this is surely one of the elements that makes Shakespeare the unequalled artist that he is.

- To grasp this part of Shakespeare's greatness and to fully enter into the profundity of his plays, we must use the drama of ideas tool to engage with the philosophical complexity of the plays. We've done plenty of this already, in discussing the functions of comedy in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, the role of fate in *Romeo and Juliet*, or the relation of God to kingship in the Henry plays—really, this concept is unavoidable in grappling with Shakespeare's work.

- In the high tragedies—such as *Macbeth*, *Hamlet*, and *King Lear*—and also in the late romances, such as *The Tempest*, the complex philosophical probing that Shakespeare takes us through is an essential part of understanding the plays. We must carefully read or listen to the great speeches in particular and try to isolate and explore the key philosophical ideas that Shakespeare is exploring through each character and each speech.

- Whereas *Macbeth* begins with the assumption that historical events are filled with purpose and significance, by the end of the play, Macbeth views life as a stage, a play—and a bad one at that. It's a version of the play-within-the-play device we've tracked in so many Shakespeare plays already, but now, all of existence is seen as only that, only a foolish person discharging his role and doing it badly. The player himself—and this is Macbeth, and indeed all of us—is an idiot, and his play, though filled with sound and fury, that is, the pretense of significance, in fact is meaningless, "signifying nothing."

- By paying close attention to the drama of ideas in this play, by focusing on the philosophical development of the ideas, we gradually see that the play's bitter insight is not merely something we can keep at arm's distance; rather, Macbeth's embrace of nothingness lingers with us—almost like an illness.

Tools

tragic woman: Pay attention to what the women in the tragedies say and what others say about them. How does Shakespeare reveal the plights and struggles of these women through the dramatic dialogue? In what ways does this tool help you see the major themes and ideas of these plays? This is a very important tool for understanding *Othello*, *King Lear*, *Macbeth*, *Antony and Cleopatra*, and *Romeo and Juliet*.

embedded stage directions: Observe carefully how Shakespeare tells the actors to act their parts and how he places key guides to what they are doing, how they are doing it, and how people respond to them. How do these directions help the reader grasp the way the scene should be performed?

drama of ideas: Particularly as you read or listen to the great speeches, try to isolate the key philosophical idea that Shakespeare is exploring through that character and that speech.

Suggested Reading

Bloom, *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human*.

Frye, *Fools of Time*.

Kermode, *Shakespeare's Language*.

Questions to Consider

1. The embedded stage directions tool is quite powerful and a lot of fun to play around with. Choose any scene in any Shakespeare play and read it through, watching for what the characters tell you about what the other characters are doing. Pay attention to anything that signals how a character should behave, what props the character might have, or how the character could be standing or sitting. How much can you learn about how the scene should be played from these embedded directions?

2. The drama of ideas tool becomes especially acute when looking at one of the great soliloquies or long speeches of Shakespeare's work. Choose any of the following three famous speeches and try to analyze it for its deeper philosophical content: Jacques's "All the world's a stage" speech from *As You Like It* (Act II, scene vii), Hamlet's "How all occasions do inform against me" speech from *Hamlet* (Act IV, scene iv), or Ulysses's "The specialty of rule hath been neglected" speech from *Troilus and Cressida* (Act I, scene iii).

Staging *Hamlet*
Lecture 15

In order to grasp what is happening in Shakespeare's great tragedies, you need to learn how to unlock the opening scenes, and *Hamlet* is the best case study for this. In this lecture, you will learn how to employ the opening scene tool, which instructs you to focus with special care on the dynamics, structure, and action of the first scene. You will also be introduced to seminal moments of stagecraft that occur in *Hamlet* to help you understand how thoroughly the stagecraft tool is built into the play and how helpful this tool can be in analyzing Hamlet.

The Role of Hamlet

- The first scene of *Hamlet* is one of the great scenes in world drama, and we won't even meet Hamlet until the second scene. The very first words of the play—"Who's there?"—introduce the great question of the play, the great question of Western literature, the question of identity: Who am I? Who are you? The response only deepens the mystery: "Nay, answer me. Stand and unfold yourself." To the question of identity, the answer is refused, and then the question is posed again, but in a fascinating way: "unfold yourself." This almost suggests opening oneself up, taking out one's identity, and showing it to the world. Identity is elusive in this play—nobody knows who anybody truly is, least of all oneself, and the very first two lines of the play announce this theme.

- In the third act, Hamlet will protest that his unfaithful schoolboy chums, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, seek to do precisely this to him. He says: "You would play upon me, you would seem to know my stops, you would pluck out the heart of my mystery"—this is the same idea as "stand and unfold yourself," and in both cases, it is far more difficult to do than it is to say.

- These first two characters are hesitant to reveal themselves because they are castle guards, on the battlements, and it is late at night.

The mood is soon set as guarded, cold, anxious, and frightened. “You come most carefully upon your hour,” one says. “For this relief much thanks,” says the other. “’Tis bitter cold, / And I am sick at heart.”

- Soon, two more men enter, another guard and a gentleman named Horatio. They ask a question that begins to explain the mystery: “What, has this thing appear’d again tonight?” asks Horatio. It turns out that they are being haunted by a ghost. Twice they have seen “this apparition come,” and they have brought Horatio so that an educated gentleman can confirm what they have seen and tell them what to do.

- No sooner do they begin to explain to Horatio what they have seen when, suddenly, the ghost itself appears. They tell us that the ghost is no ordinary spirit; it looks exactly like the king who has just died, and it looks frightening. They try to question the ghost, but it “stalks away” and leaves them all shaken—none more so than the educated, skeptical, rational Horatio. Barnardo says to him, “How now, Horatio? You tremble and look pale. / Is not this something more than fantasy?” This is another example of embedded stage directions; it’s as if the author wrote into the margins, “Horatio trembles, looks pale,” and this clues the actor into how Horatio responds and what this ghostly vision has done to him.

- Horatio, the rationalist, says, “Before my God, I might not this believe / Without the sensible and true avouch / Of mine own eyes.” He needs that confirmation of the senses to take him to the place of belief. For his friend Hamlet, this will not be enough. Hamlet, too, will see the ghost and speak with the ghost, but then he will doubt the truth of his own sensory experience. In Act II, scene ii, he explains his suspicions.

    The spirit that I have seen

    May be the devil, and the devil hath power

To assume a pleasing shape; yea, and perhaps

Out of my weakness and my melancholy,

As he is very potent with such spirits,

Abuses me to damn me.

- Hamlet will not rest with the evidence that convinces others, and this is a key part of his character. His active intellect, his searching mind, his insistence on complete truth, always propels him further into the mysteries that both he and this play explore. By contrasting him with the reasonable Horatio's response to mystery in this first scene, we gain a better understanding of what it is that makes Hamlet so remarkable and also of the very trait that leads Hamlet to his own doom—his inability to stop his constant questions.

- It's a truism that the role of Hamlet is the most coveted part for every classical actor. This role calls upon an actor's greatest powers—if one can successfully play Hamlet, then one reaches the pantheon of great acting. The play lends itself to dramatic greatness not just because it has a really great part at its center, but also because this is a play obsessed with acting, drama, stagecraft, and the full range of the possibilities of theater.

- Think of the play-within-the-play device, or the playacting that so dominates the Prince Hal/Falstaff interactions, or the other moments of staging in *Richard II* or *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. *Hamlet* takes this to another level: It's as if Shakespeare is putting everything he knows about the stage into this play, almost consciously putting stagecraft at the center of his investigations of what is possible in a play. This calls us to employ the stagecraft tool to great effect in analyzing the earlier plays. For *Hamlet*, this requires us to gather all of the tools and techniques we have about stagecraft and apply them to this play.

Seminal Moments of Stagecraft

- How does Shakespeare use the stage, or acting—what in Shakespeare's time was called "playing"—as a major theme throughout the play? This play does this to a greater degree than any other Shakespeare play, but the other plays all participate in this theme to some degree, and learning how to use this tool for *Hamlet* will help us immeasurably in understanding every other Shakespeare play.

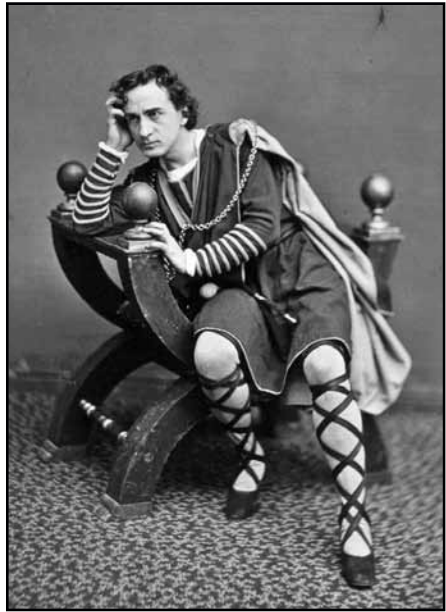
- When, midway through Act II, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern tell Hamlet that the players have arrived at Elsinore to perform, he becomes remarkably animated, and it's evident that this is a young man who delights in the theater. He asks a number of questions about their profession and status and clearly knows much about their work. When they appear onstage, Hamlet greets them joyously and knows most of them on very friendly terms.

- He instantly asks the chief player to "give us a taste of your quality. Come, a passionate speech." When the player asks which speech Hamlet would like to hear, the prince launches into a lengthy account of a speech he once heard him give—in a play that the multitudes didn't appreciate.

- The speech Hamlet chiefly recalls is Aeneas, the prince of Troy, recounting to Dido, the Queen of Carthage, the story of the slaughter of King Priam at the sack of Troy by Pyrrhus and the Greeks. Hamlet proceeds to recite, from memory and without flaw, a 15-line speech that he apparently only heard a few times many years ago. This tells us that Hamlet is a young man who has a fascination for, perhaps even an obsession with, the theater—and not just theater, but also the whole concept of acting, playing, and performing.

- It's no accident that Hamlet chose this particular speech, details the brutal slaughter of a noble king followed by the tremendous display of grief shown by his queen, Hecuba—the two traumas most central to Hamlet's mind.

- In the second scene of the play, in his first soliloquy, Hamlet wishes that he could take his own life. He is tormented by two things: the death of his beloved father just two months earlier and, perhaps even more acutely, his mother's sudden marriage to his uncle, his father's brother. To Hamlet, this is an act of incest and, hence, is something that ought to be taboo and unnatural. As centuries of scholars have noted, Hamlet is obsessed with his mother's sexuality, and he sees her marriage to his uncle Claudius as a betrayal both of his father and of himself.



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Edwin Booth (1833–1893) was an American actor who played Shakespeare's Hamlet.

- Hamlet chooses a speech from the players that shows precisely the proper mourning of a wife for her murdered husband. This is using theater as wish fulfillment: Hamlet asks for what he wishes his mother would provide. The player king renders the speech with great passion; by the end, he is weeping as he describes the queen's grief. The effect of this on Hamlet is transformative. Once the players and all the other characters leave him alone on stage, Hamlet condemns himself because of the contrast between him and this passion and force shown by the actor.

- Hamlet realizes that a player, using merely the appearance of feeling, has come across as a more loyal son than he himself has,

despite the fact that Hamlet actually faces the reality of a murdered father and betraying mother. Hamlet condemns himself for failing to appear the way he really feels—once again, appearance versus reality.

- Hamlet decides to take action by acting. He still doubts the truth of the ghost, so he will test the truth of the ghost's accusation by staging a play: He cries, "The play's the thing / Wherein I'll catch the conscience of the King." Through playing and stagecraft, Hamlet determines to prove the guilt of Claudius; he asks the players to perform a play that night before the king and the court that will reenact the murder of King Hamlet by Claudius. Hamlet will insert into the play a few lines that will make the parallel quite clear.

- Hamlet gives a speech to the players, instructing them how to say the lines he has written and, by extension, instructing them in their entire craft. For centuries, people have speculated that his advice also tells us how Shakespeare himself felt acting should be conducted.

- For Hamlet, true playing is at its best when it is almost indistinguishable from nature itself. If the best player most resembles true nature, then how can we tell the difference? Pushed far enough, Hamlet's ideas of playing ultimately suggest that the self is forever elusive, not to be found—always a performance with no authentic character within. These are the kinds of ideas that can drive a man mad, and it is a testament to Hamlet's astonishing intellect that he can sustain these ideas without finally losing his mind.

- Hamlet is able to put stagecraft to work as the test of Claudius's guilt. The mousetrap scene, in which Claudius watches actors portray his own execution of his brother—by pouring poison into the sleeping king's ear—and then marrying the dead king's wife does indeed force Claudius to reveal his own guilt. Hamlet and

Horatio each witness this, so Hamlet is now certain of his course and of the ghost's truth.

- Hamlet relies on appearance and the playing of guilt to determine true, internal guilt, which seems like a problematic standard of evidence, but from this moment—in the heart of the third act—on, Hamlet no longer doubts what he must do. However, as generations of readers have observed, Hamlet still fails to take action: His uncle has two more acts of the play to live, and a lot is going to happen before Hamlet can finally kill him.

- Hamlet remains unable to act not because he is uncertain or cannot make up his mind or has doubts; he is paralyzed precisely because he is the only character in the play—perhaps in all of Shakespeare—whose mind can penetrate the religious complexities of what he is called upon to do. It's those religious or theological issues that really make Hamlet such a magnificent play.

Tools

opening scene: Look carefully for the ways Shakespeare constructs the opening scenes of the plays. Watch for the ways that he foregrounds the great themes of the play often in minor characters or moments of dialogue. Watch for the way Shakespeare poses the play's central questions in this opening scene. Often, this can help you unlock the opening scene of the great tragedies and better understand the entire play that follows.

stagecraft: How does Shakespeare use the stage, or acting—or what in Shakespeare's time was called "playing"—as a major theme throughout the play?

Suggested Reading

Bate and Jackson, *Shakespeare: An Illustrated Stage History*.

Gurr, *Hamlet in Purgatory*.

Levin, *The Question of Hamlet*.

Questions to Consider

1. Using the opening scene tool, look carefully at the opening scene of *King Lear*, *Julius Caesar*, or *Othello*. How does Shakespeare structure the opening scenes to suggest the major outlines and ideas of the play that will ensue?

2. Stagecraft is such a huge concept in Shakespeare, and we've seen many examples of the emphasis on playing, or performing in the plays—*Henry V*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Hamlet*, and so on. The next time you watch a Shakespeare play on the stage, try to see the ways in which the play brings acting and performing to the surface. How does stagecraft affect this play? How does Shakespeare weave a self-conscious awareness of the stage into the structure and ideas of the play?

The Religious Drama of *Hamlet*

Lecture 16

This lecture is devoted to the use of a single tool: the drama of ideas tool, which seeks to understand the rich philosophical complexity in Shakespeare's plays. In this lecture, you will focus that broad tool to look particularly at issues of religion, or the theologies of Hamlet. You will analyze prominent moments of religious contemplation within *Hamlet*, and by working through these moments, you will understand the ways in which a focus on the religious ideas gets at the very heart of Shakespeare's plays.

Prayer and the Afterlife

- After the mousetrap play is performed, Claudius finds himself alone—the only time in the play when he is alone, whereas Hamlet is alone repeatedly—and he must finally confront his guilt for what he has done. However, despite his guilt and sense of wrongdoing, he states that he cannot pray, "though inclination be as sharp as will." He finds himself caught between his desire for forgiveness and his continued desire for the fruits of his crime.

- In a meditation on the blood of guilt and the cleansing power of heaven that should remind us of Macbeth, he imagines the possibility of forgiveness.

  What if this cursed hand

  Were thicker than itself with brother's blood,

  Is there not rain enough in the sweet heavens

  To wash it white as snow?

- This sounds so much like Macbeth, but whereas Macbeth despairs of forever cleansing his bloodguilt, Claudius is still hopeful. Claudius knows that mercy and grace should be able to overwhelm

any guilt or wrongdoing. The problem, however—and Claudius himself realizes this—is that his desire for forgiveness is too weak; indeed, it's insincere. "Then I'll look up, / My fault is past," he hopes, but then he confesses.

> But, O, what form of prayer
>
> Can serve my turn? "Forgive me my foul murder"?
>
> That cannot be; since I am still possess'd
>
> Of those effects for which I did the murder,
>
> My crown, mine own ambition and my queen.
>
> May one be pardon'd and retain the offence?
>
> In the corrupted currents of this world
>
> Offence's gilded hand may shove by justice,
>
> And oft 'tis seen the wicked prize itself
>
> Buys out the law: but 'tis not so above;
>
> There is no shuffling, there the action lies
>
> In his true nature.

- Claudius's reasoning is absolutely sound, and it accords perfectly with Shakespeare's great theme of appearance versus reality—indeed, this is the religious underpinning of appearance versus reality. He can mouth the words "forgive me," but he knows that in his heart, he still is pleased with what the murder gave him. It's the mere appearance of repentance, a practice that can pass "in the corrupted currents of this world," but not in heaven.

- This is precisely the moral argument put forth in the Gospels, when Christ scorns the scribes and Pharisees as “hypocrites” and says they are like “whited sepulchers, which indeed appear beautiful outward, but are within full of dead men’s bones, and of all uncleanness.”

- This theology runs throughout Shakespeare’s plays—especially in *Merchant of Venice* and *Measure for Measure*—and it frustrates Claudius’s desire for easy grace. He still tries to pray, in the hope that somehow he’ll be allowed to receive grace without truly repenting of his crime. Ultimately, he abandons this effort and speaks a sound statement of Shakespeare’s theology of appearance versus reality: “My words fly up, my thoughts remain below. / Words without thoughts never to heaven go.” He gives up the effort at otherworldly grace, sacrificing that for present earthly pleasure.

- It is one of the great ironies of this play that Hamlet refuses to kill Claudius at this moment because Hamlet falls for his appearance of prayer. At the very moment that Claudius tries to pray, Hamlet comes upon him: The two of them are all alone, and Hamlet has just received his proof of Claudius’s guilt from the mousetrap play, so this is the perfect time for Hamlet to take his revenge—but he doesn’t.

- If ever the criticism that Hamlet fails to act—that he is passive or indecisive—seems to have purchase, it would be here. However, we must ask that most famous of questions about this play: Why doesn’t Hamlet just kill Claudius? The tool of religious inquiry supplies the answer. The fact is that Hamlet is too good a theologian. Hamlet’s first impulse is toward action, but because Claudius is praying, Hamlet realizes that to kill him now would be to send him with a clean soul and guiltless conscience straight to paradise.

- At this point, we have to recall the ghost’s words to Hamlet, which are everpresent to this young man’s consciousness: The ghost tells him that he is in purgatory, which he explains is an awful existence, and when he recounts his actual murder by Claudius, the most horrible aspect of it is precisely the fact that King Hamlet died without making his last reckoning.

- In effect, the ghost has given him the charge not merely of killing Claudius, but of taking a supernatural revenge: To equal what was done to King Hamlet, young Hamlet must make sure that Claudius goes to at least as bad a place in the otherworld as did his own father. To kill Claudius while he is praying would be, according to the play's religious context and the ghost's own confession, to fail at the mandate for revenge.

- Hamlet, who is such a master of appearance and reality and seems able to see through all disguises and treacheries, fails to perceive this one correctly. Claudius fails to offer a proper prayer—he gives only the appearance of coming to terms with God—but Hamlet takes the external appearance for internal truth and defers the vengeance.

- Hamlet certainly remains faithful to the revenge that his father's ghost has laid before him—which requires an eternal woe, not merely an earthly death—but it does seem odd that a theologian as sharp as Hamlet would fail to see that the villain Claudius could not possibly find peace through prayer while still retaining all the effects of his crime.

Hamlet's Soliloquies and Speeches

- This approach—examining the play from the perspective of its religious arguments—is what we need in order to fully understand the most famous words of the play, Hamlet's "to be or not to be" soliloquy, which is a fundamentally religious soliloquy. The theology expressed in this soliloquy expresses the notion that none of us deserve mercy, grace, salvation; use us according to what we deserve, and punishment is the fate of all.

- At the end of the great soliloquy, Hamlet says, "Thus the native hue of resolution / Is sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought," which means that his ability to be decisive is eliminated by his restless mind and the darkness into which it has been cast. He is irresolute because he does not want to live, but he fears being dead. This is a religious crisis, though Hamlet does not seem to have the means to find his way out of it at this point in the play.

- Another example of the religious register in *Hamlet* occurs where we might well expect it: in the graveyard. In the fifth act, after Hamlet has killed Polonius, been banished to England, escaped Claudius's assassination attempt, and returned to Denmark, he and Horatio walk back to the castle through the graveyard.

- All of Hamlet's thoughts—from his first soliloquy in Act I through the "to be or not to be" speech to the play's end—have tended toward death and the afterlife. Now, he is literally in the final resting place and facing not the ghosts from the otherworld but, rather, the material fact of the dead and decaying body. He meets the gravedigger, and the two engage in a banter that gets at many of the fundamental themes in this play.

- The gravedigger scene functions as comic relief while bringing to light many of the darkest elements in the play. Indeed, this crude gravedigger is almost the only character in the play who can keep up with Hamlet and give as good as he gets in their witty exchanges—but it's also as insightful and grim a scene as any other in the play.

- The gravedigger pulls up a skull and tells Hamlet that it was that of Yorick, the old jester for King Hamlet whom Hamlet had known as a child. This spurs the great "Alas, poor Yorick" speech, with the splendid visual of Hamlet holding the skull and staring into its blank eyes, trying to plumb the meaning of death itself. What's so interesting about this speech is the way it quickly runs through the emotional registers—from nostalgic remembrance of happy childhood, to a kind of horror at the actual face of death, to a realization that no matter how much we resist the final end, we all must come to it.

- What is particularly interesting, when approaching this scene with our tool of the religious arguments of the play, is where Hamlet goes with his speculations at the end of the speech. After marveling at how well he can remember Yorick and remarking on the great difference between life and death, Hamlet returns to the

appearance versus reality theme: We can cover up the flesh with all manner of appearance, but death is the ultimate conqueror of appearance. This is the grounding, the one truth Hamlet can cling to—the ultimate fact of death.

- Tragically, the very next event in the play is the shocking presentation of Ophelia's corpse being brought in, and we realize—at the same moment Hamlet does—that the former woman to be buried in this grave is Hamlet's beloved. All of Hamlet's philosophizing and theologizing brings him to the bare realization of loss and the devastation of seeing another loved one lowered into the earth.

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This painting, by Eugène Delacroix, portrays the gravedigger scene in *Hamlet*.

- However, after the shock, anger, and sorrow—all of which he expresses without the reserve and guile of the first four acts—Hamlet seems to come to peace with this loss and with all losses. From here on out, Hamlet shows a remarkable resignation and tranquility about his fate.

- He faces Laertes in the final duel with a kind of equanimity we have not heretofore seen, and when Horatio asks him if he wants to reconsider the duel, Hamlet responds: "Not a whit. We defy augury. There is special providence in the fall of sparrow. If it be now, 'tis

not to come; if it be not to come, it will be now; if it be not now, yet it will come. The readiness is all. Since no man, of aught he leaves, knows aught, what is't to leave betimes? Let be."

- The young man who was so restless to know about the afterlife now says he rejects augury—that is, looking into the future. The young man who supposedly is unable to take action now says the readiness is all. The young man of "to be or not to be" fame now says simply, "let be."

- Hamlet's final peace, if peace it is, has troubled critics over the centuries. He commends himself to providence, which is a belief in the ultimate goodness of the universe, and even though this sounds absurdly general and sentimental for someone like Hamlet, nevertheless we cannot find in this play a more suitable worldview than that.

- As he holds the dead Hamlet in his arms, Horatio utters one of the most moving benedictions in all of literature: "Now cracks a noble heart. Good night, sweet prince, / And flights of angels sing thee to thy rest." We don't know any more than Horatio does where Hamlet is tending after his life's course ends, but Horatio's prayer fits well with most readers' hopes for the prince.

- Hamlet certainly embraces no doctrine at the end but becomes free of all doctrines, finally evanescing into his own experience of the beyond. Hamlet dies desperately wanting his story to be told, wanting Horatio to "in this harsh world draw thy breath in pain / To tell my story." This finally becomes his immortality and his afterlife—an eternity as Western literature's greatest character.

Tools

drama of ideas: Pay very close attention to moments of religious contemplation in the plays. Watch for scenes in which the great religious ideas, themes, and registers are being explored. How can these scenes help you understand Shakespeare's presentations of the major religious questions?

Suggested Reading

Bloom, *Hamlet*.

Frye, *Fools of Time*.

Gurr, *Hamlet in Purgatory*.

Levin, *The Question of Hamlet*.

Lewis, "Hamlet."

Questions to Consider

1. Shakespeare considers religious ideas and issues in virtually every one of his plays. *Hamlet* is particularly strong in this regard, but not unique by any means. Keeping in mind the specific models for understanding religion that we've developed in this lecture, examine another of the more overtly religious plays—*The Winter's Tale*; *The Merchant of Venice; Henry VI, Part 1*; *Pericles*; *Measure for Measure*—and try to develop some ideas about how Shakespeare is engaging or expressing religion in that play.

2. Can we make an argument for Shakespeare as an explicitly religious writer, or does he resist any such description?

The Women of *Hamlet*
Lecture 17

In this lecture, you will learn how the language of Gertrude and Ophelia reveals so much about the essential workings of this play and, indeed, of all of Shakespeare's art. The efforts of Gertrude and Ophelia to express their feelings, ideas, and passions and the strictures placed upon them by a world that wants to control their voices, thoughts, and bodies are dynamics that exist everywhere in Shakespeare's plays. This most remarkable of playwrights was supremely skilled at creating powerful, passionate, and brilliant female characters, and the roles these women fill in his plays are a key part of what makes those plays so unforgettable.

The Tragic Woman Tool

- The tool of focusing on the role and function of the tragic woman figure is highly revealing in Shakespeare's tragedies. Gertrude and Ophelia are two of Shakespeare's most complex heroines; they are crucial women, without whom this play would not have its great dramatic effect. However, when we apply this tool and begin studying these two women, we immediately see that neither is a dominant, active female figure such as Lady Macbeth or Cleopatra. Rather, these are heroines tending toward passivity, victims rather than victimizers, eloquent when finally given the chance to speak, but always struggling to find their voice and express their minds.

- Gertrude in particular has long suffered from underreadings of her character. To fully understand how Gertrude functions, we have to further refine our tragic woman tool into two more specific tools: What does the female character say, and what is said about her?

- In a play where frankly everyone talks too much—this is by far the longest of all of Shakespeare's plays, running in its full uncut version to over 4,000 lines—Gertrude, the supposedly soft and sentimental woman, has 70 lines in the whole play. By contrast, Hamlet speaks about 1,500 lines throughout the play. Gertrude

speaks seldom and in moderation. It is not likely that she has little of importance to say; instead, it is quite likely that she lives in a world that would silence her and speak for her.

- When she speaks, what does she say? This is the question our tool provokes. Her first words are addressed to her son in Act I, scene ii, when Hamlet is standing apart from the court and showing his obvious displeasure at his mother's marriage to his uncle.

  Good Hamlet, cast thy nighted colour off,

  And let thine eye look like a friend on Denmark.

  Do not for ever with thy vailed lids

  Seek for thy noble father in the dust.

  Thou know'st 'tis common. All that lives must die,

  Passing through nature to eternity.

- These words certainly are trying to broker peace and good relations between Hamlet and Claudius. "Let thine eye look like a friend on Denmark" means "be nice to your uncle, my new husband and our new king." However, she also is trying to comfort a son who grieves for his dead father, and she does this with sound theology: We are born to die, an insight that Hamlet himself will finally come to by the fifth act of the play. These are neither soft nor shallow words; Gertrude speaks directly and with understanding to the great concerns that obsess Hamlet for the next five acts.

- Hamlet resists her overture, and she asks him why grief "seems … so particular with thee?" This prompts the great "seems versus is" speech, Hamlet's great pronouncement of Shakespeare's central concern with appearance versus reality. It is no accident that this speech arises in response to his mother—not in a soliloquy or other form. In both of her initial lines, Gertrude brings Hamlet directly to

the central concerns of the play and of Shakespeare's entire body of work. She has spoken eight lines so far, but they are hardly lines of little worth, both in terms of what she says and what is said to her.

Examining Gertrude's Speech

- It is remarkable that, despite the way Gertrude has long been characterized by critics, virtually everything she says is extremely sensible and insightful. In a play filled with excess talk, Gertrude is the one who tries to get people to say what they mean and only what they mean.

- There are a few crucial contexts for examining Gertrude's speech in the play: her speech in the final scene, when both she and Hamlet die, and her speech in Act IV, when Ophelia faces her own madness and ultimately takes her own life. Focusing on what she says and what others say in response to her reveals so much about her character and about the play as a whole.

- In the final scene, Gertrude reveals her loyalty to Hamlet. At the end of the bedroom scene, Hamlet tells his mother that he is not really mad, but mad only in craft, and he tells her not to tell the king this and also not to let the king "tempt you again to bed." She seems to remain true to her son, and this can be further emphasized in production.

- When Laertes is dueling Hamlet, Gertrude in the break wipes her son's brow and then says she will drink to his honor. It is the poisoned goblet, and Claudius tells her not to drink, but she looks at him and says decisively, "I will, my lord." This defiance of Claudius signals her loyalty to her son. When she realizes that he has poisoned the cup, her final, dying words are addressed directly to Hamlet, and they warn him of the treachery, as she cries out: "No, no! the drink, the drink! O my dear Hamlet! / The drink, the drink! I am poison'd."

- It's in Gertrude's interactions with Ophelia that we learn the most of Gertrude's character—her loyalties and her deeper emotions.

This is also where we get the majority of her lines in the play; 45 of her 70 lines are either addressed to or concerned with Ophelia. The woman can find expression, but only by speaking to or about another woman.

- When Ophelia becomes mad following Hamlet's accidental killing of her father, Gertrude tries to talk with her and calm her, and crucially, Gertrude reports Ophelia's death in one of the most lovely, poignant, and poetic speeches in all of Shakespeare—a speech redolent of nature and flower imagery that is essential to its meaning.

  There is a willow grows askant the brook,

  That shows his hoary leaves in the glassy stream.

  There with fantastic garlands did she make

  Of crowflowers, nettles, daisies, and long purples,

  That liberal shepherds give a grosser name,

  But our cold maids do dead men's fingers call them.

  There on the pendant boughs her coronet weeds

  Clamb'ring to hang, an envious sliver broke,

  When down her weedy trophies and herself

  Fell in the weeping brook. Her clothes spread wide

  And, mermaid-like, awhile they bore her up;

  Which time she chaunted snatches of old lauds,

  As one incapable of her own distress,

Or like a creature native and indued

Unto that element; but long it could not be

Till that her garments, heavy with their drink,

Pull'd the poor wretch from her melodious lay

To muddy death.

- The nature, water, and flower imagery is very striking. It's as if Ophelia is taken into the bosom of nature itself—that she is set free from the awful human world that is destroying her and is joined with flowers and waters in a loving embrace. It is moving that Ophelia's death is reported by the other principal woman in the play; it's as if in her death, her bond with another female is reasserted, and her alienation from all of the men in her life is confirmed.

Examining Ophelia's Speech

- Ophelia is in an impossible position, just like Gertrude, torn between powerful male forces and unable to find a way out or a means of expression. Each ends in death—a victim of, or even a sacrifice to, the tragic forces of the play.

- Ophelia is a tough role for a young actress. She is passive at times but yearns to be active. Silenced for much of the play, she finally bursts into language in Act IV, but it's the language of madness.

- In her first scene, Act I, scene iii, each of her first two lines are short, clipped questions of only four words each, sandwiched between massive speeches by her brother Laertes as he tells her not to believe Hamlet's vows of love to her. Then, her father comes in, and he takes the same action toward her, telling her what to think instead of listening to what she thinks.

- When she tries to explain Hamlet's affection for her, Polonius is dismissive; "Pooh, you speak like a green girl," he exclaims, until

she says meekly, "I do not know, my lord, what I should think"—to which Polonius replies, "Marry, I will teach you." This exchange is indicative of Ophelia's plight throughout the play: surrounded by male figures who tell her that she does not understand herself or her world and who take it upon themselves to teach her what to do, what to say, and even what to think.

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In 1894, John William Waterhouse painted this portrait of Ophelia.

- This scene ends with Polonius forbidding her to even speak with Hamlet, and Ophelia replies, "I shall obey, my lord." Modern-day readers might be frustrated by her submission, but in Shakespeare's England, there were no other options for most daughters—they were the property of their fathers.

- When Ophelia agrees to try to trick Hamlet into admitting the reason for his apparent madness, while Claudius and Polonius look on, she basically decides to side with her father and her king against her beloved. The key moment occurs when he asks her, "Where's your father?" and she answers, "At home, my lord," even though

they both know that he's hiding behind the curtain, and they both know that she has lied and betrayed Hamlet.

- It's hard to blame Ophelia, but for Hamlet, this is the ultimate betrayal, and it leaves him utterly isolated: He has lost his father, his mother has married his father's murderer, and now his love has turned on him. Hamlet's response is brutal, and he does not sympathize with Ophelia's own plight.

- This is the scene of Hamlet's "get thee to a nunnery" speech; he tells Ophelia to leave this world of human love and to escape to a place where she can live chaste: "Why," he asks, "wouldst thou be a breeder of sinners?" He tells her that even if she does marry, she cannot escape "calumny"—that is, a slanderous reputation. Marriage sickens Hamlet because he associates it with his mother's betrayal of his father and now also with Ophelia's betrayal of himself. For Hamlet at this point, to be a woman is to be a liar, and he vents all of his outrage upon poor Ophelia.

  > I have heard of your paintings well enough. God hath given you once face and you make yourselves another. You jig and amble, and you lisp, you nickname God's creatures, and make your wantonness your ignorance. Go to, I'll no more on't, it hath made me mad. I saw we will have no more marriage. Those that are married already—all but one—shall live; the rest shall keep as they are. To a nunnery, go.

- Ophelia's madness is one of the unforgettable moments in this play. Driven insane by her inability to reconcile the forces pulling at her, she does give expression to her state by her speech. Her words spoken and sung in Act IV to Gertrude, Claudius, and Laertes have a kind of sense. She talks of death, burial, and mourning—clearly a response to her father's death—and also of young girls betrayed by unfaithful lovers—clearly a response to Hamlet's treatment of her.

Tools

tragic woman: Pay attention to what the women in the tragedies say and what others say about them. How does Shakespeare reveal the plights and struggles of these women through the dramatic dialogue? In what ways does this tool help you see the major themes and ideas of these plays? This is a very important tool for understanding *Othello*, *King Lear*, *Macbeth*, *Antony and Cleopatra*, and *Romeo and Juliet*.

Suggested Reading

Adelman, *Suffocating Mothers*.

Gurr, *Hamlet in Purgatory*.

Heilbrun, "The Character of Hamlet's Mother."

Jardine, *Still Harping on Daughters*.

Questions to Consider

1. This lecture looks very closely at the speech and action of two very famous female roles in Shakespeare's plays. Think of other women you have read about or seen onstage from Shakespeare's plays—such as Cleopatra, Cordelia, Portia, Beatrice, Joan of Arc, Marina, and Hermione—and ask yourself what you remember about the way they speak, how often they're allowed to speak, or how their speech is constricted. What does Shakespeare suggest about these women through the vehicle of speech?

2. In the first scene of *King Lear*, Lear asks his daughters, "Which of you shall we say doth love us most?" Look carefully at how each daughter responds—particularly Cordelia, who in essence refuses to answer the question. How does the tool of the tragic woman, specifically focusing on her uses of speech, help you understand Cordelia in that scene?

The Merchant of Venice—Comedy or Tragedy?
Lecture 18

When Shakespeare's first edition of collected works was brought out in 1623 by his friends, *The Merchant of Venice* was grouped with all of the other comedies, sandwiched between *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *As You Like It*. In fact, *The Merchant of Venice* seems to be a comedy in its structure, but in its actual content, it has elements that just don't fit easily into the traditional sense of comedy. In this lecture, you will learn that the tools of comedy can help you analyze and understand *The Merchant of Venice*.

Applying the Tools of Comedy to Tragedy

- Many of the same tools that are used to analyze comedy are fit for the analysis of *The Merchant of Venice*. The most fundamental tool for understanding comedy is the block to young love, which gives us a working definition of comedy: If the block to love is overcome, then it's a comedy; if not, then it's tragedy.

- In *The Merchant of Venice*, Bassanio and Portia love each other, but their love is blocked by her dead father's will, which says she can only marry the man who solves the riddle of the caskets. Bassanio answers the riddle and thereby wins her love. Also in this play, another young couple, Lorenzo and Jessica, love each other, but her angry father, Shylock, won't let his daughter marry a Christian, so they steal away at night and are able to be together by the end of the play.

- On the surface, *The Merchant of Venice* appears to be a comedy, but just as in *Twelfth Night*, there are some who are excluded from the happy ending—which comes at a terrible price for some.

- Another fine tool for analyzing comedy is the friends to lovers tool. Is there a shift from sisterly/brotherly bonds to a heterosexual marriage resolution? This really fits with *The Merchant of Venice*:

Portia is very close to her waiting woman, Nerissa, and each chooses marriage to a man at the end, thereby sundering their sisterly bonds for a male husband—though neither laments this exchange.

- Similarly, Bassanio, who weds Portia, is very close friends with Antonio, the merchant of the title, at the start of the play. In fact, Antonio is the one who furnishes Bassanio with the money so that Bassanio can successfully woo Portia—and he borrows the money from Shylock, the money lender, which sets in motion the whole pound-of-flesh plot. By the play's end, when Bassanio has wedded Portia, Antonio is left solitary and alone, very much like his namesake, the Antonio of *Twelfth Night*.

- In *The Merchant of Venice* especially, the sense of loss and exclusion for Antonio is acute, even more so because he offers his very life for his friend. Indeed, the relationship between Antonio and Bassanio is often portrayed as more than mere friendship: Antonio seems to view Bassanio as a son, friend, boon companion—and perhaps as a lover. One of this play's great mysteries is Antonio's sadness, which he announces in the play's opening lines.

  In sooth, I know not why I am so sad.

  It wearies me, you say it wearies you,

  But how I caught it, found it, or came by it,

  What stuff 'tis made of, whereof it is born,

  I am to learn.

- Many have speculated over the centuries that Antonio is sad precisely because his best friend and companion, Bassanio, is about to leave him in order to woo Portia. Whether we construe Antonio's relationship to Bassanio as close friendship or as a romantic relationship, clearly the friends to lovers shift is central to the play.

- The green world, a place of escape from the harsh world of human law and justice, is absolutely present in *The Merchant of Venice*. The city of Venice is completely dominated by law—this is where the money exchanges take place, where Shylock accuses and arrests Antonio, and where the trial scene occurs. It is almost by definition a place ruled by law and not mercy or love.

- Contrast this with Portia's home of Belmont: It's a place of beauty, repose, music, and nature. Law does not operate here, and when it tries, it is overcome—as when the law of her father's will is overcome by Bassanio. Most importantly, this is the place where love flourishes and regeneration is possible. The green world dynamic is fully in play, again confirming the play's status as a comedy. However, we'll see that certain characters are excluded from this regenerative green world; Antonio will be there by the play's end, but there is no love plot available for him.

- The cross-dressing dynamic, central to the great comedies but almost nowhere to be seen in the tragedies, occurs in *The Merchant of Venice*. In fact, this play is one of the most famous examples of the cross-dressing dynamic in all of Shakespeare's work.

- When Portia dresses as a judge and Nerissa as her clerk to go to the court to save Antonio's life, they assume not just the clothing and appearance of men, but they actually take on the public roles reserved only for men—the roles of law and masculine authority—and they do it so well that they outsmart all of the male legal authorities in the play.

- This is cross-dressing at its most radical, showing a woman's superiority in reasoning and argumentation—the very spheres in which man was supposed to be preeminent, according to the ideas of Shakespeare's day. It also makes for superb humor, especially at the end of the play when they reveal their disguises to their husbands who were completely fooled by the costumes. This is clearly comedy.

- However, Jessica, Shylock's daughter, also dresses in boy's clothes when she leaves her father's house to run away with Lorenzo, and there is evidence in the play, and certainly in the dramatic tradition, that this is not a redemptive action but, rather, a falling off for her into the corruption and materialism of what Shylock scornfully calls "the Christian husbands." Even here, we have a resistance to the comic structure, a questioning of its purview.

- There is one element in comedy that we have seen, especially in *Twelfth Night*, that is certainly present, even dominant, in *The Merchant of Venice*: the figure of sacrifice, or the scapegoat, and along with that, the punishment of the opponent of mirth. Those occur here, all focused on the figure of Shylock. This, of course, is the dark side of comedy: the need to have someone to laugh at, mock, and cast our own sins upon so that we can walk away free and clear. Shakespeare takes the darkest element of comedy and explores it to its fullest in this play.

- *The Merchant of Venice* is a play that is definitely structured exactly like a comedy—every tool for understanding Shakespearean comedy works for this play—and at the same time, there is an unsettling quality at work in this play, a darkness pushing against the comic light, a refusal to portray the elements of comedy without some reservation or problem lurking just beneath the surface.

- In this, the play resembles *Twelfth Night* far more than it does *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, and it anticipates Shakespeare's so-called problem plays, such as *Measure for Measure*. In many ways, *The Merchant of Venice* looks more like Shakespeare's later work than his earlier work, even though chronologically it is closer to the early work. The reason for this is the rich and complex figure of Shylock: In this character, Shakespeare seems to have hit upon a figure who exceeds his own play and makes that play his own in ways that Shakespeare himself might not have been fully aware.

The Crisis of Identity

- One of the fundamental tools for all of Shakespeare's plays is the crisis of identity. It's a tool that we've touched on in our analyses of tragedy, though not quite in a direct way, and we've used a version of it in comedy, but we'll refine it. The key question we need to ask with this tool is: How does the question of identity work in the play? This is basically the "Who am I?" question that we see in many of the plays.

- In *The Merchant of Venice*, the tool is best understood as the crisis of identity. Naturally, we go to the play's opening lines to see this theme first sounded. Antonio enters with two friends, and though he speaks to them, we sense that he is really addressing himself.

  In sooth, I know not why I am so sad:

  It wearies me; you say it wearies you;

  But how I caught it, found it, or came by it,

  What stuff 'tis made of, whereof it is born,

  I am to learn;

  And such a want-wit sadness makes of me,

  That I have much ado to know myself.

- The sadness of Antonio is one of the great questions of this play, but Shakespeare actually gives us the answer very soon: When his friend Bassanio enters and tells Antonio his plan to woo and wed Portia, we realize what Antonio knows at the start of the play—that his friend is leaving him to marry a woman, and the forced, permanent separation deeply distresses Antonio.

- Critics interpret this in a range of ways: At one extreme is the view that Antonio and Bassanio have been lovers, and Antonio is losing

his beloved to someone else. At the other extreme is the view that they are close friends, and Antonio is saddened at the end of that friendship of youth and boyhood. Male friendship has a very high value in Shakespeare's plays, and it's one of the central elements to this comedy.

- The far greater challenge is the last one Antonio sounds: "I have much ado to know myself." This is the challenge of identity—the need to discover who one is and what one values—and it's a key element in this play. By tracing this in each of the major characters, we learn much about Shakespeare's key concerns in the play.

- How does Antonio's friend, Bassanio, participate in this challenge of identity? By using this tool, what can we learn about him? For Bassanio, his challenge is not so much "Who am I?" but "How do I become the person I want to be?" Bassanio is engaged in a great effort to transform himself, and this sort of transformation of self is at the very heart of comedy; tragedy deals with characters who are unable to transform—who, like Macbeth, cannot escape their fate.

- We meet Portia, the heroine of the play, in the second scene, and her first words—"By my troth Nerissa, my little body is aweary of this great world"—sounds a lot like Antonio. In fact, the two of them double, or mirror, each other in many ways, including in their mutual affection for Bassanio. Portia's problem is also a challenge of identity: She knows who she is, but she is not her own to control; her father's will forbids her to choose her own husband. For Portia, it means that she cannot bestow her love where she would choose; choice, the most fundamental part of identity, is denied her.

- Thus, both Bassanio and Portia are in search of themselves, though in different ways. Their fates come to a climax in the great casket scene, in many ways the pivotal scene of the play, which occurs in the middle of the third act—the literal pivot of the play.

- Each of the tools for understanding comedy confirms this play as a comedy, but each one also has a dark side to it—a mood or tone that resists the comic impulse. The darkness of the play always clusters about the figure of Shylock, who seems to exceed his own play. He's not unlike Falstaff and Hamlet, each of whom seems to become more than their creator could have had in mind as they take over their respective plays with their astonishing intellect and command of language. Shylock is not as mighty a figure as those two characters, but there is nonetheless a sense that he stands for more than Shakespeare might have had in mind—he seems to exceed the sort of character he was meant to be.

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British actress Laura Keene (1826–1873) played Portia in *The Merchant of Venice*.

Tools

block to young love: The block to young love appears repeatedly in Shakespeare's work. Pay close attention to how this block comes about and what causes this block. Is it a father figure or a figure of law? Is the block external, coming from society, or internal, coming from within the lovers themselves? How does the response to this block determine the play's ultimate mode—that is, either comedy or tragedy? (This block occurs especially in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *The Merchant of Venice*, *As You Like It*, *Hamlet*, and *The Tempest*.)

friends to lovers: Notice how the close relationships between women and men tend to give way as the play progresses to different-sex, or heterosexual, relations between men and women as the play concludes. What is lost in this movement from friendship to romantic love, and what is gained? (This dynamic especially occurs in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *The Merchant of Venice*, *Much Ado about Nothing*, and *The Winter's Tale*.)

green world: In many of the plays, especially the comedies, characters flee civilization for a world of nature, often called a "green world." Pay close attention to these green worlds and how Shakespeare uses them: How are they described? What goes on in them? Do characters transform in them? How do these green worlds relate to the civilized world to which the characters must return? (This especially occurs in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *As You Like It*, and *The Merchant of Venice*.)

cross-dressing dynamic: Often in Shakespeare's comedies, women will cross-dress as men. Watch carefully for these moments and try to see their motivations for doing this. What do they gain by cross-dressing? What does this enable them to do? How do they act and feel when dressed as a man, and how are they different after they return to dressing as a woman? Why would Shakespeare continually use this dynamic?

opponent of mirth: Shakespeare's plays always criticize the killjoy, the figure of repression, the opponent of mirth. Observe how the opponent of mirth is punished in the play. Why is this a necessary device? What does this tell you about what Shakespeare might have valued?

crisis of identity: Watch for the moments when characters seek to find or define their true selves. Pay attention to how Shakespeare puts the search for identity at the very center of so many of his characters and plays.

Suggested Reading

Bloom, *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human*.

Marx, *Shakespeare and the Bible*.

Questions to Consider

1. Read carefully through the first scene of this play and the exchange between Antonio and Bassanio. Based on their words to one another, what do you think their relationship is really like? How would you have this scene, and their relationship, performed on the stage?

2. This play is filled with the language of business and commerce. How do words such as “venture,” “risk,” “lottery,” and “bond” alter their meaning as the play goes along? Why would Shakespeare use such terms so conspicuously in the play?

The Arc of Character in *The Merchant of Venice*
Lecture 19

At the heart of *The Merchant of Venice* is a Jewish character, Shylock, who is terribly oppressed by the majority Christian community. He is portrayed with a touch of sympathy in places, but he's mainly characterized by an almost pathological desire for justice and vengeance. By the play's end, he has been so thoroughly humiliated and punished that it's frankly difficult to imagine an era in which an audience would find this a humorous or satisfying depiction of a Jewish person. In this lecture, you will use the understanding history tool, the arc of character tool, and the drama of ideas tool to help you grasp this complex play.

The Portrayal of Jews

- *The Merchant of Venice* provokes questions of Shakespeare's own time and culture, so it's a good play in which to bring out the understanding history tool, which will allow us to focus on gaining a basic understanding of the history that lies beneath the plays.

- Scholars speculate that Shakespeare probably never encountered a true practicing Jew in his life. England expelled its small Jewish population in 1290 and declared it death for them to return. By the time of Queen Elizabeth, no openly practicing Jews were known of in London, so Jews were basically the stuff of ancient history or legend, which conceived them as desecraters of Christian sacraments and covetous money lenders who would eagerly ruin Christian merchants. Given the absence of actual Jews, Shakespeare's portrayal of Shylock had to be based on secondhand information, including the portrayal of Jews in English literature.

- In 1594, Queen Elizabeth's personal doctor, the Portuguese-born Roderigo Lopez, was arrested and charged with plotting to poison the queen. Though this seems to have been a groundless accusation that had more to do with internal court politics than any actual plot, Lopez was found guilty and was brutally executed before a

huge London crowd. What is particularly compelling about the Lopez incident is that he had once been a Jew, even though he then professed to be a practicing Christian.

- The exact date of Shakespeare's writing of *The Merchant of Venice* has occasioned much debate with some arguing for as early as 1594—that is, right on the heels of the Lopez event; others argue for as late as 1596 or so, largely because the play seems to be so much more like Shakespeare's mature works that commence about this time. In the character of Shylock in particular, Shakespeare seems to move beyond his earlier work and into the more accomplished work of his middle years. It's in the character of Shylock that Shakespeare goes far beyond any easy Jewish stereotypes.

Shylock's Character

- With *Henry IV, Part 2*, we took up the tool of the arc of character development to talk about how Prince Hal has an upward arc while Falstaff has a downward arc. When we apply this tool to Shylock, we find a few remarkable things: Shylock does not change. We cannot say that he grows from one position to another in the play; what he is at the start is what he is at the close. However, he does have a rise and fall in terms of power, which is very important for understanding his character.

- We're going to sharpen this tool a bit for this play: To understand Shylock, and characters like him, we need to look at the defining parts of their character—the things about them that will not change—as well as their relationship to power as the play proceeds. These versions of the arc of development tool work with Shylock and with several other important Shakespearean characters.

- Shylock's first words are: "Three thousand ducats, well." His first words are the counting of money. He is speaking with Bassanio, who wants to arrange the loan, in Antonio's name, for the money to furnish his wooing of Portia. Antonio can't produce the actual cash because all of his money is tied up in his ships, which are off on the seas, so they turn to Shylock to lend them the money.

A determining part of Shylock's character is to think of morality in terms of money.

- Shylock has a deep grudge against Antonio. Shylock's hatred for Antonio is based on the mere fact that Antonio is a Christian and that he loans his money to people for free, thereby hurting Shylock's business. This fits with the idea that Shylock measures character in terms of wealth. This is all consistent with the stereotypes of Jewishness, and at this point, we might think Shakespeare has not progressed beyond any shallow rendering of Jewish character. However, as Shylock and Antonio argue, Shylock reveals how cruel and vindictive Antonio has been in his treatment of Shylock, and Antonio begins to come across as the more negative figure.

- Shylock says that he will overlook all the cruelty and agree to the loan if Antonio agrees that if he does not repay on the agreed date, he will forfeit to Shylock a pound of his flesh, "to be cut off and taken / In what part of your body pleaseth me." Antonio merrily agrees, despite Bassanio's objections, because Antonio is certain that his ships will come in with "thrice three times the value of this bond." Antonio trusts in his commercial ventures, not realizing what a risk this is. Shylock trusts in what is certain to him, the money actually in his hand. Each runs his own sort of risk.

- Of course, Antonio's ships all founder, and his bond becomes forfeit. Shylock is unmerciful and demands the payment according to the bond; he will have his bond, he says, he will have his pound of flesh. He insists upon this because of his ongoing desire for vengeance, which is nearly a pathology with Shylock; his commitment to justice, which he thinks Antonio has outraged in his cruel treatment of Shylock; and, especially, his pain and sense of betrayal over his daughter Jessica, who has eloped with one of Bassanio's friends, Lorenzo, taking a lot of Shylock's jewels and wealth with her.

- In Shakespeare's day, Shylock was almost certainly not so troubling a character; rather, he would fit pretty snugly into the traditional

role of “comic villain”: He is an isolate; he wants to block the young love of his daughter and Lorenzo; he is miserly, wanting to hold onto his money; he is the butt of jokes and builds up enormous resentment because of this; and he is based on obvious stereotypes, not complex reality.

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This is a scene from Shakespeare’s *The Merchant of Venice* that features Bassanio and Shylock.

- Shylock doesn’t manipulate—in fact, his whole ethic is based on clear, understood contractual obligation—and he doesn’t want to attain power. Rather, he wants to stay separate from the Christian society he hates. Even in his efforts to kill Antonio, it’s never entirely clear what he really wants. In fact, Shylock wants his bond, his justice; he wants to get what he deserves. This is all the stuff of a comic villain, an almost stock character in Elizabethan drama —and one that Shakespeare’s audience would know how to laugh at and enjoy.

- What happens, however, is that the character Shakespeare ultimately writes exceeds this stock, two-dimensional characterization. We see this most powerfully in his most famous speech, which occurs

in Act III, scene i—the pivot of the play. After his daughter's flight, and after news has arrived that Antonio's ships are not faring well, Shylock meets two of Antonio's friends in the street who mock him further.

- This is the point where something in Shakespeare cuts loose from the stock, stereotypical character, and he gives us a Shylock with whom we can sympathize and who in performance can far exceed what seems to have been his original role. Somehow, this character grew out of its stereotypes. Out of whatever sympathies, conscious or unconscious, Shakespeare created a character who refused the stereotypes of his time. This is a hallmark of Shakespeare's art.

Portia as the Real Hero

- This play does not truly belong to Shylock—even though in recent years it's become the plum role in the play—and the play is not Antonio's either, even though he's the merchant of the title. The real hero in this play is Portia, and without her, this play would be profoundly diminished. In fact, it's Portia who keeps it from becoming a true problem play such as *Measure for Measure*, and it's the absence of a Portia-like figure from the three problem plays that in fact makes them problems in the first place.

- The drama of ideas tool can be used to attend to the larger arguments being carried on between characters. Shylock has spoken for justice, for the extreme letter of the law, and in the trial scene, he rejects all arguments for mitigation of the bond, insisting on exactly what is his due.

- It is to counter this argument for law and punishment that Portia will make her own argument, really a series of arguments. She is costumed as a young doctor of law, sent by a famous judge who cannot make the journey himself, and her first words in this disguise are important: She enters the courtroom and asks, "Which is the merchant here? And which the Jew?" The difference between Antonio and Shylock is obvious to everyone on the stage, but this

suggests Portia's objectivity; in the eyes of true justice, the Jew and the Christian are equal—there is no discernible difference.

- In Shakespearean terms, she will judge not on the basis of appearance, but on the basis of internal reality. She examines the bond and instantly declares it forfeit, an apparent victory for Shylock. However, she then says, "Then must the Jew be merciful," to which Shylock replies, "On what compulsion must I?" At this moment, Portia delivers the play's most famous speech—and truly one of the most famous in all of Shakespeare—a plea for mercy that speaks eloquently against this entire play's thirst for vengeance, justice, and blood.

  The quality of mercy is not strain'd,

  It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven

  Upon the place beneath: it is twice blest;

  It blesseth him that gives and him that takes:

  'Tis mightiest in the mightiest: it becomes

  The throned monarch better than his crown;

  His sceptre shows the force of temporal power,

  The attribute to awe and majesty,

  Wherein doth sit the dread and fear of kings;

  But mercy is above this sceptred sway;

  It is enthroned in the hearts of kings,

  It is an attribute to God himself;

> And earthly power doth then show likest God's
>
> When mercy seasons justice. Therefore, Jew,
>
> Though justice be thy plea, consider this,
>
> That, in the course of justice, none of us
>
> Should see salvation: we do pray for mercy;
>
> And that same prayer doth teach us all to render
>
> The deeds of mercy.

- This speech is her response to Shylock's argument for law, but more than that, these words are delivered to Antonio, Bassanio, the Duke, and ultimately the readers and playgoers. "In the course of justice," she concludes, "none of us / Should see salvation." This is speaking to the very heart of this play. Justice does not lead us to salvation and God's presence—rather, justice alone would lead us to damnation, by our own accusation.

- Everyone in this play engages in vengeance, bloodlust, and wrongdoing, it seems. Everyone in this play shows hatred and paranoia toward another. In short, the entire society in *The Merchant of Venice* has a kind of sickness to it. Portia's eloquent plea for mercy engages those characters' ideas, too: If blessing is going to come in this play, it will come through those who show mercy, and if the characters in this play are really going to approach godliness and salvation, it will occur not through their acts of justice, but through their acts of mercy.

- Mercy and charity are the directions of life and love, and also of comedy; justice and law are the directions ultimately of death, and also of tragedy. Are these virtues specifically Christian? It's tempting to see Shakespeare hinting that they are not—however bold a move that would have been for his time and place. The

Christians in this play act just as unmercifully as the Jews do, and the lack of charity on both sides of the religious coin is pretty much equal.

Tools

understanding history: Often in a Shakespeare play, especially the history plays, it helps to have a basic understanding of the actual history that he is imaginatively re-creating. Using a wide range of easily available resources, how can you develop a modest understanding of this historical background? How does this help you understand the plays? Ask yourself: What is a history play*?* Shakespeare draws upon actual historical events for a large number of his plays, but he does not slavishly record history. How does Shakespeare use history in his dramas? Where does he depart from history and for what reasons? Does the play treat a wide variety of historical characters, a broad sweep of historical canvas, or does it focus on a single figure, what might be considered the "hero" of the play? How is history a meditation for Shakespeare in these plays?

arc of character: Pay attention not only to a character's rise and fall—that is, his or her internal changes—but also to the ways a character's external role changes—that is, how his or her status in relation to the social structure can alter throughout a play.

drama of ideas: Watch carefully for Shakespeare's investigation of the relation of God to politics, to history, and to kingship. This issue dominates the history plays and also appears in the tragedies.

Suggested Reading

Bloom, *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human*.

Gurr, *Will in the World*.

Marx, *Shakespeare and the Bible*.

Questions to Consider

1. Shylock can be portrayed with great sympathy, and productions now generally try to highlight his victim status and the injustice of his treatment by the Christians. As you read or view this play, ask yourself: Is this the way Shakespeare meant Shylock to be portrayed, or is this contemporary actors and directors reinterpreting the part in light of the last century? What finally can make this distinction—or is this an impossible question to resolve for a Shakespeare play?

2. Portia gives one of the most eloquent and moving speeches for mercy in all of English literature. Read her speech aloud, with care, in three different moods or approaches: first, as a sincere plea for mercy; second, as a sarcastic delivery, knowing that she is going to hoodwink Shylock and cheat him of his bond; and third, as an angry, outraged cry for overthrowing harsh justice. Which reading do you think the play's language best supports? Why?

Measure for Measure—Is This Comedy?

Lecture 20

All three of Shakespeare's problem plays—*Troilus and Cressida*, *All's Well That Ends Well*, and *Measure for Measure*—seem to be neither truly comic nor tragic; rather, they tend toward a bitterness and a satiric quality that belies both true comedy and true tragedy. When Shakespeare's plays were first published in 1623, *Measure for Measure* was listed among the other comedies, but it is definitely not a comedy. In this lecture, you will learn to use some tools of comedy along with a new tool, called the scene progression tool, to navigate *Measure for Measure*.

Comic Tools and Measure for Measure

- In *Measure for Measure*, we see the strangeness of the play immediately by applying some of the comic tools, such as the altar or the tomb tool. This play takes us to the altar because it ends in marriages—three of them, in fact, but none of them are satisfying. It could be argued that we want none of these marriages to take place at all.

- Then there's the block to love tool: At the start of the play, we have the classic block to love, but not because of any angry father figure; rather, the highest law in the land outlaws young love, in effect.

- Sexuality exists only in the basest form, and the heroine desires more than anything else to escape from the world of sex into a chastity that would shield her from the world's corruption. The hero, if he is a hero, manipulates her in such an appalling way that we can only imagine she would hate him more than love him. At the play's end, she is silenced before she can respond to his proposal, leaving us wondering if any marriage is possible or even desirable.

The Scene Progression Tool

- In a play that frustrates many traditional interpretive approaches, we have to introduce a new tool—the scene progression tool, in

which we compare the progressive development of the setting of the scenes. This is a great tool for seeing how Shakespeare structures his plays and how setting actually reinforces, and in some cases even dictates, meaning.

- In the first scene of the first act, we are in the place of government, the duke's palace or castle—the place of law, power, and order, the highest authority in this play.

- In the second scene, we shift to a street right outside a brothel, the place of illicit sexuality, disorder, and illegality. Here we learn that a young man, Claudio, has been sentenced to death because he has gotten a young woman pregnant who is not his wife.

- In the third scene, we are in the cell of a friar—a religious place, also a secret place—where the Duke, having left his place of rule, desires to disguise himself as a friar so that he can reenter his city as a spy.

- In the fourth and final scene of the first act, we are at the gates of a nunnery, where Lucio, the brazen socialite who was first seen in the brothel, comes to tell Claudio's sister, Isabella, who is preparing to enter the convent for life, about her brother's condemnation.

- There are many intriguing ways to read these scenes in their relation to one another; they work to show us some of the larger themes in this play. We start in the place of public order and law in the first scene, but then we suddenly shift to its very opposite—the disorder and lawlessness of the brothel—in the second scene. This startling dynamic runs throughout the play: Pure goodness and pure vice are put side by side until, eventually, we can hardly tell them apart.

- Then, we go to a closed-off religious cell, where a friar is speaking with the duke. Here, we might reasonably expect to find religious goodness and moral authority, but actually, we get something rather startling: The duke is asking the friar to help him disguise himself as a friar—basically so that he can spy on his dukedom and, specifically,

on the man he has left in charge, Lord Angelo, and the friar agrees. We get deception, trickery, and distrust in place of religious goodness and moral authority, another dynamic that is going to reappear throughout this play. An excellent line to help us with *Measure for Measure* is that of Macbeth's: "fair is foul and foul is fair."

- Then, we shift to a nunnery, and here, surely, we can hope to find religious goodness. We meet Isabella, who is preparing to take her vows and enter the convent, and her first words show her requesting an even stricter rule than the already strict rule enjoined by the sisters of Clare. This is our first glimpse of Isabella, and already we sense that she fears, and even loathes, the body and sexuality and even is repulsed by love itself. She seeks the convent as a cell, a place away from the corruption of the world. Religion for her is not about the love of God, but about her own fear and loathing toward man.

The Place and Person Tool

- The place and person tool allows us to look at how character relates to place or scene. Here, each of these places is associated with a different character, so we want to work to see how character and place interact in these scenes to enhance their meanings.

- It is the duke's abdication of authority in the very first scene that leads to all the trouble in this play in the first place. Why does he leave his dukedom and put Angelo in charge? We get two answers to this question: The first, and most obvious, is what he reveals in scene iii, when he's in secret counsel with the friar. There, he says that Vienna has harsh laws on the books that he has not enforced for 14 years; as a result of his laxity, he admits, "our decrees, / Dead to infliction, to themselves are dead."

- Why didn't the duke do his job and enforce his own laws? Basically, because then the people wouldn't like him, would think him a tyrant, and the duke couldn't bear that. Instead, he says that he will have Angelo be the bad guy and enforce the laws so that his city will grow healthy without resenting him. This is hardly an inspiring

mode of leadership. At this early stage in the play, we like Angelo a lot more than we like the duke.

- The duke gives another reason, and perhaps this is even more influential on his thought. In the first scene, the duke makes a curious statement about Angelo: “Angelo, / There is a kind of character in thy life, / That to the observer doth thy history / Fully unfold.” He’s saying he can tell what Angelo’s true inner character is just based on Angelo’s appearance. It’s the very reverse of the appearance versus reality dynamic.

- Nobody appears more upright, moral, self-controlled, and virtuous than Angelo. When, later in the play, he will reveal himself to be lascivious, corrupt, and tyrannical, it’s a bit of a shock to everyone—but perhaps the duke saw it coming all along. This two-sided nature to a character functions in every person in the play.

- Isabella’s apparent holiness is also a mask to hide her fear of the body and her squeamish dislike for human company. She is compelled to plead for the life of her brother, Claudio, though she is the first to admit that she abhors his crime. She is torn: She would condemn what Claudio has done, but she loves her brother. In fact, Isabella may be more torn than even she realizes.

- The doubling of each person in this play provokes fascinating questions about human nature, and Angelo is the supreme example of this. In his first scene, as acting head of state, he argues with Escalus, who is suggesting that Angelo is being a bit harsh by enforcing old laws that have been gathering dust for years—particularly the law that has arrested Claudio, making it a capital crime to make a woman pregnant outside of marriage.

- Angelo sets himself a standard of morality that is Christlike: If I commit this sin, then let me die as well. It’s no accident that Angelo makes this pronouncement in his own chambers, the site of justice. The tool of looking closely at the juxtaposition of scenes, and how characters and scenes interact, has already shown us

how the apparently fair becomes foul—surely, that is going to be the pattern for Lord Angelo, as the duke himself predicted in the opening of the play.

- The character Lucio is sort of intriguing. Recall from *Twelfth Night* that the boundary-crossing figure is the character who can cross between worlds, and Lucio can do it in this play. He's very much at home in the brothels, making jokes about grace and venereal disease—and being able to joke about both of those is testament to how this play works.

- However, when he hears that Claudio is condemned because he got a girl pregnant, he grows serious and says, "But, after all this fooling, I would not have it so." He agrees to go to Isabella at the convent to urge her to beg mercy from Angelo. When he meets Isabella, he is sarcastic and rather forward, but he's not really that bad—certainly, not as bad as Angelo will be. He actually shows some respect for her holiness and sanctity, maybe more than she does herself, in an odd way.

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This painting, by William Holman Hunt, portrays Claudio and Isabella.

- Lucio hints that Angelo's harsh punishment for getting a woman with child is itself unnatural. Angelo is unnatural in his repression—a critique we could offer of Isabella, too. In the first half of the play, Lucio's role is to speak the truth about the world of Vienna because nobody else does. We need to keep this in mind during the second half of the play, when Lucio will speak very harshly of the absent duke, something that will get him into trouble at the play's end. Perhaps there, too, Lucio is speaking the truth.

- Barnardine is the imprisoned man who is due to be executed but who simply refuses to come out of his cell long enough to have his head chopped off. When the duke, disguised as a friar, asks the provost of the prison who this Barnardine is, the provost responds that the man is always drunk, cares for nothing, is "careless, reckless, and fearless of what's past, present, or to come: insensible of mortality, and desperately mortal." He's been given the liberty of the prison and could escape any time he wants, but he's too drunk and uncaring to ever leave.

- The duke tries to have him executed, thinking he can replace his severed head for Claudio's and thereby foil Angelo's scheme, but Barnardine splendidly refuses: "You rogue," he cries, "I have been drinking all night; I am not fitted for't." The duke tries to get him to pray and confess his sins, but Barnardine replies, "Friar, not I. I have been drinking hard all night, and I will have more time to prepare me, or they shall beat out my brains with billets. I will not consent to die this day, that's certain." Off he goes, leaving the duke astonished.

- There is a sublime poetry about Barnardine; it's as if he's the only person who realizes how crazy the world of this play really is. In a world where nothing is as it appears—where a man can be executed by the state for loving a woman, where hypocrisy reigns and no goodness is to be found—the only logical response is to refuse to give that world your assent. The law tells Barnardine that it's time for him to die: He responds, "I refuse" and walks back to his cell to drink some more. It's a rather amazing gesture, and it shows once again how warped the world of Vienna is.

Tools

altar or the tomb?: Track the direction of the love plot. Does it move toward death, or does it move toward marriage? The difference is the difference between tragedy and comedy.

block to young love: The block to young love appears repeatedly in Shakespeare's work. Pay close attention to how this block comes about and what causes this block. Is it a father figure or a figure of law? Is the block external, coming from society, or internal, coming from within the lovers themselves? How does the response to this block determine the play's ultimate mode—that is, either comedy or tragedy? (This block occurs especially in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *The Merchant of Venice*, *As You Like It*, *Hamlet*, and *The Tempest*.)

scene progression: Notice the way Shakespeare alternates, shifts, and contrasts the scenes in his plays. Watch for dramatic contrasts from one scene to the next and how this indicates major developments of meaning. This is especially pronounced in such plays as *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Othello*, and *As You Like It*.

place and person: Pay careful attention to the way the setting of a scene relates to the characters in the scene. How does Shakespeare use the setting or scene to reveal the nature of a character? How do characters change depending on the scene they are in?

Suggested Reading

Frye, *The Myth of Deliverance*.

Garber, *Shakespeare After All*.

Marx, *Shakespeare and the Bible*.

Questions to Consider

1. Read carefully through one of the major scenes of this play—such as Act II, scene i, the humorous scene of Escalus and Pompey; or Act IV, scene iii, set in the jail with Pompey, the duke, and Isabella. How do these scenes share elements of comedy and of tragedy? Can you see why this would be labeled a "problem play"?

2. Look with care at Isabella's speeches to Angelo. Do you think she is purposefully being seductive toward him, or is this innocent speech from an innocent girl—or is there a mixture of both at work here? How does your answer affect your understanding of the entire play?

Measure for Measure—Overcoming Tragedy
Lecture 21

Measure for Measure is similar to the last four plays Shakespeare ever wrote—his late romances—*Pericles*, *Cymbeline*, *The Winter's Tale*, and *The Tempest*. *Measure for Measure* pushes against the form of Shakespeare's high comedies. In this lecture, by using many of the tools of tragedy, you will learn how much this play approaches the grimness of Shakespeare's great tragedies, but when it veers away from these tragic elements, denying the tomb and urging forgiveness, it finally begins to show the direction of Shakespeare's final phase, the romances.

The Tools of Tragedy

- Although it hasn't been emphasized as a marker of tragedy, the foul and fair tool definitely helps us with *Measure for Measure*: Basically everyone who seems to be fair is actually more or less foul. However, the second half of that—foul can become fair—can be applied to the astonishing ending of this play.

- The central tool for understanding tragedy is the arc of development from ignorance to knowledge. It's tempting to say that nobody learns anything by the end of this play; there is no reformation of Angelo and no educating of Lucio or Claudio—no growth or learning that takes place. That's a perfect example of this play's uncertain status: If there's no growth in knowledge, then it doesn't really match up with tragedy, but a world in which no positive change occurs is hardly a comic place either. Ultimately, there is actually a tremendous change at the end, but it takes a lot of work to get there.

- The key tool for tragedy ever since the Greeks is the role of fate versus free will, which can be put under the drama of ideas tool. There is a powerful sense of inevitability to much of this play. The characters are given a single moment of choice, and after that, their fates seem to be sealed.

- Claudio sleeps with Juliet, and she becomes pregnant—from that point on, the unyielding and inevitable power of the law takes over and condemns him to death, despite the best efforts of Isabella and Escalus to turn the law aside.

- Angelo succumbs to his overwhelming temptation toward Isabella, and from that point on, he seems to be carried by a wave of evil and deception, even carrying out Claudio's execution after he thinks Isabella has slept with him, as he thinks she agreed.

- Isabella, who tries so desperately to do what is right—to save her brother but not compromise her morality and faith—seems unable to find the right course of action. She's caught in a maze in which no choice is the right choice, or caught in prison—in fact, the whole middle part of the play is set in the prison—powerless to alter the decree of Angelo and all the events it sets in motion.

- It's very tempting to say that the tragic concept of humanity's determined fate governs this play, which would surely push it toward the tragic. However, by the play's end, the figure of divine power emerges as the duke himself, and at least in the Duke's mind, he is a kind of benevolent deity, a divine monarch not unlike James I's conception of himself.

- The duke manages to make everything work out all right by the end, so the idea of fatedness is altered somewhat; instead of the tragic notion of being caught in a web that gives a person no choice, inexorably headed toward doom, the characters feel that they have been guided toward a remarkably tidy, if not happy, ending through the duke's impressive machinations. It's a near-divine providence, which is a spirit closer to comedy than to tragedy. The fate tool works for a while, making this play seem like tragedy, but then the duke takes it in a totally different direction, and we end up back with a somewhat comic mood.

The Fifth Act

- To really figure out how this play works, we have to go to the fifth act, when all of the themes, plots, and complexities come together. Shakespeare prepares us for the fifth act partly through the function of Barnardine, whose glorious refusal to give any significance to the world of authority in this play is a clue to what Shakespeare is suggesting: that the world of Vienna, the world of law that would kill love, just doesn't make any sense. What is needed is a total reformation of that world at the deepest level, so the other part of the preparation comes in the fourth act, when the duke and Isabella visit Mariana, Angelo's discarded fiancé, outside of the city.

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This lithograph of Mariana was published in 1888 in a London newspaper.

- Recall the tool of place and person, of looking at scene or setting and how it relates to character—that's just what happens here. The setting for Mariana's home is at "the moated grange," and this is very important: A grange is a kind of farm, but the more ancient meaning is a repository for grain, a storehouse for life, and to be moated means it is surrounded by water. The contrast with Vienna is striking: If that city is the place of lechery, lust, disease, and the injustice of harsh laws, the grange is a place of repose, of nature, of life, and a place where love could be rekindled.

- This is a version of the green world in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *The Merchant of Venice*, but whereas in those plays whole acts are set in the green world, in this play it lasts for only a very brief

scene, a mere 75 lines or so before we return to Vienna, suggesting that the healing world of nature has all but vanished—but it is there, and it's the site where the duke launches his plot with Mariana and Isabella, thereby setting in motion the shift of the play.

- The stagecraft tool works very well for understanding the duke in the second half of this play because he takes on a number of theatrical roles: He is an actor, of course, playing many parts; he is also a director, arranging multiple people in different impersonations and performances; and he is a writer, scripting in the final scene especially the actual lines that people will speak and how they will speak them.

- Another important tool that we used with comedy is Shakespeare's uses of folklore and folktale in his dramas. Recall that Shakespeare's plays are filled with folklore; everywhere you look, he draws on the folktales that he would have heard as a child or absorbed in his reading. *Measure for Measure* is even more dependent on folklore than most of his works.

- Shakespeare uses the bed trick, in which a man thinks he is sleeping with one woman, but there's a switch, and he instead sleeps with another, a device common to folklore. Then, there's the story of the corrupt judge, who tells a woman who comes before him that he'll release her husband or brother if she sleeps with him and who then usually betrays her—another common folklore story, as is the prince (in this case, duke) in disguise.

- Probably the fundamental figure in all of folklore is the figure of the trickster. This person is mischievous, loves disguise and deception, and revels in arranging outcomes nobody could have expected. This is surely a good description of the duke. In religious terms, the trickster is identified with a hidden force for good, a benevolent providence that moves a story toward a happy ending. This, too, fits the machinations of the duke, who works to reverse the negative impulse of the play, to shift it away from a tragic direction and toward a comic one.

- By approaching the folklore elements of the play, we can see how the duke is trying to bring about regeneration for the self, for the state, and maybe even the human condition as a whole. To see how he can pull this off, we need another concept called the *basanos*, or test. One way to understand the duke's function is that he constantly puts all the other characters in this play to the test; he puts them into extreme situations in which their beliefs, resolves, will, and even faith is called into question.

- Another way to understand the *basanos* is as the ordeal, an agony that must be endured in order to get to a better place. The ordeals of Isabella and Angelo are what drive this play to its conclusion. They use virtually the identical construction, only one of many ways in which these two figures are mirrors of each other: each puritanical, each concealing his or her true desires even from their very selves, each in need of education, of learning who they really are.

The Final Act

- In the long final act, we must pay attention to what happens to Angelo. Here's where we see that the arc of development from ignorance to knowledge tool is important. Act V begins with the duke returning to Vienna and asking Angelo and Escalus to greet him at the city gates to relinquish their authority and also to proclaim that "if any crave redress or injustice, they should exhibit their petitions in the street" when he arrives.

- When he arrives, he praises Angelo's tenure, but in subtle terms: "O," he proclaims, "your desert speaks loud"—it certainly does, we know, but desert of punishment, not praise—"and I should wrong it / To lock it in the wards of covert bosom, / When it deserves with characters of brass / A forted residence 'gainst the tooth of time / And razure of oblivion." Angelo seems just a little disconcerted at this point, and he should—he knows how calamitous it would be for him to have his true deserving written in brass characters for all the world to see. However, this is just what the duke wants: for the real truth, the inner truth, to emerge and to emerge not

from without, from another's accusation, but from within, from Angelo's own self-accusation.

- As rehearsed and directed by the duke, Isabella and Mariana come forward to accuse Angelo. The duke steps aside and says to Angelo, "In this I'll be impartial; be you judge / Of your own cause"— the line that is crucial to this entire play. In other words, the duke is asking Angelo to look inside himself and tell them what he sees. To be able to do this would be true self-knowledge.

- Angelo thinks that he can manipulate justice as he has done throughout the play, but the duke's drama outsmarts him: Mariana reveals herself, Angelo admits that they were "affianced," and when the duke reveals himself to have been the friar in prison and confirms that Angelo did sleep with Mariana the night before, thinking it was Isabella, Angelo not only admits his guilt but almost seems to welcome the end of the pretense and the confession of his sins. Angelo confesses—he has finally come to know himself, and he admits his depravity and calls for the just punishment: death.

- We know that a play that ends in the tomb, with death, is a tragedy, but *Measure for Measure* is finally no tragedy. Isabella, too, is put to the test. First, her initial desire for chastity, or purity, is tested and found wanting. Isabella moves away from chastity and is willing—perhaps—to accept the duke's proposal of marriage at the end of the play.

- More than her chastity, Isabella's desire for vengeance is put to the test. Against all sense, against all human desire for vengeance, even against our sense of actual justice, of measure for measure, Isabella kneels and begs for mercy from the man she most abhors in the world—the duke—in one of the most moving moments in all of Shakespeare.

Most bounteous sir,

Look, if it please you, on this man condemn'd,

As if my brother lived: I partly think

A due sincerity govern'd his deeds,

Till he did look on me: since it is so,

Let him not die.

- If we think of Isabella's earlier arguments in the play, we might deduce that this is her true self finally emerging. It's only when we see this moving speech given form in Isabella's own actions, in her kneeling to beg for mercy for the man who killed her brother and would have killed her own virtue, that we can finally view this play as a moving and transformative event, one of the more hopeful in all of Shakespeare's canon.

Tools

foul and fair: Watch carefully for moments in the plays where reversals, questions, and contraries structure the play. When does someone appear fair and virtuous, and then it is discovered that the character is actually treacherous and foul? When does the reverse occur? What is Shakespeare trying to say about human nature?

arc of character: Watch carefully the way in which Shakespeare's main characters develop and grow over the course of the play. Pay attention not only to a character's rise and fall—that is, his or her internal changes—but also to the ways a character's external role changes—that is, how his or her status in or relation to the social structure can alter throughout a play. What patterns do they follow? Is it a rise and fall, or is there a more subtle pattern at work? How is this arc related to power? How is it related to the movement from ignorance to knowledge?

drama of ideas: Watch particularly for how Shakespeare explores the role of fate versus free will in the plays. Pay attention to the ways Shakespeare's characters are caught between the inexorable quality of fate and their own ability to choose their destinies.

place and person: Pay careful attention to the way the setting of a scene relates to the characters in the scene. How does Shakespeare use the setting or scene to reveal the nature of a character? How do characters change depending on the scene they are in?

stagecraft, or the play within the play: Watch carefully for moments when a miniature play is actually performed within the larger play, and pay attention to how that miniplay comments on or mirrors the larger play in which it appears. What does this tell you about Shakespeare's fascination with how theater works? (This especially occurs in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *As You Like It*, *Hamlet*, and *The Winter's Tale*.)

***basanos*, or trial:** Pay attention to the moments when characters are put to the test—when their true internal selves emerge under duress or in a scene of trial. Watch for how the characters respond to their trial. How do these testings connect to the major themes or dramatic moments in the play?

folklore or folktale: There are many examples of Shakespeare using folklore or folktales to structure or give meaning to his plays. Watch for these moments—the bed trick, the trickster figure, uses of magic or fairy lore, the caskets, etc.—and try to see how Shakespeare uses these apparently old-fashioned devices to give meaning to his plays. (This especially occurs in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *The Merchant of Venice*, *King Lear*, *Measure for Measure*, and *Pericles*.)

Suggested Reading

Frye, *The Myth of Deliverance*.

Marx, *Shakespeare and the Bible*.

Questions to Consider

1. The opening of Act IV, set at the "moated grange" where we meet Mariana, can be compared to the green world in Shakespeare's other comedies. As you look at that brief scene, what are the elements that make this scene such a contrast to the rest of the play? What things does Shakespeare include—such as the song, the Duke's commentary, or the meeting between the two women—that help shape this scene?

2. In this lecture, we interpret the final scene (Act V, scene i) ultimately as a positive and redemptive moment, but some scholars view this last scene as ironic, tongue in cheek, almost a satire of what it seems to represent. What evidence can you find to support this reading? What lines, gestures, or actions could be read ironically or satirically to move us toward this reading of the play's conclusion?

Tools of Romance in *The Tempest*
Lecture 22

Over the last four years or so of his career, Shakespeare developed yet another form of drama, what scholars have called for centuries the late romances. These are the final four plays that Shakespeare wrote entirely by himself: *Pericles*, *Cymbeline*, *The Winter's Tale*, and *The Tempest*, all written probably between 1608 and 1611. Sometimes referred to as tragicomedies, these plays ultimately seem to create an altogether new form. In your study of *The Tempest*, you will learn how the ideas of grace and forgiveness come to dominate Shakespeare's imagination in the final plays he wrote for the stage.

Defining "Romance"

- The first tool we need to apply to Shakespeare's late romances is the defining romance tool—that is, developing an understanding of what the term "romance" means and what sort of play it prepares us to see and understand.

- A romance is actually a very ancient literary form; the Greeks wrote romances, and nearly every culture has some version of romance in its folklore and legends. In fact, this is an important aspect to Shakespeare's romances: They are old-fashioned, having a timeless and ancient quality to them. They are closer to folktales—to the stories told around the fireside in ancient cultures. *The Tempest* is almost a collection of folktale elements, woven together in Shakespeare's inimitable style to become a dramatic masterpiece.

- A second quality of romance follows from this: The plots are incredible, in the sense that there is no pretense to realism at work in them. They are simply fantastic, containing things that in the real world could just never happen. The magic and sorcery of *The Tempest* is an example of this, but *Pericles*, *Cymbeline*, and *The Winter's Tale* have their own examples as well.

- As the prologue says in *Henry V*, we must let the play "on your imaginary forces work"—in other words, we must enter into the story, or go along for the ride. At the end of his career, Shakespeare throws off all of the rules of the drama, all of the conventions of the stage, and delights in incredible stories almost as if to show how he has become independent of all the rules.

- The third element of romance is its three-part plot structure, particularly as Shakespeare develops the form: It begins with outrageous wrongdoing, followed by a long period of suffering or penance, and then concluding in a scene of forgiveness and reconciliation that is remarkable as a capstone to Shakespeare's career.

- There seems to be a spirit of grace at work in these late plays, in which outrageous wrong is ultimately forgiven (once the proper penance and learning have taken place) and long-separated parents and children, husbands and wives, and friends and brothers are restored—not without a keen awareness of the pain of the separation, but still in a restoration of the love that once brought them together in romantic youth. How much this maps onto Shakespeare's own life story has been a matter of endless debate and speculation over the centuries.

- *The Tempest* certainly shows all of these elements of romance, so it's ideal to help us see and understand what Shakespeare is doing in these famous final plays. At the same time, this play shares many characteristics with Shakespeare's other works; in fact, some of the tools that we've used in every genre of play can help us here, drawing on the histories, tragedies, and romances. This shows once more how a tool that helps us with one Shakespeare play also helps us to understand every other Shakespeare play and also that Shakespeare is not the slave to his conventions, but in fact, he defies and makes his own conventions.

The Block to Love

- The key tool for all of the comedies that we have seen is the block to young love by a father figure, and in *The Tempest*, it's one of the defining features. The play begins with a terrible storm that apparently wrecks a ship carrying royal passengers. This brief opening scene is followed by a much longer one, in which the magician Prospero reveals to Miranda, his daughter, that the storm is his doing, the result of his magic. She is very upset over the suffering of the mariners, but Prospero tells her: "I have done nothing but in care of thee, / Of thee, my dear one, thee my daughter."

- Prospero is a father who clearly loves his daughter, so at this point, knowing Shakespeare, we know that this is going to cause trouble. In so many father-daughter relations in Shakespeare, love usually leads to controlling, willful, domineering relationships by the father.

- Prospero proceeds to tell Miranda the full story of how they came to be isolated on this island—how his brother usurped his throne and set the two of them adrift on a boat until they landed here and where he raised her and educated her over the intervening 12 years. This is the play's period of suffering that is so crucial to the romances, but in this play, it's all presented as having just ended.

- *The Tempest* is almost two plays, and the first play takes place before the actual play begins: It's a story of brother versus brother, of betrayal, outrage, and terrible injustice—a story not unlike *Macbeth*—but the spirit of the romances is not that of vengeance but, rather, forgiveness, as this play will demonstrate. We begin with the revenge plot coming to an end, as we shift into its alternative story, in which Miranda will play a crucial role.

- At the start of the play, Prospero is still committed to his plot of revenge. He tells Miranda, "By accident most strange, bountiful fortune … hath mine enemies / Brought to this shore," and now he has an opportunity to revenge himself upon them all. He then casts a sleeping spell over Miranda, and we realize what power Prospero

wields over her. Prospero is a man who demands unquestioning obedience from all those around him.

- With a nudge, this play could certainly go in that tragic direction, but that's not the impulse that governs this play. Rather, Prospero wants the young couple—Miranda and Ferdinand—to earn their love, not to have it come too easily, which would mean it could as easily leave them. At the very heart of the play, the third act, Ferdinand must perform his labors in order to win Miranda's hand. The scene opens with him bearing "some thousands" of logs into a pile, a meaningless task except that its goal for Ferdinand makes it worthwhile.

    This my mean task

    Would be as heavy to me as odious, but

    The mistress which I serve quickens what's dead,

    And makes my labours pleasures.

- The phrase "quickens what's dead" is so important. Ferdinand is mourning the loss of his father, whom he believes has died in the shipwreck. A part of him dies with the death of his father—but Miranda has the capacity to breathe life back into dead things. Throughout the romances, a spirit of restoration and even resurrection holds sway, pushing past the apparent tragedies of death and loss and offering comfort and continued life at the end. Unlike the comedies, the loss is not simply overcome—the intervening years have taken their toll and cannot be washed away—but through the grace-bestowing power of the young girls such as Miranda, life is restored, and the hope for the future is regained.

- As Prospero, invisible, watches on, Miranda and Ferdinand confess their absolute love for one another. Prospero knows the cost of this young love; he knows what it has taken to bring them together, and he knows how easily young love can be damaged or lost. Nevertheless, this accomplishment has been at the heart of

his plan throughout the play, and bringing their love to fruition is a major reason why he is able to let go of his more sinister plan for vengeance on those who had wronged him.

Tools of Stagecraft

- Prospero's method throughout this play is essentially that of an accomplished man of the theater; he takes on the roles of actor, director, stage manager, and even playwright, as he artfully constructs the world around him to match his desires. The tools of stagecraft all apply brilliantly to this play, particularly the whole idea of the play within the play, which we've seen in so many of Shakespeare's plays.

- Prospero is perhaps the most impressive of all the stagecraft figures in Shakespeare because he truly does command the magical power of the theater. When Prospero talks in Act I with Ariel, his servant spirit, about the apparently deadly storm they have created, we learn that it was all play; it was all a performance, as Prospero confirms in his words to Ariel: "Ariel, thy charge / Exactly is performed."

- Then, Prospero has Ariel disperse the boat party throughout the island in different groupings: Ferdinand by himself, the lower-class characters Stephano and Trinculo paired off, and then the main court party in another group—exactly like a director casting his play. He has Ariel mingle with these different groupings and influence them for different effects: with Ferdinand, in order to put him to the test and educate him in the value of Miranda, and with the court party, in order to test them as well and to bring their true natures to the surface.

- The theme of undergoing suffering in penance for a great sin is at work here; nearly all the court figures have, to a greater or lesser extent, committed a moral crime. Similarly, the *basanos*, or test, so central to comedy is a key device, as these characters are tested and found more or less wanting. All of this is done through Prospero's unerring sense of the dramatic and his use of dramatic techniques.

- Prospero and Ariel, invisible, lay before the weary and wretched party a magnificent banquet, with wonderful food and finery, the very dream fulfilled for a group of men who have wandered through a pathless forest. However, just as they are about to dive into the wonderful meal, Ariel appears in the form of a harpy—the dread creature of myth that is part bird and part woman, associated with the vengeance of the gods—and he makes the entire feast vanish. Then, he declares their guilt and wrongdoing to them in a terrifying speech.

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This is a work of art depicting Ariel in Shakespeare's *The Tempest*.

> You are three men of sin, whom Destiny,
>
> That hath to instrument this lower world
>
> And what is in't, the never-surfeited sea
>
> Hath caused to belch up you; and on this island
>
> Where man doth not inhabit; you 'mongst men
>
> Being most unfit to live …
>
> … you three
>
> From Milan did supplant good Prospero;

Exposed unto the sea, which hath requit it,

Him and his innocent child: for which foul deed

The powers, delaying, not forgetting, have

Incensed the seas and shores, yea, all the creatures,

Against your peace.

- This is the cry of vengeance—this is the call for harsh justice, for measure for measure, for the law of an eye for an eye that Shylock so desires. Prospero realizes that, if he but chose to, he could crush all of his enemies at once and achieve his long-desired revenge. However, his heart has been changed, and he seeks now only forgiveness, reconciliation, and harmony. Having used all of his skills as a stage director to bring his enemies to the place of judgment, he now will use those same skills to bring them to the place of reconciliation and forgiveness.

- In Act IV, Prospero embraces Ferdinand as a son and freely gives him Miranda's hand in marriage. He reveals to Ferdinand the reason for his severe testing of him, reasons that have their foundation in Prospero's great love for his daughter. He then presents another performance, another play within the play, for the two young lovers. In contrast to the banquet and punishment performed for the court party, here Prospero presents a masque or courtly entertainment, emphasizing the purity of true love, its harmony with nature and the seasons, and its promises of long life and blessings in offspring.

Tools

defining romance: Seek to understand what Shakespeare scholars mean by the term "romance." Observe the following characteristics of romance and see how these concepts help you understand the final four plays of Shakespeare's career.

- old-fashioned
- timeless
- incredible plots
- plot structure: wrongdoing, suffering, reconciliation

block to young love: The block to young love appears repeatedly in Shakespeare's work. Pay close attention to how this block comes about and what causes this block. Is it a father figure or a figure of law? Is the block external, coming from society, or internal, coming from within the lovers themselves? How does the response to this block determine the play's ultimate mode—that is, either comedy or tragedy? (This block occurs especially in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *The Merchant of Venice*, *As You Like It*, *Hamlet*, and *The Tempest*.)

stagecraft, or the play within the play: Watch carefully for moments when a miniature play is actually performed within the larger play, and pay attention to how that miniplay comments on or mirrors the larger play in which it appears. What does this tell you about Shakespeare's fascination with how theater works? (This especially occurs in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *As You Like It*, *Hamlet*, and *The Winter's Tale.*)

Suggested Reading

Adelman, *Suffocating Mothers*.

Felperin, *Shakespearean Romance*.

Frye, *A Natural Perspective*.

Questions to Consider

1. The romances have a three-part structure of wrongdoing, suffering, and reconciliation. How does this compare to the three-part structure we noticed in standard comedy: block to love, escape, and return? Think about the ways these structures overlap and also how they differ. What does this tell us about the romances?

2. Is Prospero a cruel tyrant or a loving father and master? Choose lines from the play that would support one view or the other. Which view do you find most compelling? Why?

The Tempest—Shakespeare's Farewell to Art

Lecture 23

In many ways, *The Tempest* offers the perfect finale to Shakespeare's amazing career. While the play makes perfect sense without reading it as in some way an expression of Shakespeare's own thoughts and words as he reflects on the end of his life's work, it is clear that a lot of Shakespeare has gone into the character of Prospero—that, just as Hamlet and Falstaff seem projections of Shakespeare's most powerful ideas, Prospero seems to speak for much of Shakespeare's own thought as his career comes to a close.

The Place and Person Tool

- The place and person tool allows us to look at the interaction of place, or scene, with character and to determine how this interaction shows us some of the most important meanings in a Shakespeare play. In *The Tempest*, we see what the magical island ultimately means as we investigate the meaning of the characters who reside on the island, and in so doing, we learn more about who these characters are and what significance they have.

- Calibane is the half-human creature who unwillingly serves Prospero. Every time characters speak about Calibane, they comment on how he relates to the island on which he was born. It's no accident that the first person to describe Caliban, and hence to define him, is Prospero, who is the master stage manager of this entire play.

- Speaking with Ariel in the second scene of the play, Prospero reminds Ariel of the "blue-eyed hag," the witch Sycorax, who had been marooned on the island years before. There, she gave birth to her son, whom Prospero describes as "a freckled whelp, hag-born, not honoured with / A human shape."

- Caliban and Prospero have an odd relationship: There is mutual animosity, but there is also mutual dependence. Prospero depends

upon Caliban's labor, and Caliban depends upon Prospero's wisdom and power. It's a version of the master-slave dialectic, in which the master is just as dependent upon the slave as is the slave upon the master. It's also a version of so many human relations in which love and hate strive with each other. The island, it seems, is not just a magical place; it is also a kind of laboratory or test tube in which human relationships are stressed, experimented upon, and pushed to their extremes to see what underlies the way we relate to one another.

- Caliban's own description of himself, his past, and his relationship with Prospero and Miranda is somewhat at odds with that of Prospero.

  This island's mine, by Sycorax my mother,

  Which thou takest from me. When thou camest first,

  Thou strokedst me and madest much of me, wouldst give me

  Water with berries in't, and teach me how

  To name the bigger light, and how the less,

  That burn by day and night: and then I loved thee

  And show'd thee all the qualities o' the isle,

  The fresh springs, brine-pits, barren place and fertile:

  Cursed be I that did so! All the charms

  Of Sycorax, toads, beetles, bats, light on you!

  For I am all the subjects that you have,

  Which first was mine own king: and here you sty me

In this hard rock, whiles you do keep from me

The rest o' the island.

- This might make us question Prospero's account somewhat. According to Caliban, Prospero treated him kindly when he most needed him—when he was dependent on Caliban to teach him how to survive on the island—but then Prospero seized the island from Caliban, made Caliban his slave, and now keeps him trapped on the worst parts of the land.

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This is a portrayal of Prospero, Miranda, and Caliban in *The Tempest*.

- Clearly, Shakespeare has written into the play this tension between the master and the slave, the conqueror and the conquered, the civilized and the savage. These were the great questions facing European philosophers such as Michel de Montaigne during this time, as the sense of the globe expanded. We can also understand the island as a kind of laboratory for what happens when different cultures are brought together.

- Ariel parallels Caliban in some ways. Prospero commands Ariel and will not give him what he most desires: his liberty. Recent

scholars have argued that Caliban represents a kind of rough field slave whereas Ariel is more a refined house servant. However, Ariel's meanings extend far beyond that of servant, as his actions and powers on the island attest.

- Ariel is the principal figure in the elaborate testing that goes on throughout the play: the test of Ferdinand's love for Miranda and the test of the court party and their requisite punishment and then forgiveness. Ariel is also the ultimate test for Prospero himself; he counsels Prospero toward mercy against his enemies.

- Prospero calls Ariel "spirit," emphasizing that Ariel is not human. Ariel replies, "Mine would, sir, were I human." At this moment, the difference between the two is the crucial thing: Prospero is human and Ariel is spirit, but it is the spiritual Ariel who urges mercy and the human Prospero who still desires vengeance.

- Shakespeare makes a profound comment here on the human condition, suggesting that our "natural" instinct is toward violence and revenge, but our higher faculty—our spiritual element—raises us to the nobler action of mercy. Prospero's response carefully indicates the quickening of his higher nature, his spiritual side of forgiveness.

- As many critics have noted, *The Tempest* is not exactly a Christian play, but it is a highly religious play with a spiritual element, even a spiritual argument, that is certainly consonant with a Christian structure. Grace is a key element of Ariel's character and gives the island another array of meanings—as a testing ground of humanity's very spiritual elements.

The Man and His Art

- Prospero's transformation from revenge to forgiveness almost seems like a description of Shakespeare's own trajectory—from the early, formulaic revenge tragedies to the awesome tragedies of vengeance, such as *Hamlet* and *King Lear*, and then concluding in these visions of reconciliation and harmony at the end of his writings.

- Although Shakespeare did work on *Henry VIII* (also known as *All Is True*) and *The Two Noble Kinsman* after *The Tempest*, these were almost certainly collaborative works written with John Fletcher. Thus, *The Tempest* is Shakespeare's final solo play, so it is extremely tempting to read it as his expression of his final vision—to see it as the climactic work, and the farewell play, of his career.

- This is all the more tempting because Prospero delivers three major speeches that really sound like Shakespeare himself speaking to the audience about his own art. This employs the biographical reading tool, or what we can simply call the man and his art. This tool works rather simply: We try to read the plays as if they were expressions of William Shakespeare's own life and ideas.

- Because we know very little about Shakespeare's own life, we really can't read his life into the plays. Most academic scholars of his work will also say that this is not a sound approach to Shakespeare's work. However, when those scholars teach Shakespeare—when they really start to speculate about how this man created these astonishing works of dramatic art—they almost always lapse into this domain.

- Immediately after Prospero provides the masque for Ferdinand and Miranda, Ariel reminds Prospero that Caliban is sneaking toward him, planning to cut his throat and reclaim the island. Ferdinand remarks on Prospero's rage, and the older man then turns to his new "son" and tells him that all is well and that the play is wrapping up. Think of this speech as coming from Prospero to Ferdinand—but also from Shakespeare to the reader.

  … Be cheerful, sir.

  Our revels now are ended. These our actors,

  As I foretold you, were all spirits and

  Are melted into air, into thin air:

And, like the baseless fabric of this vision,

The cloud-capp'd towers, the gorgeous palaces,

The solemn temples, the great globe itself,

Yea, all which it inherit, shall dissolve

And like this insubstantial pageant faded,

Leave not a rack behind. We are such stuff

As dreams are made on, and our little life

Is rounded with a sleep.

- Prospero is saying that the masque is now over, but he then expands into a much larger philosophical statement about what it means to act and to live. "Our revels now are ended"—the play, and indeed all of Shakespeare's plays, his career as a man of the theatre, is coming to a close. The actors were all spirits and have melted away, and all of the illusions are now gone: the towers, the palaces, the temples, even—and here we can't help but hear Shakespeare's own voice—"the great globe itself." Recall that Shakespeare's theater was called the Globe.

- Then comes the great comment on the theater itself and, ultimately, on life itself: "We are such stuff as dreams are made on, and our little life is rounded with a sleep." Life is a brief dream, and on either end is the sleep of death, the quiet of the grave. The wisdom is not unlike that of Hamlet at the end of his play.

- The second great speech—one of the most beautiful and poetic speeches in all of Shakespeare—also comes right after a crucial moment of forgiveness and mercy, when Prospero, schooled by Ariel, resolves to show mercy to his enemies. Prospero makes a startling announcement: that he is giving up his magic forever. He states: "But this rough magic / I here abjure," which is an interesting

word to use, implying a renunciation but also having the religious sense of recanting a heresy, as if there's something unorthodox or even sinful about what he's been doing.

- Certainly, this fits with Shakespeare's own art, which defies any creed, orthodoxy, or dogma that would define and contain it. Prospero concludes with a highly dramatic evocation of the end of his magic.

  I'll break my staff,

  Bury it certain fathoms in the earth,

  And deeper than did ever plummet sound

  I'll drown my book.

- We can imagine the "staff" as Shakespeare's own pen, and the "book" of Prospero's magic is ultimately the book of all of Shakespeare's plays, a magical book indeed. In this "final" speech, Shakespeare does explore the very limits of art—his own art and, indeed, any art—and looks beyond art to whatever he might see there.

- Prospero's final address to the audience occurs after the play's conclusion—almost as if Shakespeare couldn't quite bear to end the play and his own career. The final 260 or so lines are filled with moments of forgiveness, scenes of restoration, declarations of wonder, and testaments to future peace and harmony. After all of the loose ends are tied up, Prospero returns to the stage to deliver the epilogue.

- We can read the words of the epilogue as simultaneously Prospero's farewell at the end of the play and also as Shakespeare's farewell at the end of his remarkable career. Prospero begins: "Now my charms are all o'erthrown, / And what strength I have's mine own, / Which is most faint." This is a magician shorn of his magic, an artist bidding farewell to his art. Then, he turns to his audience, who

have been his companions since the whole story began, and he asks them for the release for which he longs.

> Let me not,
>
> Since I have my dukedom got
>
> And pardon'd the deceiver, dwell
>
> In this bare island by your spell;
>
> But release me from my bands
>
> With the help of your good hands.

- Like Ariel, Prospero desires freedom, and it's hard not to hear Shakespeare's own voice at work here, asking to be released from the public life of the stage and the rigors of his art. His final words reveal the absence of his art now and an ending of despair unless he is aided by the prayers that lead toward mercy—the very keynote of this entire play.

> Now I want
>
> Spirits to enforce, art to enchant,
>
> And my ending is despair,
>
> Unless I be relieved by prayer,
>
> Which pierces so that it assaults
>
> Mercy itself and frees all faults.

- In a final turn to the audience, comparing their own spiritual state to his, he begs, "As you from crimes would pardoned be, / Let your indulgence set me free." It's a highly moving moment,

viewed from this biographical perspective, suggesting an artist who now asks his audience to release him—as they would want to be released from their own wrongdoing. Shakespeare takes his final bow and says goodnight.

Tools

place and person: In particular, look at the environment that a character is in and how he or she interacts with it to understand more about the character. Watch how this helps you understand Ariel, Caliban, and Prospero and their magic island. This also applies to Portia in Belmont in *The Merchant of Venice* or Hamlet in his dark castle.

the man and his art: How can readers use Shakespeare's biography to understand his plays? Based on what little is known of Shakespeare's life, what can this tell readers about his plays and his vision?

Suggested Reading

Felperin, *Shakespearean Romance*.

Gurr, *Will in the World*.

Jardine, *Still Harping on Daughters*.

Questions to Consider

1. Think of other Shakespeare characters and the scenes in which you imagine them. Reread one or two particularly good examples of a character and a scene—for example, King Lear on the storm-tossed heath or Desdemona in her bedchamber—and try to see what Shakespeare does to link the character with the scene. How does he achieve this link?

2. Read through Prospero's closing speech, "Now my charms are all o'erthrown." In what ways can we imagine this as a speech delivered by Shakespeare to his audience? Contrarily, how can we read it differently? What might it mean if we exclude the man and his work tool and try to read this as having nothing to do with Shakespeare's personal life?

The Tools for a Lifetime of Shakespeare
Lecture 24

Throughout this course, you have examined some of Shakespeare's greatest plays and developed a list of the most important tools for grasping a Shakespeare play. You should now be confident that if you pick up any Shakespeare play and read it for just a few moments, you will see all sorts of deeper meanings, be able to comment on the structures and devices that are at work, and understand with surprising speed what is going on in the play—not just the surface happenings, but also the more specific, deep, and complex meanings that make the play a masterpiece of world literature.

Much Ado about Nothing

- *Much Ado about Nothing* is one of Shakespeare's comedies and was written probably around 1598. A comedy written during the period after *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and just before the great tragedies should be a pretty accomplished comedy, comparable to *Twelfth Night* and *As You Like It*.

- Armed with this information, we can surmise that this play will be about the block to young love, and it will surely show the resolution of that block in a three-part structure: block, escape, return.

- The first scene starts with Leonato, the governor of Messina, with his daughter Hero and his niece Beatrice. They are hearing a report that the young lords of the city are returning from a victory in battle and that one of them, Claudius, has particularly borne himself well in the fight. Using our altar or tomb tool, we see that this will not be a tragic story because the deeds of warfare are finished—and now the boys are coming home—meaning that this will indeed be a comedy, dealing with love and courtship.

- The young dons then appear onstage, and as soon as Benedick speaks—his first lines are all jokes and puns—Beatrice picks him

out as the butt of her own humor. They proceed to exchange witty barbs at one another for the next 25 lines, mainly consisting of how much they don't want to love anybody. They clearly like each other very much but can't find a way to express or confess that love.

- As we search for the block to the young love of Beatrice and Benedick, which we know a comedy must feature, we see that it does not come from a father figure or a person of law or authority; rather, it comes from within the young lovers themselves—their own pride keeps them from confessing their mutual love.

- Because we know that a test must occur in a comedy, we might already suspect that the testing that love requires in this play will be a test of that pride and how much they are unwilling to take the chance of telling each other about their love. Indeed, that's how this will play out.

- At the same time, there's another love plot at work between Hero and Claudio, and this one follows a more conventional comic path: They love each other and her father okays the match, but the play's villain, Don John, plots to poison their love by slandering Hero's reputation.

- In this case, the comic double plot is not a high and low plot because each deals with the courtly figures; rather, it's parallel love plots, with different blocks and tests, and they combine to provide an unusually rich investigation of love. Recall that the closer comedy approaches tragedy, the more successful it is as comedy—that's how these two plots function.

Julius Caesar

- In the first act of *Julius Caesar*, we get the layout for a great political tragedy—one that looks a lot like *Macbeth*. We see a great conqueror and ruler, Julius Caesar, who is nearly worshiped by the multitudes of Rome, but his senators fear that he is becoming too great, that pride and lust for power will propel him to become a king and a tyrant.

- We are reminded of the foul and fair tool from *Macbeth* when a conspiracy arises, even drawing in those Caesar most trusts, such as the honorable Brutus. In the second act, the conspirators gather more into their fold, and Brutus is forced to choose which side he will favor in the conflict.

- The crucial tragedy tool of fate versus free will is clearly central to this play. The soothsayer famously warns Caesar, "Beware the ides of March," but Caesar ignores this prophecy, as if fate has conspired to doom him. The arc of a character's development tool helps us see what is happening in this play so far: Caesar's arc has completed itself, and he is now in decline; Brutus's arc is on the rise, as he becomes for a time the central figure in the play; and soon Antony's arc will appear, and by the play's end, he will be in the ascendant and Brutus will have fallen.

- We know that the third act is the central and pivotal moment in any Shakespeare play, and its first scene is spectacular: Caesar processes to the senate and then is set upon by all the conspirators, who plunge their daggers into him. It's one of the more famous scenes in all of Shakespeare, and when he sees the trusted Brutus among the assassins, Caesar knows his star has indeed fallen: "Et tu, Brute?" he famously asks. "Then fall, Caesar."

- To understand what is happening here, we must always be ready to employ the appearance versus reality tool. Brutus, of course, appears to be loyal, but in fact, his true reality is that he betrays Caesar—because Caesar is a tyrant. However, Caesar has not actually become tyrannical; in fact, earlier in the play, when Antony three times presents Caesar with a crown, Caesar dramatically refuses that crown.

- Caesar is killed because, although he appears to be nontyrannical, the conspirators are convinced that his inner reality is that of a tyrant. The problem is that we as viewers or readers are left unsure. Shakespeare masterfully leaves this crucial detail ambiguous, so we must decide just as Brutus must decide, never knowing if the

decision is correct. This is one of the play's great themes: that our political lives, like our personal lives, are always uncertain, elusive, finally unknown.

- In the next scene of Act III, Brutus gives his speech to the people, explaining why the conspirators felt it necessary to kill Caesar. Brutus's speech is rational, matter of fact, and straightforward. He then allows Antony to speak, to show that the assassins are not unfair, thinking that this will make them appear even better to the masses. However, Brutus does not understand something that we understand quite well: the power and importance of stagecraft, of the role of theater in politics and politics in theater.

- Antony surely understands that the great politician is also a great actor, one who can manipulate a crowd the same way a great actor can command an audience. In his speech, Antony masterfully moves from careful support of Brutus and the others, to a hint that something might be wrong with what they did, to a careful examination of Caesar's ambition, and ultimately to convincing the crowd that they themselves want to reject Brutus's argument and overthrow the conspiracy.

- He opens by assuring the crowd, "I come to bury Caesar, not to praise him"—this will be no speech of praise, but just an epitaph to a man's life. This takes the crowd off the defensive. He then repeats the principal accusation against Caesar—that "Caesar was ambitious"—and attributes it to Brutus, with the reminder that "Brutus is an honorable man." This is the premise and conclusion: Brutus is honorable; Brutus says that Caesar was ambitious; therefore, Caesar must die.

- Remove the first premise, "Brutus is honorable," and the rest falls. This is Antony's strategy—but the removal must come about from the crowd, not from his own counteraccusation. Thus, he keeps repeating that Brutus, and indeed all the conspirators, are honorable men, but at the same time, he amasses the counterevidence to Caesar's apparent ambition.

- Antony reminds the crowd that Caesar brought wealth to the city, cried over the fate of the poor, and refused the crown three times—is this ambition? As the crowd thinks to itself that it's not ambition, Antony then reminds them that Brutus says that it is ambition, leaving them to reject the major premise: that Brutus is an honorable man. Once that falls, the rest falls, too.

- Antony then shifts the tone of the speech from the public to the personal. He reminds the crowd that they once loved Caesar, and asks them to mourn for him, thereby opening their emotional responses to this grim deed. Antony then walks down off the platform and stands in the very midst of the crowd, with Caesar's bloody corpse in front of him—a masterpiece of staged production—and shows the crowd where each dagger pierced Caesar.

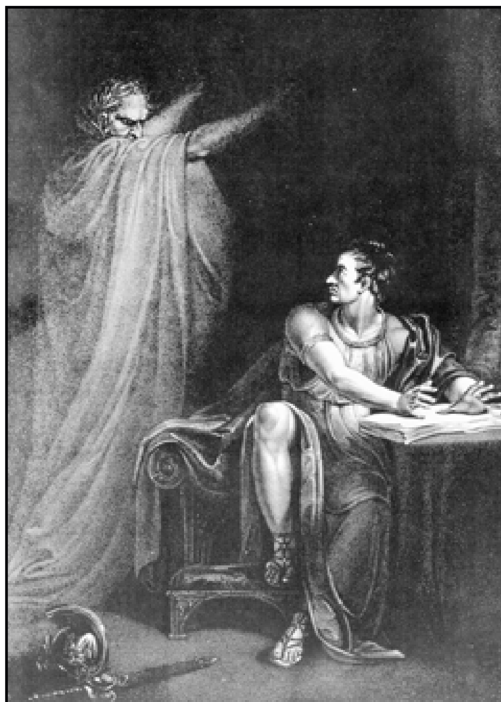
- Now, the crowd wants Brutus's blood; he was a traitor, and not just a traitor to Rome, but a traitor to his dearest friend. Antony makes the situation so personal and intimate, as all revenge tragedies ultimately are. This is another version of the play within the play, with Antony posing as actor, director, and playwright and the crowd as his unwitting audience.

- In his final move, Antony makes the most effective of all politician's gestures, saying that he's not making a political speech or trying to convince the crowd of anything—he's just speaking from his heart, a plain man addressing other plain men. The crowd now feels that it is their own conclusion—that Brutus is, as they soon shout, a traitor; that the conspirators are "villians, murderers;" and that Antony is now their guiding spirit.

As You Like It

- *As You Like It* is regarded by many to be Shakespeare's greatest comedy. As expected, the block to young love is in this comedy: Rosalind is the heroine, and her father, the duke, has been usurped and banished by his brother. Rosalind lives with her cousin, Celia, but Celia's father (the usurping duke) exiles Rosalind from the dukedom because everyone loves her so much.

- The power of law and authority is the block at the start, the more so because Rosalind has fallen in love, at first sight, with young Orlando, whom the usurping duke also banishes because Orlando's father was sympathetic to the first duke.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In this image, the ghost of Caesar taunts Brutus about his imminent defeat.

- Celia, unwilling to be parted from Rosalind, determines to go into exile with her—the same-sex friendship and friends to lovers tool work here. To avoid attack on the road, the two girls decide to dress as men, which brings the cross-dressing motif into play.

- Then, as expected, the young lovers go into the green world; in this case, they go into the Forest of Arden, which seems to draw all the play's characters into it like a lodestar. In fact, the banished duke lives there with his band of followers in apparent bliss.

- Often, viewers or readers are puzzled that this duke—who, like Prospero, has lost everything because of an evil brother—is actually happier in the forest without any of the advantages of civilization.

Our tools help us see why this is so: The court is the realm of mere appearance, of corruption and seeming, of fair is foul and foul is fair, of politics as theater, but the forest is the place of true reality, where there is no flattery, but a greater meaning.

- As the lovers come into this forest, they are, as we would predict, tested in various ways, until by the end they are able to confess their love, throw off their disguises, and unite in harmony and marriage. Every rivalry between brothers is reconciled, and the true duke has the final words, stating as the marriage festival commences, "Proceed, proceed. We'll so begin these rites / As we do trust they'll end, in true delights."

- The "rites" referred to are not merely the wedding ceremony; it's the entire ritual of a life lived in harmony with the principal of regeneration and amity. This is what comedy finally aims at, in the largest sense. The comic impulse is a much larger, more inclusive pattern than that of tragedy, finally harmonizing with the patterns of the seasons, the cycles of nature, and the great religious systems.

- The rites referred to at the end of *As You Like It* are not just the marriage rites; they are also the rites of the theater, a place of ritual and meaning not unlike a church. Shakespeare provides these rites for us and hopes that, as they began, so shall they end, in true delight.

Suggested Reading

Barber, *Shakespeare's Festive Comedy*.

Bradley, *Shakespearean Tragedy*.

Frye, *Fools of Time*.

Questions to Consider

1. What tool do you think is the most powerful for understanding a Shakespeare play? Choose two or three of the tools that it seems we constantly return to and ask yourself why these tools in particular seem to really get at the heart of these plays. What might this tell us about Shakespeare?

2. At the end of this lecture, we compare the Shakespeare play to rituals, or "rites," that provide patterns of satisfying meaning for us. What might this mean? How can we conceive of Shakespeare's work as a ritual? Does it function in our culture in this way?

Timeline

(Note: Dates of Shakespeare's plays reflect the common scholarly consensus; dates given reflect the year of first performance, with likely year(s) of composition in parentheses.)

1558 .... Elizabeth becomes Queen.

1564 .... William Shakespeare born in Stratford-upon-Avon.

1576 .... The Theatre, London's first public playhouse, is built by James Burbage.

1582 .... William Shakespeare marries Anne Hathaway.

1583 .... Shakespeare's daughter, Susanna, is born.

1585 .... Shakespeare's twin son and daughter, Hamnet and Judith, are born.

1585–1592 .... The so-called lost years, during which Shakespeare's activities and whereabouts are not known. The leading theory suggests that he was a schoolmaster in a country home in Lancashire.

1587 .... Thomas Kyd writes *The Spanish Tragedy*.

The Rose Theatre is built in London by Philip Henslowe.

1588 .... England defeats the Spanish Armada.

1589...Christopher Marlowe writes *The Jew of Malta*.

1591...*Henry VI, Part 2*.

Henry VI, Part 3.

1592...*Henry VI, Part 1*.

Richard III (1592–1593).

Venus and Adonis (1592–1593).

The Comedy of Errors (1592–1594).

1593...*The Rape of Lucrece* (1593–1594).

Titus Andronicus.

The Taming of the Shrew.

1594...*The Two Gentlemen of Verona*.

Love's Labour's Lost (1594–1595).

1595...*Richard II*.

Romeo and Juliet.

A Midsummer Night's Dream (1594–1596).

1596...*King John*.

The Merchant of Venice (1596–1597).

Henry IV, Part 1 (1596–1597).

1597 .... *The Merry Wives of Windsor* (1597–1598).

1598 .... *Henry IV, Part 2* (1597–1598).

Much Ado about Nothing.

The Theatre is demolished and its timbers taken across the Thames to build the Globe Theatre.

1599 .... *Henry V* (1598–1599).

Julius Caesar.

As You Like It (1599–1600).

1600 .... *Hamlet* (1600–1601).

1601 .... The Essex Rebellion, put down by Elizabeth's forces.

Twelfth Night.

Death of John Shakespeare, father of the playwright.

1602 .... *Troilus and Cressida*.

1603 .... Death of Queen Elizabeth.

James VI of Scotland declared James I King of England.

1604 .... *Measure for Measure* (1603–1604).

Othello (1603–1604).

1605 .... *All's Well That Ends Well* (1604–1605).

King Lear (1604–1605).

The Gunpowder Plot, an effort to assassinate James and the Parliament, is foiled.

1606 .... *Macbeth*.

Antony and Cleopatra.

The Plymouth and London companies are chartered to colonize Virginia in the New World.

1607 .... John Smith establishes settlement in Jamestown, Virginia.

Timon of Athens (1607–1608).
Pericles (1607–1608).

Susanna, Shakespeare's daughter, marries John Hall in Stratford.

1608 .... *Coriolanus*.

Death of Mary Shakespeare, formerly Mary Arden, Shakespeare's mother.

Birth of Shakespeare's granddaughter Elizabeth.

Shakespeare's company, the King's Men, begin private indoor performances at the Blackfriars Theatre.

1609.. Shakespeare's sonnets are published.

Cymbeline (1609–1610).

1610.. *The Winter's Tale*.

1611.. The King James Bible is published.

The Tempest.

1612.. Shakespeare writes *Cardenio*, in collaboration with John Fletcher.

1613.. *All Is True*, also known as *Henry VIII*, perhaps written in collaboration with John Fletcher.

A fire breaks out during a performance of *Henry VIII*, and the Globe Theatre burns down.

The Two Noble Kinsmen, probably written in collaboration with John Fletcher.

1614.. The Globe is rebuilt on its original foundations.

1616.. Shakespeare's daughter Judith marries Thomas Quiney.

Shakespeare makes his last will and dies on April 23.

1623.. The "First Folio," a collection of most of Shakespeare's plays, is published by his friends and former theatre colleagues.

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plays, arguing that our conception of the human character originates in Shakespeare. Controversial, but filled with brilliant insights.

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Additional Resources

American Shakespeare Center. Located in Staunton, Virginia, with the recreation of the Blackfriars Stage. In addition to all of the information on their superb Shakespeare plays, performed with original staging conditions, this site has a host of educator resources. The podcasts of Ralph Cohen's lectures and discussions of the plays with the cast are marvelous. http://www.americanshakespearecenter.com.

The Complete Works of William Shakespeare. All available online in electronic editions through the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. http://shakespeare.mit.edu/.

Folger Shakespeare Library. Located in Washington, DC. In addition to several fine links that are helpful for grasping Shakespeare (including "Discover Shakespeare" and "Teach and Learn"), this site has information on performances of Shakespeare at the Folger and also helpful podcasts on Shakespeare-related issues. http://www.folger.edu/.

In Search of Shakespeare. DVD/video, PBS 2004. Starring Ray Fearon, Gerald Kyd, Fred Melamed, Robert Whitelock, and Michael Wood. Narrated by Michael Wood. This is a delightful and lively investigation into Shakespeare's life—trying to sort out history and mystery, that is set up almost like a detective story. It's quite factual, but it does play up the tantalizing enigmas. Mixing travel sequences, interviews with leading scholars, and created scenes, it's an entertaining and intriguing look at Shakespeare's life.

Mr. William Shakespeare on the Internet. This is basically a guide to all of the best internet resources that exist for Shakespeare. It also houses loads of scholarly material, introductions, historical context tools, and much more. http://shakespeare.palomar.edu/.

Open Source Shakespeare: An Experiment in Literary Technology. The big advantage of this resource is that you can search all of the plays by keyword, by speaker, by term or concept, and much more. You can also determine how many lines a speaker has in a play, how many lines are in an entire play, and more. http://www.opensourceshakespeare.org/.

Royal Shakespeare Company. Located in Stratford-upon-Avon and London. The "Education" section of this site has a robust range of tools to help you understand and learn more about Shakespeare. http://www.rsc.org.uk/.

Shakespeare Birthplace Trust. Owns and operates the Shakespeare properties in Stratford-upon-Avon as well as the Shakespeare Centre for research on Shakespeare. The section titled "Visit the Houses" has web tours of the Shakespeare properties, and the section titled "Explore Shakespeare" has

many resources for understanding Shakespeare's life, performance, and works. http://www.shakespeare.org.uk/home.html.

Shakespeare Resource Center. Houses a wide range of tools and sites that are helpful for understanding more about Shakespeare. Particularly useful links include "The Globe Theatre" and a fine basic section on Shakespeare's language and scansion. http://www.bardweb.net/study.html.