'MAN DEMIREL UNIVERSITY
FACULTY OF PHILOLOGY
ELL DEPARTMENT

SHAKESPEAREAN

LITERATURE

(Collected Lecture Notes)

by

MURAT KAPLAN

ALMATY-2000

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"Introduction"

Out, out, brief candle!
Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player,
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage,
And then is heard no more. It is a tale
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
Signifying nothing.

Excerpt from *Macbeth*

WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE

1564-1616

William Shakespeare is an English playwright and poet whose body of works is considered the greatest in English literature. His plays, many of which were performed at the Globe Theatre in London, include historical works, such as *Richard II,* comedies, including *Much Ado about Nothing* and *As You Like It,* and tragedies, such as *Hamlet, Othello,* and *King Lear*. He also composed 154 sonnets. The earliest collected edition of his plays, the First Folio, contained 36 plays and was published posthumously (1623).

For more than 350 years, William Shakespeare has been the world's most popular playwright. On the stage, in the movies, and on television his plays are watched by vast audiences. People read his plays again and again for pleasure. Students reading his plays for the first time are delighted.

Shakespeare's continued popularity is due to many things: His plays are filled with action, his characters are believable, and his language is thrilling to hear or read. Underlying all this is Shakespeare's deep humanity. He was a profound student of people and he understood them. He had a great tolerance, sympathy, and love for all people, good or evil.

While watching a Shakespearean tragedy, the audience is moved and shaken. After the show the spectators are calm, washed clean of pity and terror.

A Shakespearean comedy is full of fun. The characters are lively; the dialogue is witty. In the end young lovers are wed; old

babblers are silenced; wise men are content. The comedies are joyous and romantic.

AUTOBIOGRAPHY

His Boyhood in Stratford-upon-Avon

William Shakespeare was born in Stratford-upon-Avon, England, in 1564. This was the sixth year of the reign of Queen Elizabeth I. He was christened on April 26 of that year. The day of his birth is *unknown*. It has long been celebrated on April 23, the feast of St. George.

He was the third child and oldest son of John and Mary Arden Shakespeare. Two sisters, Joan and Margaret, died before he was born. The other children were Gilbert, a second Joan, Anne, Richard, and Edmund. Only the second Joan outlived William.

Shakespeare's father was a tanner and glove maker. He was an alderman of Stratford for years. He also served a term as high bailiff, or mayor. Toward the end of his life John Shakespeare lost most of his money. When he died in 1601, he left William only a little real estate. Not much is known about Mary Shakespeare, except that she came from a wealthier family than her husband.

Stratford-upon-Avon is in Warwickshire, called the heart of England. In Shakespeare's day it was well farmed and heavily wooded. The town itself was prosperous and progressive.

The town was proud of its grammar school. Young Shakespeare went to it, although when or for how long is not known. He may have been a pupil there between his 7th and 13th years. His studies must have been mainly in Latin. The schooling was probably good. All four schoolmasters at the school during Shakespeare's boyhood were graduates of Oxford University.

Nothing definite is known about his boyhood. From the content of his plays, he must have learned early about the woods and fields, about birds, insects, and small animals, about trades and outdoor sports, and about the country people he later portrayed with such good humor. Then and later he must have picked up an amazing stock of facts about hunting, hawking, fishing, dances, music, and other arts and sports. Among other subjects, he also must have learned about alchemy, astrology, folklore, medicine, and law. As good writers do, he must have collected information both from books and from daily observation of the world around him.

Marriage and Life in London

In 1582, when he was 18, he married Anne Hathaway. She was from Shottery, a village a mile (1.6 kilometers) from Stratford. Anne was seven or eight years older than Shakespeare. From this difference in their ages, a story arose that they were unhappy together. Their first daughter, Susanna, was born in 1583. In 1585 a twin boy and girl, Hamnet and Judith, were born.

What Shakespeare did between 1583 and 1592 is not known. Various stories are told. He may have taught school, worked in a lawyer's office, served on a rich man's estate, or traveled with a company of actors. One famous story says that about 1584 he and some friends were caught poaching on the estate of Sir Thomas Lucy of Carlecote, near Warwick, and were forced to leave town. A less likely story is that he was in London in 1588. There he was supposed to have held horses for theater patrons and later to have worked in the theaters as a page.

By 1592, however, Shakespeare was definitely in London and was already recognized as an actor and playwright. He was then 28 years old. In that year Robert Greene, a playwright, accused him of borrowing from the plays of others.

Between 1592 and 1594, plague kept the London theaters closed most of the time. During these years Shakespeare wrote his earliest sonnets and two long narrative poems, 'Venus and Adonis' and 'The Rape of Lucrece'. Both were printed by Richard Field, a boyhood friend from Stratford. They were well received and helped establish him as a poet.

Shakespeare Prospers

Until 1598 Shakespeare's theater work was confined to a district northeast of London. This was outside the city walls, in the parish of Shoreditch. Located there were two playhouses, the Theatre and the Curtain. Both were managed by James Burbage, whose son Richard Burbage was Shakespeare's friend and the greatest tragic actor of his day.

Up to 1596 Shakespeare lived near these theaters in Bishopsgate, where the North Road entered the city. Sometime between 1596 and 1599, he moved across the Thames River to a district called Bankside. There, two theaters, the Rose and the Swan, had been built by Philip Henslowe. He was James Burbage's chief competitor in London as a theater manager. The Burbages also moved to this district in 1598 and built the famous Globe Theatre. Its sign showed Atlas supporting the world. Shakespeare

was associated with the Globe Theatre for the rest of his active life. He owned shares in it, which brought him much money.

Meanwhile, in 1597, Shakespeare had bought New Place, the largest house in Stratford. During the next three years he bought other property in Stratford and in London. The year before, his father, probably at Shakespeare's suggestion, applied for and was granted a coat of arms. It bore the motto *Non sanz droict*--Not without right. From this time on, Shakespeare could write "Gentleman" after his name. This meant much to him, for in his day actors were classed legally with criminals and vagrants.

Shakespeare's name first appeared on the title pages of his printed plays in 1598. In the same year Francis Meres, in 'Palladis Tamia: Wit's Treasury', praised him as a poet and dramatist. Meres's comments on 12 of Shakespeare's plays showed that Shakespeare's genius was recognized in his own time.

Honored As Actor and Playwright

Queen Elizabeth I died in 1603. King James I followed her to the throne. Shakespeare's theatrical company was taken under the king's patronage and called the King's Company. Shakespeare and the other actors were made officers of the royal household. The theatrical company was the most successful of its time. Before it was the King's Company, it had been known as the Earl of Derby's and the Lord Chamberlain's. In 1608 the company acquired the Blackfriars Theatre. This was a smaller and more aristocratic theater than the Globe. Thereafter the company alternated between the two playhouses.

Plays by Shakespeare were also performed at the royal court and in the castles of the nobles. After 1603 Shakespeare probably acted little, although he was still a good actor. His favorite roles seem to have been old Adam in 'As You Like It' and the Ghost in 'Hamlet'. In 1607, when he was 43, he may have suffered a serious physical breakdown. In the same year his older daughter Susanna married John Hall, a doctor. The next year Shakespeare's first grandchild, Elizabeth, was born. Also in 1607 his brother Edmund, also a London actor, died at the age of 27.

The Mermaid Tavern Group

About this time Shakespeare became one of the group of now-famous writers who gathered at the Mermaid Tavern located

on Bread Street in Cheapside. The Friday Street Club (also called the Mermaid Club) was formed by Sir Walter Raleigh. Ben Jonson was its leading spirit (*see* Jonson). Shakespeare was a popular member. He was admired for his talent and loved for his kindliness.

Thomas Fuller, writing about 50 years later, gave an amusing account of the conversational duels between Shakespeare and Jonson: "Many were the wit-combats betwixt him and Ben Jonson; which two I behold like a Spanish great galleon and an English man-of-war; Master Jonson (like the former) was built far higher in learning; solid, but slow, in his performances. Shakespeare, with the English man-of-war, lesser in bulk, but lighter in sailing, could turn with all tides, tack about, and take advantage of all winds, by the quickness of his wit and invention."

Jonson sometimes criticized Shakespeare harshly. Nevertheless he later wrote a eulogy of Shakespeare that is remarkable for its feeling and acuteness. In it he said:

> *Leave thee alone, for the comparison Of all that insolent Greece or haughty Rome Sent forth, or since did from their ashes come. Triumph, my Britain, thou hast one to show To whom all scenes of Europe homage owe. He was not of an age, but for all time! . . . . . Sweet Swan of Avon! what a sight it were To see thee in our waters yet appear, And make those flights upon the banks of Thames, That so did take Eliza, and our James!*

Death and Burial at Stratford

Shakespeare retired from his theater work in 1610 and returned to Stratford. In 1613 the Globe Theatre burned. He lost much money in it, but he was still wealthy. He shared in the building of the new Globe.

On April 23, 1616, Shakespeare died at the age of 52. This date is according to the Old Style, or Julian, calendar of his time. The New Style, or Gregorian, calendar date is May 3, 1616. He was buried in the chancel of the Church of the Holy Trinity in Stratford.

Did Shakespeare Really Write the Plays?

The outward events of Shakespeare's life are ordinary. He was hard working, sober, and middle-class in his ways. He steadily gathered wealth and took good care of his family. Many people have found it impossible to believe that such a man could have written the plays. They feel that he could not have known such heights and

depths of passion. They believe that the people around Shakespeare expressed little realization of his greatness. Some say that a man of his little schooling could not have learned about the professions, the aristocratic sports of hawking and hunting, the speech and manners of the upper classes.

Since the 1800s there has been a steady effort to prove that Shakespeare did not write the plays or that others did. For a long time the leading candidate was Sir Francis Bacon. Books on the Shakespeare-Bacon argument would fill a library. After Bacon became less popular, the Earl of Oxford and then other men were suggested as the authors. Nearly every famous Elizabethan was named. The most recent has been Christopher Marlowe. Some people even claim that "Shakespeare" is an assumed name for a whole group of poets and playwrights.

However, some men around Shakespeare--for example, Meres in 1598 and Jonson in 1623--did recognize his worth as a man and as a writer. To argue that an obscure Stratford boy could not have become the Shakespeare of literature is to ignore the mystery of genius. His knowledge is of the kind that could not be learned in school. It is the kind that only a genius could learn, by applying a keen intelligence to everyday life. Some great writers have had even less schooling than Shakespeare.

The idea that Shakespeare's plays and poems were written by another is an interesting possibility. Although it was suggested as far back as the middle of the 19th century that Bacon was the author, this belief has diminished.

Secrets of the Sonnets

People want to know more about Shakespeare's private life. They have searched his plays for hints, with little result. However, he left 154 sonnets, published, probably against his wishes, in 1609. Many readers believe that these reveal an important part of his life.

The sonnets have attracted more attention than anything else he wrote except *Hamlet*. As poetry, they are superb. However, people are more interested in them because they may tell a true story. They story is hinted at, rather than told. It concerns Shakespeare's feelings toward a young nobleman who wronged him by stealing the affections of a sweetheart and by transferring his friendship to another poet. In the end the young nobleman is forgiven.

Whether this really happened or was only invented makes up the "problem of the sonnets." People have tried to find out who the "friend," the "dark lady," and the "rival poet" actually were. One theory is that the friend was William Herbert, earl of Pembroke. Another is that he was Henry Wriothesley, earl of Southampton. The best opinion is that the sonnets are so full of detailed passion they probably refer to some actual happening. However, this cannot be proved.

Shakespeare's other nondramatic poems include 'Venus and Adonis' and 'The Rape of Lucrece'. Both are full of gorgeous imagery and pagan spirit and very obviously the work of a young man. There are also about 60 songs scattered throughout the plays. The songs show the finest Elizabethan qualities in their originality, melodies, and rhythms.

Shakespeare As an Elizabethan

The English Renaissance reached its peak in the reign of Queen Elizabeth I (1558-1603). In this period England was emerging from the Middle Ages. It changed from an absorbing interest in heaven and an afterlife to an ardent wonder about this world and man's earthly existence. It was an age when men were curious, active, and brave. They boldly explored the past, the Earth, and themselves.

At its best the period showed an intellectual and physical daring. It produced such adventurers as Walter Raleigh and Francis Drake. It had such statesmen as Lord Burghley, and such scholar-gentlemen as Philip Sidney. Philosophers such as Francis Bacon, scientists such as William Gilbert, and poets such as William Shakespeare belonged to this period.

At its worst the age was extravagant and brutal. Its extravagance showed in the general population's dress, manners, and speech, which were elaborate and ornate. The language was growing fast. It was suited to magnificent poetry. Shakespeare's vocabulary was large, but its size is less remarkable than its expressiveness. English speech reached its peak of strength between 1600 and 1610. Then the King James Version of the Bible was being made, Bacon was writing his famous 'Essays', and Shakespeare was composing his great tragedies.

The people of the English middle class were stern, moral, and independent. London's citizens held fast to their rights. They did not hesitate to defy the royal court if it became too arrogant. Nobles, citizens, and common people all loved the stage, its

pageantry and poetry. Wealthy people encouraged and supported the actors. They paid for the processions, masques, and tournaments, which the public loved to watch. Men of the royal court competed with one another in dress, entertainment, and flattery of the queen.

Elizabeth I Symbolizes the Age

The queen herself was the symbol of the glory of England. To her people Elizabeth I stood for beauty and greatness. Historians do not agree on her greatness or her flaws, but to her subjects, she was Gloriana, as Edmund Spenser portrayed her in 'The Faerie Queen'.

During her reign the country grew in wealth and power, despite plagues and other calamities. The queen's freedom was no greater than that of all Englishwomen. Like her, they talked, joked, and even cursed like men. (Women do exactly this in Shakespeare's comedies.)

Moralists felt it necessary to preach against the lowering of morals, the oppression of the poor, and the greediness of the nobles. England, however, was still Merrie England. It had the best inns and the richest and most varied foods in Europe. Its people were the best clothed and housed.

Drama in the Elizabethan Age

The defeat of the Spanish Armada raised English spirits high. Sober men were convinced that England was great. Young people believed that one Englishman could beat six Spaniards. During the years 1590-1600 the nation became intensely interested in its past. Playwrights catered to this patriotism by writing chronicles, or history plays. These were great sprawling dramas telling the stories of England's kings. Shakespeare wrote ten of them. The same interest spread to the history of other nations of Europe.

When Shakespeare came to London he found the theater alive and strong. People enjoyed going to the theater. Plays were shrewdly written for the public's taste. The theater was as popular then as movies and television are now. The first public theater had been opened in 1576. A group of talented men, the University Wits, had already developed new types of plays out of old forms and had learned what the public wanted.

Playwrights of the time were practical men, bent on making a living. They may have been well educated, but they were

more eager to fill the theaters than to please the critics. The result was that almost from the start the drama was a popular art. It was not, as in France, a learned and classical art.

Shakespeare did not have any fancy notions. He listened to what the public said, and he was quick to detect changes in popular taste. He wrote his plays to be acted, not read. He took whatever forms were attracting attention and made them better. To save time he borrowed plots and put down other men's thoughts in his own words.

A dramatist in those days was also likely to be an actor and producer. He joined a company and became its playwright. He sold his manuscripts to it and kept no personal rights in them. Revising old plays and working with another writer on new ones were common. Such methods saved time. The demand for plays was great and could never be fully met.

No manuscripts of Shakespeare--with the possible exception of a scene from 'Sir Thomas More'--and very few manuscripts of other dramatists of the period have survived. The dramas were written to be played, not printed, and were hardly considered literature at all.

A company of players was a cooperative group that shared the profits. Its members had no individual legal or political rights. Instead the company looked for a patron among the rich nobles. Members became his "servants," or "men," and received his protection. A company was usually made up of eight or ten men who took the main parts. Other actors were hired as needed. Boys took the female parts, for women did not appear on the stage.

Public theaters were usually round, wooden buildings with three galleries of seats. The pit, or main floor, had no roof. There were no seats in the pit, and its occupants were called "groundlings" because they stood on the ground. Admission to the pit was usually a penny. The galleries, boxes, and stage cost more. Plays were put on in the afternoon. Private theaters were of the same general design, except that they were square and entirely roofed.

Shakespeare wrote most of his plays for the Globe Theatre. Historical research indicates that its main stage was about 40 feet (12 meters) wide and that it projected 27 feet (8 meters) into the pit and had a roof of its own. Behind it was a recessed inner stage, which could be hidden by curtains. Above the inner stage was a second inner stage, with curtains and a balcony. Above this was a music room. Its front could be used for dramatic action. On top of the stage roof were hoists for raising and lowering actors and

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properties. On performance days a flag was flown from a turret above the hoists.

The Elizabethans may have used no scenery, but their stage was not entirely bare. They used good-sized properties, heavy hangings, and elaborate furniture. Their costumes, usually copied from the fashionable clothes of the day, were rich. The outer stage was generally used for outdoor scenes and mass effects. The inner stage was used for indoor scenes and for cozy effects, as between lovers. The upper stage was used for scenes at windows or walls.

The Stage Influences Shakespeare's Methods

This stage had much to do with the form of Shakespeare's plays. Because the stage was open and free, it permitted quick changes and rapid action. As a result 'Antony and Cleopatra' has more than 40 changes of scene. The outer stage, projecting into the audience, encouraged speechmaking. This may be the reason for the long and impassioned speeches of the plays.

With no women actors, men made up as women seemed natural somehow. With no stage lighting and with the daytime sky above, the author had to write speeches about the time, season, and weather of the play. There are more than 40 such speeches in 'Macbeth'. The actors were close to the audience; the groundlings were close to the aristocrats. Shakespeare had to appeal to them all. He mixes horseplay with philosophy and coarseness with lovely poetry.

For this theater Shakespeare wrote at least 37 plays. The chief sources of his plots were Plutarch's 'Parallel Lives of Illustrious Men', Raphael Holinshed's 'Chronicles of England, Scotland, and Ireland', and some Italian *novelle,* or short tales. He borrowed a few plays from older dramas and from English stories. What he did with the sources is more important than the sources themselves. If his original gave him what he needed, he used it closely. If not, he changed it. These changes show his genius as a dramatist.

Shakespeare As a Dramatist

The facts about Shakespeare are interesting in themselves, but they have little to do with his place in literature. Shakespeare wrote his plays to give pleasure. It is possible to spoil that pleasure by giving too much attention to his life, his times, and the problem of figuring out what he actually wrote. He can be enjoyed in book form, in the theater, or on television without our knowing any of these things.

Some difficulties stand in the way of this enjoyment. Shakespeare wrote more than 350 years ago. The language he used is naturally somewhat different from the language of today. Besides, he wrote in verse. Verse permits a free use of words that may not be understood by some readers. His plays are often fanciful. This may not appeal to matter-of-fact people who are used to modern realism. For all these reasons, readers may find him difficult. The worst handicap to enjoyment is the notion that Shakespeare is a "classic," a writer to be approached with awe.

The way to escape this last difficulty is to remember that Shakespeare wrote his plays for everyday people and that many in the audience were uneducated. They looked upon him as a funny, exciting, and lovable entertainer, not as a great poet. People today should read him as the people in his day listened to him. The excitement and enjoyment of the plays will banish most of the difficulties.

Shakespeare's Plots and Characters

Shakespeare's knowledge of men and his poetic skill combined to make him the greatest of playwrights. The world has finally made up its mind about this greatness. Many people spend their lives studying Shakespeare.

His plots alone show that Shakespeare was a master playwright. He built his plays with care. He seldom wrote a speech that did not forward the action, develop a character, or help the imagination of the spectator. The plays should be read twice. The first reading should be a quick one, to get the story. The second, more leisurely, reading should bring out details. The language itself should be studied. It has great expressiveness and concentrated meaning. An edition with good explanatory notes is helpful.

Many of Shakespeare's plots are frankly farfetched. He belonged to an age, which was romantic and poetic. People still had the power to make believe. They did not go to the theater to see real life. They wanted to be carried away to other times and places or to a land of fancy. The imaginative reader today loves him for the same reason. There were really no such places as his Bohemia or Illyria or Forest of Arden, though the names were real. He has never been equaled in the invention of supernatural creatures--ghosts, witches, and fairies.

Yet Shakespeare's art is realistic in the sense that it is true to life. His plots, as in *King Lear, A Midsummer Night's Dream,* and

The Tempest, may seem fantastic. Actually, they are powerfully and eternally true.

Shakespeare's people are alive and three-dimensional. They live in the mind as warmly as close friends. His best portrayals are those of his great heroes. Yet even his minor characters are almost as good. For example, he created in his plays more than 20 young women, all about the same age, of the same station in life, and with the same social background. They are as different, however, as any 20 girls in real life. The same can be said of his old women, men of action, churchmen, kings, villains, dreamers, fools, and country people.

His Poetic Greatness

No other writer in the world is so quotable or so often quoted. He expressed deep thoughts and feeling in words of great beauty or power. In the technical skills of the poet--rhythm, sound, image, and metaphor--he remains the greatest of craftsmen. His range is immense. It extends from funny puns to lofty eloquence, from the speech of common men to the language of philosophers.

The meter of his plays is the unrhymed iambic pentameter called blank verse. This was first used in Italy. It was taken up by English poets in the reign of Henry VIII. The University Wits, especially Christopher Marlowe, developed it as a dramatic verse form. Shakespeare perfected it. With John Milton, he made it the greatest meter in English. Blank verse is an excellent form for poetic drama. It is just far enough removed from prose. Blank verse is not monotonous and forced, as rhymed verse sometimes is. It is more ordered, swift, and noble than prose. At the same time it is so flexible that it seems almost as natural as prose if it is well written.

Examples of His Poetry

To gain an impression of Shakespeare's power and variety, read such passages as Prospero's speech in *The Tempest*, Act IV, Scene I:

> *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.*

And then read Lorenzo's speech in the last act of *The Merchant of Venice*:

> *How sweet the moonlight sleeps upon this bank! Here will we sit and let the sounds of music Creep in our ears. Soft stillness and the night Become the touches of sweet harmony. Sit, Jessica. Look how the floor of heaven Is thick inlaid with patines of bright gold. There's not the smallest orb which thou behold'st But in his motion like an angel sings, Still quiring to the young-ey'd cherubims; Such harmony is in immortal souls; But whilst this muddy vesture of decay Doth grossly close it in, we cannot hear it.*

Then compare other great passages, such as Shylock's (in *The Merchant of Venice*) "Signior Antonio, many a time and oft"; Mercutio's (in *Romeo and Juliet*) "O, then, I see Queen Mab hath been with you"; Richard II's "No matter where; of comfort no man speak"; Hamlet's "How all occasions do inform against me"; Claudio's (in *Measure for Measure*) "Ay, but to die, and go we know not where"; Othello's "Soft you, a word or two before you go"; Jaques's (in *As You Like It*) "A fool, a fool! I met a fool i' the forest"; and Cleopatra's (in *Antony and Cleopatra*) "Give me my robe, put on my crown." Each speech could come naturally from the speaker and from no one else. Each is very moving. Each has great rhythmic flow and force. Yet each is in the same basic pattern.

Shakespeare's love of words sometimes leads him to rant and bombast, pun and quibble. In haste he sometimes writes nonsense. At times his minor characters talk with affectation or without taste. He can be coarse, and he sometimes shocks the reader by his lack of feeling. Yet most of his faults were natural to a writer of his time. This age was not ashamed of man's animal nature, and it did not doubt man's divinity.

How the Plays Came Down to Us

Since the 1700s scholars have worked over the text of Shakespeare's plays. They have had to do so because the plays were badly printed, and no original manuscripts of them survive.

In Shakespeare's day plays were not usually printed under the author's supervision. When a playwright sold a play to his company, he lost all rights to it. He could not sell it again to a

publisher without the company's consent. When the play was no longer in demand on the stage, the company itself might sell the manuscript. Plays were eagerly read by the Elizabethan public. This was even truer during the plague years, when the theaters were closed. It was also true during times of business depression. Sometimes plays were taken down in shorthand and sold. At other times, a dismissed actor would write down the play from memory and sell it.

About half of Shakespeare's plays were printed during his lifetime in small, cheap pamphlets called quartos. Most of these were made from fairly accurate manuscripts. A few were in garbled form.

In 1623, seven years after Shakespeare's death, his collected plays were published in a large, expensive volume called the First Folio. It contains all his plays except two of which he wrote only part--'Pericles' and 'Two Noble Kinsmen'. It also has the first engraved portrait of Shakespeare.

This edition was authorized by Shakespeare's acting group, the King's Company. Some of the plays in it were printed from the accurate quartos and some from manuscripts in the theater. It is certain that many of these manuscripts were in Shakespeare's own handwriting. Others were copies. Still others, like the 'Macbeth' manuscript, had been revised by another dramatist.

Shakespearean scholars have been determining what Shakespeare actually wrote. They have done so by studying the language, stagecraft, handwriting, and printing of the period and by carefully examining and comparing the different editions. They have modernized spelling and punctuation, supplied stage directions, explained difficult passages, and made the plays easier for the modern reader to understand.

Another hard task has been to find out when the plays were written. About half of them have no definite date of composition. The plays themselves have been searched for clues. Other books have been examined. Scholars have tried to match events in Shakespeare's life with the subject matter of his plays.

These scholars have used detective methods. They have worked with clues, deduction, shrewd reasoning, and external and internal evidence. External evidence consists of actual references in other books. Internal evidence is made up of verse tests and a study of the poet's imagery and figures of speech, which changed from year to year.

The verse tests follow the idea that a poet becomes more skillful with practice. Scholars long ago noticed that in his early plays Shakespeare used little prose, much rhyme, and certain types of rhythmical and metrical regularity. As he grew older he used more prose, less rhyme, and greater freedom and variety in rhythm and meter. From these facts, scholars have figured out the dates of those plays that had none.

Critics Rank the Plays

The nine plays most often read in American high schools are: 'Macbeth', 'As You Like It', 'Julius Caesar', 'Hamlet', 'The Merchant of Venice', 'A Midsummer Night's Dream', 'Romeo and Juliet', 'The Tempest', and 'Twelfth Night'. It is a good list for new readers of Shakespeare.

Another useful guide for reading and studying the plays is the list given here. It shows how the critics have ranked them throughout the past 350 years. The plays are numbered in the order of their excellence within each group. It is a general summary of criticism only. Individual critics have departed widely from some of these estimates.

Tragedies: (1) 'Hamlet', 'Macbeth', 'King Lear', 'Othello'; (2) 'Antony and Cleopatra', 'Coriolanus', 'Romeo and Juliet', 'Julius Caesar'; (3) 'Richard II', 'Richard III', 'Timon of Athens'; (4) 'King John', 'Titus Andronicus', 'Henry VI'.

Comedies: (1) 'The Tempest', 'As You Like It', 'The Winter's Tale', 'The Merchant of Venice', 'Twelfth Night', 'Much Ado about Nothing', 'Cymbeline', 'A Midsummer Night's Dream'; (2) 'The Merry Wives of Windsor', 'The Taming of the Shrew', 'Two Gentlemen of Verona', 'All's Well That Ends Well', 'A Comedy of Errors', 'Pericles', 'Love's Labour's Lost', 'Two Noble Kinsmen'.

Histories: (1) 'Henry IV', Parts 1 and 2, 'Henry V', 'Richard II', 'Richard III', 'Henry VIII,; (2) 'King John', 'Henry VI', Parts 2 and 3, 'Henry VI', Part 1.

Serious Plays, or Bitter Comedies: 'Measure for Measure', 'Troilus and Cressida'.

Tests of Greatness

"Greatness" is a hard word to define. A "great" play is one that affects the audience deeply. For example, 'King Lear' has a very nearly silly plot. It has obvious faults of taste. Yet it is regarded as one of Shakespeare's greatest tragedies. It moves the audience and the reader profoundly. It has sublime poetry, deep

experience, touching pathos, and characters created on a grand scale. It is great, too, because one can read it over and over with appreciation.

'King Lear' is complex in detail, yet simple in plan and design. It is unforgettable in its effect. Each of the tragedies arouses similar powerful feelings. These feelings form the basis for a critic's decision as to how to rank the tragedies. Some equally general feeling of rich fun decides the rank of the comedies.

New readers need not be bound by such judgments. They should read the plays for their plots, people, and poetry. One may like a poor play better than a great one. There is nothing to worry about in this. The honest thing is to be true to one's own tastes. In time, if one continues to study, the reasons why one play is better than another will show themselves.

Reasons for His Popularity

Shakespeare has a magic of speech and fancy, which can be felt but not described. His tolerance and sympathy are great and his mind is healthy. No one else has his wide variety, his warmth, his clear-cut vision of evil, and his high regard for heroism.

He believes that man can overcome the evil in himself. He says, "We are mixtures of good and evil." His people have astonishing reality. Like real people, they can be great and yet foolish, bad and yet likable, good and yet faulty. He believes that the world is made up of all kinds of people. He finds fools, criminals, and madmen fascinating. Shakespeare's people are painted larger than life. They have superhuman energy and grandeur. They stand for mankind in its greatest passions and powers, for good or for evil.

Jan. 13, 1996: New Shakespeare work discovered.

Donald Foster, a professor of English at Vassar College, identified a 578-line elegy published in 1612 and signed with the initials "W.S." as a lost work of William. Shakespeare. Using a complex computer program that indexed all the words that appeared 12 times or fewer in Shakespeare's 36 plays, Foster analysed the elegy and found that its author used many of the rare words that Shakespeare employed in his plays written at about the same period. Elizabethan scholars gave Foster's findings a vote of confidence at the annual meeting of the Modern Language Association held in Chicago in December 1995, making the elegy the first newly discovered piece of writing to be generally attributed

to Shakespeare since parts of the play 'Sir Thomas More' were credited to him in 1871.

The elegy had been bound as a 21-page pamphlet and stored in the Bodlein Library at Oxford University. The work was composed for the funeral of William Peter, an Oxford student working in the London Theater when he was murdered after an afternoon of drinking. Several Elizabethan scholars said that they believed William Peter to be the young man Shakespeare addressed in 126 of his 154 sonnets.

Chief Known Facts of Shakespeare's Life

1564. Born at Stratford-on-Avon, Warwickshire, probably April 21-23, and baptized, April 26
1582. License issued for his marriage with Anne Hathaway of Shottery
1583. Daughter Susanna born
1585. Twins Hamnet and Judith born
1592. First alluded to in a book, by Robert Greene
1593. 'Venus and Adonis' published
1594. 'The Rape of Lucrece' published
1596. His son Hamnet dies
1596. His father is granted a coat of arms
1597. Purchases New Place in Stratford
1598. Is praised by Francis Meres, who mentions his poems and sonnets and names 12 of his plays
1603. He and his fellow players are honored by James I; appointed Grooms of the King's Chamber
1607. Daughter Susanna marries
1609. 'Sonnets' published
1616. Daughter Judith marries
1616. Dies April 23 and is buried April 25

Shakespeare's Four Periods

Shakespeare's first period of writing was his apprenticeship. Between the ages of 26 and 30 he was learning his craft. He imitated Roman comedy and tragedy and followed the styles of the playwrights who came just before him. He may have collaborated with Christopher Marlowe and others. The Senecan tragedy, or "tragedy of blood," was in style at this time. Shakespeare too wrote plays in this fashion. Later he wrote chronicle, or history, plays when these became popular.

His second period is highlighted by 'Romeo and Juliet', 'The Merchant of Venice', and 'Henry IV'. He had mastered his art. He tried the comedy of local middle-class people only once, in 'The Merry Wives of Windsor'. His heart was not in it. His favorite style was the romantic comedy. During this period he shows ease, power, and maturity. The plays are generally sunny and full of joyous poetry.

With 'Hamlet', written in about 1601, his third period begins. For eight years he probed the problem of evil in the world. At times he reached an almost desperate pessimism. Even the comedies of this period are bitter.

In his fourth and last period Shakespeare used a new form. It was the tragicomedy, or dramatic romance. In his hands the tragicomedy is calm, sober, and quietly lovely. 'The Tempest' is perhaps the most beautiful and serene of all his plays.

Although the precise date of many of Shakespeare's plays is in doubt, his dramatic career is generally divided into four periods: (1) the period up to 1594, (2) the years from 1594 to 1600, (3) the years from 1600 to 1608, and (4) the period after 1608. Because of the difficulty of dating Shakespeare's plays and the lack of conclusive facts about his writings, these dates are approximate and can be used only as a convenient framework in which to discuss his development. In all periods, the plots of his plays were frequently drawn from chronicles, histories, or earlier fiction, as were the plays of other contemporary dramatists.

A. First Period (Up to 1594)

Shakespeare's first period was one of experimentation. His early plays, unlike his more mature work, are characterized to a degree by formal and rather obvious construction and by stylized verse.

Chronicle history plays were a popular genre of the time, and four plays dramatizing the English civil strife of the 15th century are possibly Shakespeare's earliest dramatic works (*see* England: *The Lancastrian and Yorkist Kings*). These plays, *Henry VI, Parts I, II,* and *III* (1590? - 1592?) and *Richard III* (1593?), deal with evil resulting from weak leadership and from national disunity fostered for selfish ends. The four-play cycle closes with the death of Richard III and the ascent to the throne of Henry VII, the founder of the Tudor dynasty, to which Elizabeth belonged. In style and structure, these plays are related partly to medieval drama and partly to the works of earlier Elizabethan dramatists, especially Christopher

Marlowe. Either indirectly (through such dramatists) or directly, the influence of the classical Roman dramatist Seneca is also reflected in the organization of these four plays, especially in the bloodiness of many of their scenes and in their highly colored, bombastic language. The influence of Seneca, exerted by way of the earlier English dramatist Thomas Kyd, is particularly obvious in *Titus Andronicus* (1594?), a tragedy of righteous revenge for heinous and bloody acts, which are staged in sensational detail.

Shakespeare's comedies of the first period represent a wide range. *The Comedy of Errors* (1592?), a farce in imitation of classical Roman comedy, depends for its appeal on mistaken identities in two sets of twins involved in romance and war. Farce is not as strongly emphasized in *The Taming of the Shrew* (1593?), a comedy of character. *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* (1594?) concerns romantic love. *Love's Labour's Lost* (1594?) satirizes the loves of its main male characters as well as the fashionable devotion to studious pursuits by which these noblemen had first sought to avoid romantic and worldly ensnarement. The dialogue in which many of the characters voice their pretensions ridicules the artificially ornate, courtly style typified by the works of English novelist and dramatist John Lyly, the court conventions of the time, and perhaps the scientific discussions of Sir Walter Raleigh and his colleagues.

B. Second Period (From 1594 to 1600)

Shakespeare's second period includes his most important plays concerned with English history, his so-called joyous comedies, and two of his major tragedies. In this period, his style and approach became highly individualized. The second-period historical plays include *Richard II* (1595?), *Henry IV, Parts I* and *II* (1597?), and *Henry V* (1598?). They encompass the years immediately before those portrayed in the Henry VI plays. *Richard II* is a study of a weak, sensitive, self-dramatizing but sympathetic monarch who loses his kingdom to his forceful successor, Henry IV. In the two parts of *Henry IV,* Henry recognizes his own guilt. His fears for his own son, later Henry V, prove unfounded, as the young prince displays a responsible attitude toward the duties of kingship. In an alternation of masterful comic and serious scenes, the fat knight Falstaff and the rebel Hotspur reveal contrasting excesses between which the prince finds his proper position. The mingling of the tragic

and the comic to suggest a broad range of humanity subsequently became one of Shakespeare's favorite devices.

Outstanding among the comedies of the second period is *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1595?), which interweaves several plots involving two pairs of noble lovers, a group of bumbling and unconsciously comic townspeople, and members of the fairy realm, notably Puck, King Oberon, and Queen Titania. Subtle evocation of atmosphere, of the sort that characterizes this play, is also found in the tragicomedy *The Merchant of Venice* (1596?). In this play, the Renaissance motifs of masculine friendship and romantic love are portrayed in opposition to the bitter inhumanity of a usurer named Shylock, whose own misfortunes are presented so as to arouse understanding and sympathy. The character of the quick-witted, warm, and responsive young woman, exemplified in this play by Portia, reappears in the joyous comedies of the second period.

The witty comedy *Much Ado About Nothing* (1599?) is marred, in the opinion of some critics, by an insensitive treatment of its female characters. However, Shakespeare's most mature comedies, *As You Like It* (1599?) and *Twelfth Night* (1600?), are characterized by lyricism, ambiguity, and beautiful, charming, and strong-minded heroines like Beatrice. In *As You Like It,* the contrast between the manners of the Elizabethan court and those current in the English countryside is drawn in a rich and varied vein. Shakespeare constructed a complex orchestration between different characters and between appearance and reality and used this pattern to comment on a variety of human foibles. In that respect, *As You Like It* is similar to *Twelfth Night,* in which the comical side of love is illustrated by the misadventures of two pairs of romantic lovers and of a number of realistically conceived and clowning characters in the subplot. Another comedy of the second period is *The Merry Wives of Windsor* (1599?), a farce about middle-class life in which Falstaff reappears as the comic victim.

Two major tragedies, differing considerably in nature, mark the beginning and the end of the second period. *Romeo and Juliet* (1595?), famous for its poetic treatment of the ecstasy of youthful love, dramatizes the fate of two lovers victimized by the feuds and misunderstandings of their elders and by their own hasty temperaments. *Julius Caesar* (1599?), on the other hand, is a serious tragedy of political rivalries, but is less intense in style than the tragic dramas that followed it.

C. Third Period (From 1600 to 1608)

Shakespeare's third period includes his greatest tragedies and his so-called dark or bitter comedies. The tragedies of this period are considered the most profound of his works. In them he used his poetic idiom as an extremely supple dramatic instrument, capable of recording human thought and the many dimensions of given dramatic situations. *Hamlet* (1601?), perhaps his most famous play, exceeds by far most other tragedies of revenge in picturing the mingled sordidness and glory of the human condition. Hamlet feels that he is living in a world of horror. Confirmed in this feeling by the murder of his father and the sensuality of his mother, he exhibits tendencies toward both crippling indecision and precipitous action. Interpretation of his motivation and ambivalence continues to be a subject of considerable controversy.

Othello (1604?) portrays the growth of unjustified jealousy in the protagonist, Othello, a Moor serving as a general in the Venetian army. The innocent object of his jealousy is his wife, Desdemona. In this tragedy, Othello's evil lieutenant Iago draws him into mistaken jealousy in order to ruin him. *King Lear* (1605?), conceived on a more epic scale, deals with the consequences of the irresponsibility and misjudgment of Lear, a ruler of early Britain, and of his councillor, the Duke of Gloucester. The tragic outcome is a result of their giving power to their evil children, rather than to their good children. Lear's daughter Cordelia displays a redeeming love that makes the tragic conclusion a vindication of goodness. This conclusion is reinforced by the portrayal of evil as self-defeating, as exemplified by the fates of Cordelia's sisters and of Gloucester's opportunistic son. *Antony and Cleopatra* (1606?) is concerned with a different type of love, namely the middle-aged passion of Roman general Mark Antony for Egyptian queen Cleopatra. Their love is glorified by some of Shakespeare's most sensuous poetry. In *Macbeth* (1606?), Shakespeare depicts the tragedy of a man who, led on by others and because of a defect in his own nature, succumbs to ambition. In securing the Scottish throne, Macbeth dulls his humanity to the point where he becomes capable of any amoral act.

Unlike these tragedies, three other plays of this period suggest a bitterness stemming from the protagonists' apparent lack of greatness or tragic stature. In *Troilus and Cressida* (1602?), the most intellectually contrived of Shakespeare's plays, the gulf

between the ideal and the real, and both individual and political is skillfully evoked. In *Coriolanus* (1608?), another tragedy set in antiquity, the legendary Roman hero Gnaeus Marcius Coriolanus is portrayed as unable to bring himself either to woo the Roman masses or to crush them by force. *Timon of Athens* (1608?) is a similarly bitter play about a character reduced to misanthropy by the ingratitude of his sycophants. Because of the uneven quality of the writing, this tragedy is considered collaboration, quite possibly with English dramatist Thomas Middleton.

The two comedies of this period are also dark in mood and are sometimes called problem plays because they do not fit into clear categories or present easy resolution. *All's Well That Ends Well* (1602?) and *Measure for Measure* (1604?) both question accepted patterns of morality without offering solutions.

D. Fourth Period (After 1608)

The fourth period of Shakespeare's work includes his principal romantic tragicomedies. Toward the end of his career, Shakespeare created several plays that, through the intervention of magic, art, compassion, or grace, often suggest redemptive hope for the human condition. These plays are written with a grave quality differing considerably from Shakespeare's earlier comedies, but they end happily with reunions or final reconciliations. The tragicomedies depend for part of their appeal upon the lure of a distant time or place, and all seem more obviously symbolic than most of Shakespeare's earlier works. To many critics, the tragicomedies signify a final ripeness in Shakespeare's own outlook, but other authorities believe that the change reflects only a change in fashion in the drama of the period.

The romantic tragicomedy *Pericles, Prince of Tyre* (1608?) concerns the painful loss of the title character's wife and the persecution of his daughter. After many exotic adventures, Pericles is reunited with his loved ones. In *Cymbeline* (1610?) and *The Winter's Tale* (1610?), characters suffer great loss and pain but are reunited. Perhaps the most successful product of this particular vein of creativity, however, is what may be Shakespeare's last complete play, *The Tempest* (1611?), in which the resolution suggests the beneficial effects of the union of wisdom and power. In this play a duke, deprived of his dukedom and banished to an island, confounds his usurping brother by employing magical powers and furthering a

love match between his daughter and the usurper's son. Shakespeare's poetic power reached great heights in this beautiful, lyrical play.

Two final plays, sometimes ascribed to Shakespeare, presumably are the products of collaboration. A historical drama, *Henry VIII* (1613?) was probably written with English dramatist John Fletcher (*see* Beaumont and Fletcher), as was *The Two Noble Kinsmen* (1613; published 1634), a story of the love of two friends for one woman.

CHRONOLOGY OF THE PLAYS

The approximate date when Shakespeare wrote each play is given before the title, the date of first printing after the title. Many of these dates are in dispute, and scholars differ about some by as much as ten years. The letters (C), (H), and (T) show whether the play is a comedy, historical drama, or tragedy.

First Period (1590-94) Apprenticeship

1590 **The Comedy of Errors** (C), 1623
1591 Two Gentlemen of Verona (C), 1623
1592 Henry VI, Parts 1, 2, 3 (H or T), 1623
1593 Titus Andronicus (T), 1594 Love's Labour's Lost (C), 1598
1594 Richard III (H or T), 1597

Second Period (1595-1600) Great Comedies and Histories

1595 A Midsummer Night's Dream (C), 1600 Richard II (H or T), 1597
1596 **Romeo and Juliet** (T), 1597 The Merchant of Venice (C), 1600 King John (H or T), 1623
1597 **Henry IV, Part 1** (H), 1598 Part 2 (H), 1600
1598 The Taming of the Shrew (C), 1607 **Much Ado About Nothing** (C), 1600
1599 Henry V (H), 1600 The Merry Wives of Windsor (C), 1602 **Julius Caesar** (T), 1623
1600 **As You Like It** (C), 1623 Twelfth Night (C), 1623

Third Period (1601-08) Great Tragedies and Bitter Comedies

1601 **Hamlet** (T), 1603 (pirated edition) 1604 or 1605 (good edition)
1602 All's Well That Ends Well (C), 1623 Troilus and Cressida (C), 1609
1604 Measure for Measure (C), 1623 **Othello** (T), 1622

1605 King Lear (T), 1608
1606 Timon of Athens (T), 1623 **Macbeth** (T), 1623
1607 Antony and Cleopatra (T), 1623 Pericles, Prince of Tyre (C), 1609
1608 Coriolanus (T), 1623

Fourth Period (1609-13) Tragicomedies
1609 Cymbeline (C), 1623
1610 The Winter's Tale (C), 1623 The Tempest (C), 1623
1613 Henry VIII (H), 1623 Two Noble Kinsmen (C), 1634 **In a mutilated version, 'Henry VI, Part 2' was published in 1594 and Part 3 in 1595. Perhaps a collaboration.*

Chapter two

"Comedies"

AS YOU LIKE IT

1600

INTRODUCTION

Like most of the major characters in 'As You Like It', William Shakespeare experienced life in both the country and the city. His birthplace -Stratford, on the Avon River- was a bustling country town. He arrived in London, the social, commercial, and intellectual center of England, during the reign of Elizabeth I, at the height of the English Renaissance. All classes of Englishmen, including artisans, the new middle class, and the nobility, shared a keen desire to be entertained. The influx of wealth from the New World had given many of them money to spend. Since Shakespeare's plays were -and still are- crowd pleasers, he quickly became one of the most successful playwrights of his time.

It should be helpful to examine a few ways in which 'As You Like It' reflects the interest of the audience for which it was written. For example, Elizabethan audiences took great pleasure in the type of complex wordplay practiced by Rosalind, Celia, and Touchstone.

During the Renaissance, the English had begun to take their own language seriously for the first time. It had previously been considered too coarse for the expression of subtle ideas or fine shades of meaning. ("Serious" writing was still done in Latin.) Shakespeare probably shared his audience's enthusiasm for exploring the potential of their native tongue.

'As You Like It' draws upon an Elizabethan genre (type of literature) known as the pastoral romance. As escapist literature, the pastoral romance (a love story with a country setting) was extremely popular. Its conventions were as fixed and artificial as the formula plots of today's romance novels. These love stories were set in idealized country locales, where life was pure and innocent. The rustic settings were populated by shepherds and shepherdesses who thought only of love and spoke of their passion in elaborate (and sometimes awful) verse. Love at first sight was commonplace. The characters suffered the pangs of unrequited love. In the forest settings of these stories, you might encounter a lion, a magician, or a band of thieves. Elizabethans would have recognized the poetic rustics Silvius and Phebe from 'As You Like It' as stock characters out of such a pastoral romance. They would

have enjoyed seeing Rosalind save Orlando from becoming just another lovesick young man like Silvius.

Many noble Elizabethan households kept professional fools such as Touchstone for entertainment. His role was actually written for Robert Armin, who had been a professional fool before joining Shakespeare's acting company. Jesters occupied a special place in Elizabethan society. They could mix with both kings and servants. As long as they pleased their masters, they could say almost anything they wished. Often, Shakespeare's fools tell the truth when nobody else will. As you will see, Touchstone exposes pretension and foolishness wherever he finds them.

The romance and humor of 'As You Like It' are played out against a backdrop of danger and political intrigue. Rosalind and Orlando both flee the city under threat of death. Much is made of the "envious court," where nobody can be trusted and where flatterers are always seeking to add to their own power. This darker side of life was also a part of Shakespeare's England. When Elizabeth became queen in 1558, she inherited both religious tensions and grave financial difficulties. Fortunately, she was a shrewd politician and skillfully played her noblemen against each other, so that no individual could gain enough power to threaten her.

A very real threat to Elizabeth was posed by Mary, Queen of Scots. Until Mary's execution in 1587, Elizabeth lived with the fear that the Roman Catholics might rally around Mary and mount a rebellion. In this play, Duke Frederick fears that Rosalind's graces will remind the people of her father and cause them to revolt.

So 'As You Like It' does mirror the concerns of Shakespeare's audience. But what about the author, what of Shakespeare the man? Very little is actually known about him. Neither he nor anybody else of his era ever recorded the story of his life. A few facts are known. He was born in Stratford, a small English country town on the Avon River, and baptized on April 26, 1564. Since infants were generally baptized at three days, his birth date may have been April 23. His father was John Shakespeare, a prosperous Stratford businessman and town council member. William's mother, Mary, was the daughter of a well-to-do landowner. William was the eldest of their six children. Shakespeare almost certainly attended the local grammar school. There, his studies would have included Latin, rhetoric (grammar, composition), and literature.

In November 1582 he married Anne Hathaway, eight years his senior. Anne's age, combined with the fact that their first child was born only six months after the wedding, has led some scholars to believe that the marriage was one of necessity. That may not be the case, however, because at that time it was socially acceptable for an engaged couple to sleep together. William and Anne had two girls, Susanna and Judith, and one son, Hamlet, who died young.

Nobody knows what work Shakespeare did while in Stratford. He may have been a schoolteacher or a private tutor in a wealthy household. Like Orlando in 'As You Like It', he had to leave his birthplace to find his future. Unlike Orlando, who fled to the country, William headed for the big city, London. (Legend has it that he had to leave Stratford after being caught hunting illegally on a large estate, but no records exist to verify that story.) In London he became first an actor and later a playwright. Along with success, he found envy. The first mention of Shakespeare in London is in a pamphlet by a rival playwright, Robert Greene. In "A Groatsworth of Wit" (groat: an old English coin worth four pennies), Greene warned fellow university-educated playwrights of an upstart actor (Shakespeare) who had the gall to write plays. Nevertheless, Shakespeare became the most successful playwright of his day. He was an actor (of small parts), a playwright, and a partner in the Lord Chamberlain's Men, a theater company favored by Queen Elizabeth. Her successor, James I, elevated the company to the rank of King's Men in 1603.

Although plays were a popular form of entertainment, they weren't highly regarded as literature. To secure his artistic reputation, Shakespeare wrote poems. Between 1592 and 1601, he penned three long narrative poems- Venus and Adonis, The Rape of Lucrece, and The Phoenix and the Turtle- as well as a famous series of sonnets.

'As You Like It' premiered in 1599 or 1600, about the same time that Shakespeare's company moved into the Globe Theatre, across the Thames River from the city of London. Shakespeare's reputation had been firmly established by nineteen previous plays. Among the eighteen to follow would be his four great tragedies- Hamlet, Othello, King Lear, and Macbeth. By 1612, Shakespeare had returned to live in Stratford, where he owned a fine house called New Place. He died there, presumably on his birthday, April 23, 1616.

'As You Like It' was rarely performed in the first century after Shakespeare's death. In 1723 an enterprising London

producer combined the play with Shakespeare's 'Much Ado About Nothing' and 'A Midsummer Night's Dream' to create a collage called Love in a Forest. But by the nineteenth century, 'As You Like It' had become one of Shakespeare's most frequently performed works. The Romantic spirit of that time probably helped the play to find new favor with audiences. In addition, many leading ladies wanted to play the showcase role of Rosalind. 'As You Like It' is still popular today. Audiences enjoy its blend of humor and romance, and fall in love with Rosalind just as Orlando does.

THE PLOT

Orlando, the youngest son of Sir Rowland de Boys, is fed up. Since his father's death, his oldest brother, Oliver, has refused to give Orlando either the proper education or the money that Sir Rowland intended for him. Oliver hates Orlando. When he learns that Orlando intends to try his skill against a professional wrestler named Charles, Oliver incites Charles to kill Orlando in their match.

The country is ruled by Duke Frederick, who seized the throne from his own older brother by force. The wronged brother, Duke Senior, has been exiled to the Forest of Arden with many of his lords. His daughter, Rosalind, however, has remained at court. She and Duke Frederick's daughter, Celia, love each other like sisters.

Observing Orlando and Charles preparing for their match, Rosalind and Celia fear that the wrestler will hurt Orlando. Much to everybody's surprise, Orlando defeats Charles. But when Duke Frederick finds out that Orlando is the son of Sir Rowland, who was once his enemy, he coldly dismisses the young man and leaves. The ladies offer Orlando a word of congratulation, and as they do so, it is clear that Rosalind and Orlando have already fallen in love.

Duke Frederick accuses Rosalind of stealing the people's affection away from his own daughter. As a punishment, she must leave the city or be put to death. Celia, who cares more for Rosalind than for her wicked father, resolves to run away with her cousin to the Forest of Arden. For safety's sake, Celia disguises herself as a peasant girl, named Aliena, while Rosalind dons a boy's outfit and assumes the name Ganymede. They convince Duke Frederick's court fool (clown), Touchstone, to go with them.

When Duke Frederick discovers that Celia and Rosalind are missing, he assumes they are with Orlando and angrily commands Oliver to find them and bring his daughter back. Meanwhile, warned

by his father's old servant Adam that Oliver intends to murder him, Orlando has fled with Adam to the Forest of Arden.

After a long, hard journey, the ladies and Touchstone arrive in the forest. Rosalind arranges with Corin, an old shepherd, to buy a cottage for them and a flock of sheep.

Orlando and Adam finally reach Arden. Tired and starving, they find a haven in the camp of Duke Senior (Rosalind's father) and his lords.

Orlando now turns his thoughts to love. He writes passionate but amateurish poems to his beloved Rosalind and hangs them on the trees. He doesn't know, of course, that she is in the forest. She discovers the poems and is thrilled that Orlando is near.

Disguised as Ganymede, Rosalind finds Orlando in the forest and strikes up a conversation with him. He never suspects her true identity. Adopting a cynical attitude toward women, Rosalind tells Orlando that his lovesick behavior is foolish. She offers to cure him of love by playing a game with him. She will pretend to be his Rosalind. If he will woo her, she will demonstrate how impossible women are. Although he doesn't want to be cured, Orlando agrees to play along. They plan to meet the next day to begin the "love cure."

While waiting for Orlando to keep their appointment, Rosalind observes a young shepherd named Silvius wooing Phebe, a shepherdess. Phebe scorns Silvius, who swears that her rejection will kill him. Rosalind soon has heard enough. She steps in and berates Phebe for her cruelty. Thinking that Rosalind is a man, Phebe immediately falls in love with her! Rosalind, of course, rejects Phebe and quickly leaves.

Orlando finally arrives for his first dose of love cure. After Ganymede demonstrates how difficult women can be, Orlando leaves, promising to return shortly.

Silvius shows up with a letter from Phebe to Ganymede. He assumes that it's an angry message. But when Rosalind reads it aloud, he's dismayed to learn he's brought a love letter. Rosalind sends the crushed lover back to Phebe.

Then Oliver, Orlando's brother enters, bearing a message for the "youth" Rosalind. It seems that Orlando has just saved Oliver's life by fighting and killing a fierce lioness that was ready to attack. As a result, Oliver has seen and renounced the evil of his ways.

Celia and Oliver fall in love at first sight. Their joy only increases Orlando's sadness at being separated from Rosalind. Ganymede offers to make Rosalind appear the next day by magic.

The following day, all the lovers gather at Duke Senior's camp. Touchstone arrives with Audrey, a country wench he's decided to marry. Rosalind reveals her true identity, paving the way for a joyful conclusion to the story. Rosalind will marry Orlando; Oliver and Celia will wed; Phebe, seeing that Ganymede is a woman, decides she loves Silvius after all; and Touchstone and Audrey will marry.

Before the celebrating can begin, a message arrives that Duke Frederick, who set out into the forest with the intention of killing Duke Senior, has met an old religious man along the way and been converted. Duke Senior's lands and position are therefore restored to him. After music and dancing, Rosalind asks the lovers in the audience to bid her farewell with their applause.

THE CHARACTERS

ROSALIND

Rosalind's function in the plot of 'As You Like It' is vital. Once circumstances have driven all the major characters to the Forest of Arden, Rosalind either causes or contributes to all the major conflicts. It is she who resolves them all in the end.

She's a complex and deeply human character. In Act I, you are first struck by her wit as she and Celia joke about such subjects as love and luck. At the same time, Shakespeare reminds you that Rosalind is an outsider, even in the court where she has grown up. Her father, the rightful duke, has been exiled. Although Rosalind misses him terribly, she will laugh and joke for her friend Celia's sake.

Rosalind has the ability to rise above her own deeply felt emotions. Her love for Orlando makes her feel as giddy as any lovesick adolescent. (Look at her excitement when she learns that Orlando is in the forest.) She could easily surrender to the temptation to run around reciting poetry and swearing to die for love. Instead, she administers a love cure to Orlando that makes both of them stand back and take a good look at how ridiculous many conventional attitudes toward love really are. Thus, she avoids confusing the "idea of love" with love itself.

She is also remarkably clever. She makes up the love cure on the spot and quickly invents an uncle and a magician to justify

the stories she tells. And she's practical enough to be sure that she and Celia acquire a place to live as soon as they reach Arden.

Rosalind is a good judge of character. She appreciates the skill of Touchstone, the court fool, and immediately sees through the pretensions of Jaques, Duke Senior's melancholy attendant. She has only to observe Silvius and Phebe for a few moments in order to size up their situation accurately.

Finally, you should take note of her courage. She boldly tells the usurping duke that her father was no traitor. It also takes spunk to go on a dangerous journey disguised as a man because highwaymen would probably attack the man first.

ORLANDO

Readers' opinions about Orlando tend to fall into two camps. Some view him as the embodiment of all the virtues a Renaissance gentleman should possess. Others consider him dull and even stupid.

Even his brother Oliver, who hates him, admits that Orlando is well thought of in the community. He's considered gentle and naturally noble. Although he's physically strong (as his defeat of Charles the wrestler proves), he will not harm his brother. He should respect his older brother, and he does. Later, even after Oliver has plotted to kill him, Orlando only hesitates a moment before risking his life to save Oliver's. When Orlando and his faithful old servant Adam are starving, Orlando will not eat a bite until he has seen to the old man's needs. Such courtesy must be a product of his nature, because he's been denied a gentleman's education.

So, Orlando is strong, gentle, and noble. Is he witty and intelligent, too? He does outsmart Jaques in a contest of words. But nobody would read his love poems and find much to praise in them. As a lover, he tends to be a bit sappy. Without Rosalind's help, he could be another Silvius. Does that make him a fool? Rosalind must see hope for him. Under her guidance, he does improve.

Do you see Orlando's weaknesses as indications that he's noble but not very intelligent? Or do you regard them as the kinds of imperfections that make him more human?

CELIA

In Act I, Celia has just as much to do and say as Rosalind. She fades into the background, however, as the play goes on. Although she remains undeveloped, many readers find her a

charming character. She and Rosalind share a deep, loving friendship, and her importance is a function of that relationship.

First, she serves as a confidant, a person with whom Rosalind can talk openly about her feelings. While Rosalind hides her true emotions in her scenes with Orlando, she is absolutely honest with Celia.

What raises Celia from dramatic device (someone serving merely to help the play along) to a character that is interesting in her own right is her wit. From their first appearance, Celia matches Rosalind in her ease with words. Since Celia doesn't fall in love until nearly the end of the play, she also retains her cool judgment. Thus, when Rosalind expresses her own romantic feelings, Celia is there to undercut them with pointed jests.

JAQUES

Jaques (pronounced "Jake-ways" or "Jake-weez") has been the focus of much debate. Is he a caricature of the many self-styled social critics Shakespeare saw around him? Or is he a genuine critic of society who voices Shakespeare's own cynical view of life? Many readers see Jaques as a "railer," a professional griper who adopts a melancholy pose. Is he profound or foolish? That you can even ask such questions is a tribute to Shakespeare's genius in portraying his major characters. You can take different views of them, just as you can of real people.

Duke Senior and his followers treat Jaques with a certain amount of respect, but they clearly derive more amusement than instruction from his pronouncements. Touchstone patronizes Jaques, although Jaques doesn't realize it. Orlando plainly tells Jaques that he hates his company. Rosalind accuses him of being a traveler who pretends not to like his own country only to get attention.

Are these assessments correct? Readers who see Jaques as Shakespeare's spokesman point to his speech about the Seven Ages of Man. If Shakespeare wanted to satirize Jaques's cynical views, would he have Jaques express his sentiments so beautifully? On the other hand, does the play as a whole support such a viewpoint? Would Shakespeare have picked Jaques as his spokesman? You must make up your mind based on your interpretation of the text.

Jaques is what Elizabethans called a "humor" character. To the Elizabethans, humor meant temperament. A humor character is based on an exaggerated personality trait. Elizabethans believed that a person's temperament (mood or personality) was regulated by the balance of four bodily fluids: blood, phlegm, choler, and melancholy. According to this theory, if the balance of your bodily fluids changed, your mood would alter. If a person was constantly sad and gloomy, like Jaques, Elizabethans believed he had too much melancholy (also called "black bile") in his system. That's why there are references to "the melancholy Jaques."

TOUCHSTONE

Many noble households in Shakespeare's time kept "licensed fools." These fools were essentially entertainers. They wore "motley," a patchwork coat of various colors. Touchstone, the fool of Duke Frederick's household, becomes Rosalind and Celia's traveling companion when they escape to the Forest of Arden. Like Feste in Shakespeare's Twelfth Night or the Fool in King Lear, Touchstone is a "wise" fool. Under the guise of spouting amusing nonsense, he reveals the truth about the people he meets.

Touchstone's name describes his function. A touchstone was used to test the purity of precious metals- that is, to determine the genuineness or quality of a thing. This fool unmasks pretension and foolishness wherever he sees it. His primary technique is mimicry. For example, the first time he hears Silvius carrying on about Phebe, Touchstone does a funny imitation of the lovesick shepherd. He accomplishes two things: He makes the audience laugh, and he points out the absurdity of Silvius's behavior.

He uses the same approach on the melancholy Jaques, who finds sad morals everywhere. Touchstone mimics him by delivering a gloomy but meaningless sermon about the consequences of time passing, making Jaques believe he's found a kindred spirit. Touchstone reveals that Jaques's pronouncements may not be as profound as Jaques would like people to believe.

Touchstone doesn't always mimic the person he's talking to. With Corin and William, he imitates a learned man from the city. His manners and his "learned examples" are all nonsense, but the shepherds are fooled. Shakespeare uses Touchstone to clarify one of the satiric points of As You Like It- that real shepherds are not "poetical," like their counterparts in pastoral romances.

Touchstone's courtship of Audrey parodies the pure, spiritual love that Silvius talks about by demonstrating the opposite extreme. Silvius sees love as something poetic and marriage as the fulfillment of a great spiritual longing. Touchstone regards marriage as a way to fulfill one's sexual urges. He purposely

chooses an ugly woman and clearly states his intention to leave her once he tires of her.

As you read each of Touchstone's scenes, ask yourself: 'Whom is the fool mimicking? What point is he making?'

OLIVER

Orlando's brother Oliver starts the play as a villain. When you first meet him, he is arrogant and cruel. He has stolen Orlando's inheritance by refusing to give him a gentleman's education or the money that their late father intended for Orlando. When Orlando wins acclaim by defeating Charles the wrestler, the jealous Oliver plots to murder his brother.

Several times in Act I, Oliver is called "unnatural." That means he respects neither his dead father's wishes nor the laws of God, according to both of which he should love and care for his brother. His ill treatment of the faithful old servant, Adam, demonstrates his contempt for all the Old World virtues.

Some readers believe that Oliver is motivated by envy. He says in a soliloquy (monologue) that people love Orlando and, as a consequence, ignore Oliver. Thus, he's an example of what Duke Senior calls the "envious court." Other readers hold that Oliver's psychological motivations are beside the point. He is not a study of a good man ruined by envy. He's evil because Shakespeare needed him to be. (The same is often said of a much more fully developed villain- Iago in Othello.)

When you see Oliver at the end of Act IV, he has undergone a complete and miraculous conversion. His forsaking of evil serves two purposes: It parodies the types of sudden conversions found in pastoral romances, and it allows Celia to fall in love with him, thus providing another couple for the climactic wedding scene.

SILVIUS AND PHEBE

These two rustics, or country folk, are the typical shepherds and shepherdesses of pastoral romances. Though uneducated, Silvius and Phebe speak in verse. Their sheep must be wandering loose somewhere, because their only concern is love.

The roles they play are determined by convention. Phebe proudly scorns Silvius, who constantly pursues her, swearing eternal love. He seems actually to believe that her frowns can kill him, and he's always ready to die for love. When Phebe falls in love with Ganymede, she expresses the same sentiments.

Can a modern audience appreciate these characters? Of course. Most people who have ever been in love can identify with Silvius (and later with Phebe). Can you? If you regard them as people (rather than as literary parodies), they become embodiments of all the ridiculous extremes to which love can drive almost anybody.

CORIN, WILLIAM, AND AUDREY

These three rustics are very different from Silvius and Phebe. Instead of speaking in elaborate verse, Corin, William, and Audrey express themselves simply and have very limited vocabularies.

Corin befriends Rosalind, Celia, and Touchstone when they first arrive in the forest. He arranges for Rosalind and Celia to purchase a cottage, some land, and a flock of sheep. Since he knows a lot about tending sheep, Rosalind and Celia hire him to look after their flock. Corin is a good, simple man. Touchstone's nonsense philosophy confuses him, but the fool cannot make Corin doubt his own values.

Audrey is as earthy as Phebe is "poetical." Before Touchstone can woo her, he has to promise to look after her goats. She understands very little of what he says and believes that he's a courtier (a member of the royal court). If Touchstone tells the truth, she is extremely unattractive. A great deal of humor is derived from her coarseness and lack of sophistication. At one point, for example, Touchstone has to tell her to "bear [her] body more seeming [properly]" (Act V, scene iv, lines 72-73). After a distinctly unromantic courtship, she marries Touchstone.

William is a country bumpkin who may have once been engaged to Audrey. When he comes to discuss the matter with Touchstone, the fool confuses him utterly and sends him on his way. Many readers consider William's one scene a classic example of Shakespeare's skill in comedic writing.

DUKE FREDERICK AND DUKE SENIOR

Duke Frederick is a usurper (someone who seizes power illegally). He has taken the throne from his older brother, Duke Senior, and banished him to the forest. Elizabethans believed that God placed rulers on their thrones. Therefore, a usurper offended God as well as man. Frederick lives in constant fear of being overthrown himself. (In that way he's similar to another usurper in Shakespeare, Macbeth. Unlike Macbeth, however, Frederick has not

committed murder.) As a consequence, he is capable of swift mood changes and acts of terrible cruelty. He banishes Rosalind, because he fears that she is stealing the people's affection away from his own daughter, Celia. He probably also fears that, as the daughter of the rightful ruler, Rosalind might inspire the people to revolt. All he cares about is preserving his own power.

Duke Senior, on the other hand, is gentle, generous, and philosophical. He treats the lords who have joined him in exile like equals, although they still show him the respect due his position. He gladly welcomes Orlando and Adam into their group. He tries to find good in everything, even their banishment. Although living in the forest is difficult, he claims to prefer that life to the lies, flattery, and deception he had to deal with in the city.

Some readers question whether he really enjoys the forest as much as he says he does. They point out how willingly he returns to the city at the end of the play. Is he trying to convince himself that he likes the forest? Or is he pretending to be cheerful for his companions' sake?

ADAM

Orlando's faithful old servant, Adam, represents the virtues of the Old World. He clearly loved his master, Sir Rowland, and is now just as devoted to Sir Rowland's son Orlando. He even goes so far as to give Orlando all the money he has saved. Orlando proves his nobility by treating Adam with love and respect. The wicked Oliver, on the other hand, mistreats Adam, thus proving his villainy.

AMIENS

The Lord of Amiens is one of Duke Senior's men. He engages in conversation with Jaques but, unlike the duke, does not dispute with him. Amiens's main function is to sing songs about the forest life.

LE BEAU

Le Beau, a courtier, is one of Duke Frederick's followers. He is a dandy, one who always dresses in the latest fashion, no matter how ridiculous it, or he, may look. Rosalind, Celia, and Touchstone band are together to make fun of his posing. He is not merely a figure of fun, however. After the wrestling match, he risks his own safety to warn Orlando that the duke may harm him.

SIR OLIVER MARTEXT

Sir Oliver is a priest, who shows up to marry Touchstone and Audrey. His name provides a clue to his character- he will mar (ruin) his text (the wedding ceremony). By hiring this inept priest, Touchstone underscores his attitude toward marriage- that it is like the mating of animals.

OTHER ELEMENTS

SETTING

The first act of 'As You Like It' takes place in the city. Here, a man-made order has been imposed. Oliver owns his house. The duke lives in the palace and rules the land. The wildness of nature has been tamed. Trees grow in an orchard; grass is neatly trimmed into a lawn. The same rigid order is found in the city's social structure. People know exactly whom they have to please in order to get ahead. Flattery and outright deception are commonplace.

Almost all the action in Acts II to V occurs in the Forest of Arden. There, no such man-made order exists. Except for the modest cottage purchased by Rosalind and Celia, ownership is never an issue. One scene is distinguished from another simply by its taking place in "another part of the forest." Duke Senior never gives commands. His lords treat him like a respected older gentleman.

There are similarities between this forest and the woodland settings of pastoral romances. It's a rather magical place. In no forest does the animal population include both sheep and lions. An old, religious hermit lives there, and so, it seems, does Hymen, the god of marriage. Yet, there are realistic elements. The shepherd Corin has a hard life, and the duke and his men must contend with cruel winter winds.

THEMES

Here are some major themes of 'As You Like It'. Some appear to contradict each other (like the first two). As you study the play, you should decide which ones you consider valid.

1. THE PASTORAL LIFE

In Elizabethan pastoral romances (love stories set in the country), rustic life was idealized as simpler, happier, and healthier than city life. Some readers believe this play expresses the same attitude. In the city, Rosalind's and Orlando's virtues arouse so

much envy that both must flee to avoid being murdered. In the country, these two noble characters prosper. Virtuous Duke Senior seems to be happier in exile than he was at court. Country folk like Corin and Audrey are simple, hardworking people. Silvius and Phebe may seem silly, but they are harmless and rather charming. Finally, both villains (Oliver and Duke Frederick) renounce evil as soon as they arrive in the forest.

2. A SATIRE OF THE PASTORAL LIFE

Some readers believe that As You Like It exposes the absurdity of the so-called pastoral ideal. Duke Senior speaks about Arden as if it were the Garden of Eden, but he returns to the city the first chance he gets. Silvius and Phebe aren't even real shepherds. They exist only to demonstrate the absurd way rustics are portrayed in pastoral fiction. Real shepherds, such as Corin and William, are dim-witted clowns. Arden isn't Eden- it's a place where the winter winds will freeze you, if the wild beasts don't kill you first.

3. VARIETIES OF LOVE

'As You Like It' is a love story. The word "love" has many meanings. Through its various characters and their relationships, the play comments on several varieties of love.

a. Romantic Love

The essence of romantic love, as portrayed in literature, is that love must remain unfulfilled. The lovers are separated by distance, circumstance, or some unkind act of fate. Therefore, they quietly pine away for each other. This romantic ideal became popular in medieval times. By Shakespeare's time, the conventions of romantic love had been refined into a formula by the writers of romantic prose and poetry. Silvius and Phebe act out those conventions. Rosalind and Orlando flirt with the formula but ultimately rise above it.

b. Sexual Love

In sexual love, fulfillment is the only consideration. As Touchstone explains, people have needs. Marriage is an efficient, socially acceptable means to satisfy those physical needs. The love object need not be beautiful, noble, or inspirational- only available and willing.

c. Balanced Love

Rosalind and Orlando occupy a middle ground between the romantic and the purely sexual. They both feel the joy and excitement of romance, as they do inspire each other. But they want their love to lead to fulfillment. Rosalind has only just met Orlando when she tells Celia that she wants him to be the father of her children. Is their love the most complete love found in this play? What evidence can you offer to support your opinion?

d. Love as Friendship

Rosalind and Celia enjoy an ideal friendship. They feel each other's pain and enjoy each other's good qualities. There is no envy between them. Such friendships were frequently portrayed in Renaissance fiction, but the relationship was generally between two men.

4. FORTUNE AND NATURE

The play can be viewed as a study of the difference between what people deserve and what they get. "Nature," according to the Elizabethans, referred to the qualities a person is born with. "Fortune" was thought of as a force that determined a person's worldly position. By Nature, Orlando is honest, virtuous, and noble. Fortune, however, has deprived him of his birthright. His brother Oliver is petty and jealous, but Fortune has given him wealth and power. All the noble characters suffer in this play. In the end, the imbalance is corrected.

5. NATURAL VS. ARTIFICIAL

Affectations (pretensions) have always been good targets for satire. In As You Like It, Shakespeare exposes several forms of artificial behavior. The affectations of courtiers are parodied by Touchstone. Corin, William, and Audrey provide realistic examples of country folk in contrast to the artificial characters portrayed by Silvius and Phebe. Rosalind systematically explains how the conventions of romantic love do not agree with the realities of life. While ridiculing pretense, Shakespeare celebrates genuine nobility and real love.

6. ROLE PLAYING

"The entire world's a stage," says Jaques, "and all the men and women merely players" (Act II, scene vii, lines 149-150). Every

person plays a variety of roles in real life-parent, child, friend, lover, enemy, and so on. Some of the characters in this play engage in playacting as well. Some of the role-playing produces positive results. Rosalind's disguise as a man enables her to teach Orlando a valuable lesson. Celia's disguise allows her to escape from the court of her wicked father. Touchstone amuses and instructs by assuming various roles at will. Other roles cause problems. Silvius and Phebe act out the limited conventions of romantic love; without Rosalind's help, their relationship would remain static. Some readers consider Jaques a consummate role player. They hold that his criticisms come not from true feeling but from a desire for attention.

7. ORDER VS. DISORDER

Elizabethans believed that God established the order and rank of people and things. Whoever disturbed that order committed a sin. Duke Frederick upset God's plan when he stole his older brother's throne. Oliver committed a wrong by refusing to respect his late father's wishes. These sins cause suffering. The noble characters must endure hardship, and the villains can't enjoy the power and wealth they've stolen. By the end of the play, the natural order is restored. Both villains are converted, and God's will once again prevails.

STYLE

You can learn a lot about the characters in 'As You Like It' by examining the way they speak. For example, if you look at Orlando's use of language in Act I, you will notice that his statements are bold and direct but always respectful. That suggests that he's a noble young man, forced to stand up for his rights. Oliver, in contrast, is snide and deceitful. The tyrant Duke Frederick often gives commands. His speeches contain neither wit nor poetry. Rosalind and Celia have a natural optimism and enthusiasm for life that no hardship can subdue. Their speech accordingly bubbles with wit and good humor.

In the forest, when Orlando's thoughts turn to love, his mode of expression changes. He becomes fanciful and poetic in talking about Rosalind. Silvius and Phebe speak only in verse; love is all that matters to them. The severely limited vocabularies of Corin, William, and Audrey tell you that these are genuine rustics- uneducated, and familiar only with matters pertaining to sheep and goats.

Some of the dialogue is written in verse (Silvius and Phebe's, for example). For these passages, Shakespeare used unrhymed iambic pentameter- that is, lines of ten syllables each, with every second syllable accented. Other characters, like Corin and Audrey, speak less formally in prose. Most of the others alternate between two styles.

Shakespeare's language is loaded with imagery- words and phrases that make you see a picture. The imagery tells you something about the speaker's character or his emotions. A good example is Jaques's famous speech about the Seven Ages of Man (Act II, scene iii). Jaques paints a picture to describe each age, from the "mewling and puking" infant to the old man who has entered "second childishness." Each image reflects Jaques's melancholy and overcritical nature.

As you read, ask yourself: How is each character using language? What does his or her language reveal about that character?

FORM AND STRUCTURE

'As You Like It' is divided into five acts, which are subdivided into scenes. Many readers have commented that almost all the major events of the play occur in the first act and a half. The city characters are introduced and the necessary history is explained (exposition). Each of the major characters is given a reason to go to the Forest of Arden. After Act II, scene iii, only one short scene takes place in the city.

In the country, nothing happens quickly except the characters' falling in love. The tension of the plot grows out of Rosalind's disguise. When will she reveal her true identity? What will happen when she does? In that sense, Rosalind has the power to end the play whenever she chooses. She takes time to explore the consequences of her disguise while discussing matters of love and philosophy. More confusions and additional pairs of lovers are added until Act V, scene ii, when Rosalind decides that it's time to unmask herself. The four marriages in Act V, scene iv, the repentance of both villains, and the restoration of Duke Senior's dukedom all give the play an entirely happy ending. Music and dancing follow, after which Rosalind turns to the audience and delivers a short epilogue.

THE GLOBE THEATRE

One of the most famous theaters of all time is the Globe Theatre. It was one of several Shakespeare worked in during his career and many of the greatest plays of English literature were performed there. Built in 1599 for L600 just across the River Thames from London, it burned down in 1613 when a spark from a cannon in a battle scene in Shakespeare's Henry VIII set fire to the thatched roof. The theater was quickly rebuilt and survived until 1644. No one knows exactly what the Globe looked like but some scholarly detective work has given us a pretty good idea.

When it was built, the Globe was the latest thing in theater design. It was a three-story octagon (eight-sided building) with covered galleries surrounding an open yard some 50 feet across. Three sides of the octagon were devoted to the stage and backstage areas. The main stage was a raised platform that jutted into the center of the yard, or pit. Behind the stage was the tiring house- the backstage area where the actors dressed and waited for their cues. It was flanked by two doors and contained an inner stage with a curtain used when the script called for a scene to be discovered. (Some scholars think the inner stage was actually a tent or pavilion that could be moved about the stage.) Above the inner stage was the upper stage, a curtained balcony that could serve as the battlements in Hamlet or for the balcony scene in Romeo and Juliet. Most of the action of the play took place on the main and upper stages.

The third story held the musicians' gallery and machinery for sound effects and pyrotechnics. Above all was a turret, from which a flag was flown to announce "Performance today." A roof (the shadow) covered much of the stage and not only protected the players from sudden showers but also contained machinery needed for special effects. More machinery was located under the stage, where several trapdoors permitted the sudden appearance of ghosts in a play and allowed actors to leap into rivers or graves, as the script required.

For a penny (a day's wages for an apprentice), you could stand with the "groundlings" in the yard to watch the play; another penny would buy you a seat in the upper galleries; and a third would get you a cushioned seat in the lower gallery- the best seats in the house. The audience would be a mixed crowd- scholars, courtiers, and merchants and their families in the galleries; rowdy apprentices and young men looking for excitement in the yard; and

pickpockets and prostitutes taking advantage of the crowds to ply their trades. And crowds there would be- the Globe could probably hold 2,000 to 3,000 people, and even an ordinary performance would attract a crowd of 1,200.

The play you came to see would be performed in broad daylight during the warmer months. In colder weather, Shakespeare's troupe appeared indoors at court or in one of London's private theaters. There was no scenery as we know it, but there are indications that the Elizabethans used simple set pieces such as trees, bowers, or battle tents to indicate location. Any props needed were readied in the tiring house by the book keeper (we'd call him the stage manager) and carried on and off by actors. If time or location were important, the characters usually said something about it. Trumpet flourishes told the audience that an important character was about to enter, rather like a modern spotlight, and a scene ended when all the characters left the stage. (Bodies of dead characters were carried off stage.) Little attention was paid to historical accuracy in plays such as Julius Caesar or Macbeth, and actors wore contemporary clothing. One major difference from the modern theater was that all female parts were played by young boys; Elizabethan custom did not permit women to act.

If the scenery was minimal, the performance made up for it in costumes and spectacle. English actors were famous throughout Europe for their skill as dancers, and some performances ended with a dance (or jig). Blood, in the form of animal blood or red paint, was lavished about in the tragedies; ghosts made sudden appearances amid swirling fog; thunder was simulated by rolling a cannonball along the wooden floor of the turret or by rattling a metal sheet. The costumes were gorgeous- and expensive! One "robe of estate" alone cost L19, a year's wages for a skilled workman of the time. But the costumes were a large part of the spectacle that the audience came to see, and they had to look impressive in broad daylight, with the audience right up close.

You've learned some of the conventions of the Globe Theatre, a theater much simpler than many of ours but nevertheless offering Shakespeare a wide range of possibilities for staging his plays. Now let's see how specific parts of As You Like It might have been presented at the Globe.

If you could slip back in time and see As You Like It at the

Globe, you might be surprised at the speed of the play. A modern production of Shakespeare takes at least two and a half hours, and that's with part of the play omitted. But back in Shakespeare's day, plays took only about two hours. This could be done because there was no real break between scenes, and no scenery had to be shifted. Instead, different parts of the stage could be used.

Imagine how this could work in 'As You Like It'. The first scene of Act I would take place on the main stage; then the second and third scenes, set in rooms in the palace, could be acted on the inner stage. The first scene of Act II (remember, no break between acts) would be back on the main stage for the forest. The next scene, another room in the palace, could use the balcony stage. Then one side of the main stage could serve for Scene iii, in front of Oliver's house, represented by the door. For Scene iv Rosalind, Celia, and Touchstone could enter from the other side of the stage and Rosalind would announce, "This is the Forest of Arden." Each scene would follow on the heels of the one before it, so that the play would move very quickly.

THE CRITICS

'As You Like It', as its title asserts, has something to offer every taste. On one level it serves as stock romantic comedy, with disguised princesses, an unjustly deposed ruler, and a handsome leading couple. But the play also offers food for thought on a traditionally entertaining subject, the assets and drawbacks of country life. And the dedicated student of literature can consider the play's relationship to a favorite *RENAISSANCE* literary mode, the *PASTORAL* romance, a form of escapist writing with roots in ancient Greece. Further, the play is a sparkling theatrical entertainment, with more songs than any other Shakespearean play and several diverting set pieces: an on-stage wrestling match in 1.2, a a procession of singing hunters in 4.2 (traditionally carrying a deer's carcass, though a set of antlers has been generally substituted in modern times), and Hymen's charming masque in 5.4.

These features enliven a work whose plotting is strikingly undramatic. After Act 1 establishes the separate banishments of Duke Senior, Orlando, and Rosalind, Acts 2-4, set in Arden, lack striking change. Adam seems near death in 2.3, but we know that the exiled duke's comfortable establishment is near, and we feel only admiration for Orlando's devotion rather than anxiety for Adam's plight. Orlando invades the Duke's banquet, but we know

that he will be graciously received, and we are not chilled by any threat of violence. Oliver's tale of peril and salvation offers no thrilling tension, for we know he survived to tell us about it.

Instead of a plot, the play presents conversations among different combinations of characters. They talk mostly about romantic love, country living, or both. Their remarks weave a shimmering pattern of agreements and contradictions, harmonies and counterpoints that constitute the substance of Acts 2-4. There emerges from this fabric of ideas an opposition of two points of view: responsiveness to love and life, represented by Rosalind; and a withdrawal from complexities and commitment, represented by Jaques. The play's climax in Act 5 produces a resolutionin favor of the former. Jaques, although no villain, must be defeated if the life-affirming spirit of the lovers is to triumph, for his doctrine of passivity and retreat is ultimately antisocial.

Shakespeare neatly and subtly presents the opposition of Jaques and the lovers by having first Orlando and then Rosalind dismiss the melancholy courtier from the stage with a rebuke, in 3.2.289 and 4.1.36 respectively, before each of the two great wooing scenes. This is a bold instance of the dominant technique in the play; the development of the dramatic tension not through plotting, as we have seen, but by juxtaposing encounters among the characters. For the most part, we are not expected to judge the speakers but rather to enjoy their meetings and gradually appreciate their differences.

For instance, the pastoral world of the banished duke in the forest of Arden is described, even before we see it, as one in which the exiles 'fleet the time carelessly as they did in the golden world' (1.1.118-119), a reference to the golden age of ancient mythology, analogous to Eden in the Judeo-Christian tradition. However, once the play's action moves to Arden, this proposition is undermined. The duke's praise of his exiled court's woodland life is followed immediately by an account of Jaques' lament for the wounded deer, which critiques human inteference with nature. Jaque's comments also present a cynical, distrustful image of human society, as he invectively ... pierceth / The body of counry, city, court' (2.1.58-59). In 2.2 Duke Frederik's villainy is once again displayed, supporting Jaque's dark viewpoint but also reaffirming the essential virtue of the exiled Duke Senior's court. Shakespeare establishes Arden as an ideal, pastoral world in which characters criticise the real one, but then other characters criticize them, both explicitly and by implication. Further when Rosalind arrives in Arden

with Celia and Touchstone in 2.4, their initial response is humorously unenthusiastic, with Rosalind weary in spirit and Touchstone weary in body; the fool comments that 'at home I was in a better place' (2.4.14). Thus we can ponder several points of view without being diverted from the central situation of the drama.

In 2.5 Amiens sings a song that illustrates the Duke's attitude towards the pastoral life, that those 'who doth ambition shun' (2.5.35) are happy to have no enemies but the weather, but Jaques responds a comically insulting parody. In 2.7 Jaques' delightfully expressed desire to be a jester like Touchstone, licensed to satire everyone provokes a sharp reprimand from the duke for wishing to correct the world's vices when he has sinned himself. Later in the same scene Jaques' position is again rejected. As the melancholy courtier completes his sardonic account of human life with a morbid description of helpless old age, Orlando bears in Adam, whom the duke, who is entirely unaffected by Jaques' speech, treats with reverence. The scene closes with another instance of such subtle contradiction. Amiens sings a song condemning humanity for '... ingratitude' and asserting that 'most friendship is feigning, most loving mere folly' (2.7.174-193). Just at the moment, the duke's hospitality is enabling Orlando to express his gratitude for Adam's friendship and loyalty. The basis of the pastoral convention – the idealization of rustic life and an accompanying cynicism towards sophisticated society – are espoused, but they are just as persistently contradicted and undercut.

Most telling in this respect are the play's comparisons of different lovers. The central figures are Rosalind and Orlando. They are flanked by comic variations: the ridiculously conventional Silvius and Phebe on the one hand, and the equally preposterous yet earthy Touchstone and Audrey (with an assist from William) on the other. The lovesick shepherd and the hard-hearted shepherdess who rejects him were standard figures in pastoral literature, and Silvius and Phebe are absurd manifestations of it. Their exaggeration is emphasized by Rosalind's own overstated realism when she advises Phebe, 'Sell when you can, you are not for all markets' (3.5.60).

Silvius's sentimentality is countered in Touchstone's attitude to Audrey. So far from adoring Audrey, or being in love with love itself, the jester finds only that 'man hath his desires, and as pigeons bill, so wedlock would be nibbling' (3.3.72-73). His detached and resigned submission to human instincts is ironically

opposed to the worship of an ideal woman. Touchstone also provides a foil for Rosalind's love for Orlando. When Silvius' plaintive lament reminds the heroine of her seemingly impossible passion (Orlando not yet having arrived in Arden), Touchstone immediately mocks her by saying that his preposterous love for one Jane Smile led him to kiss 'the cow's dugs that her pretty chopt hands had milked' (2.4.46-47).

In another repeated theme, different sort of rustic characters are contrasted. Silvius and Phebe are essentially stereotypical literary lovers, countrified only vaguely by their occupation as shepherds. Audrey and her helpless swain William are typical rustic buffoons, instances of the Shakespearean CLOWN. And Corin is a lifelike peasant, a man who fully understands the realities of extracting a living from the land. In 2.4.73-84 he frankly discusses his poverty and, by implication, the essential falseness and sentimentality of the pastoral convention. At the same time, he does not envy the courtiers their easier but less honest life, and his exchanges with Touchstone in 3.2.11-83 constitute one of the most telling critiques of the pastoral in the play. The country world holds its own against courtly sophistication, yet its hardships and difficulties are clearly stated.

Even the two figures that comment on the activities of the others, Touchstone and Jaques, are pointedly different from each other. They first meet offstage, as we hear in Jaques' enthusiastic report on the 'motley fool' (2.7.13). Touchstone's observations on the human tendency to ripen and then rot appeal greatly to the melancholy courtier. However, the jester ridicules everything and has no philosophy, while Jaques is dedicated to a pessimistic view of life and looks to mockery to 'cleanse the foul body of th'infected world' (2.7.60). His jaded attitude leads him to withdraw from human society at the play's end, whereas Touchstone enters the play's swirl of courtships with enthusiasm, if also with sarcasm. Touchstone eventually joins the 'country copulatives' (5.4.35) and marries, while Jaques departs, declaring himself 'for other than for dancing measures' (5.4.192). The contrast reflects the play's two opposing poles, love and withdrawal.

The play's repeated juxtapositions of ideas and temperaments comstitute its overall mood and are perhaps referred to in its title. Each character has an opinion about love and the good life, but then another personality presents a viewpoint that contradicts or modifies it. Each idea is qualified, and each has some

merit. In the end, as the multiple marriages in 5.4 suggests, the dominant theme is the unifying power of love.

Rosalind represents this theme throughout, and perhaps the most telling juxtaposition in the play is that of Rosalind to herself in her disguise as Ganymede. Ganymede insists that Orlando's love is a sickness he can cure. The delightful result is the spectacle of Rosalind, while madly in love with Orlando, telling him that 'love is merely madness' (3.2.388) and then quite hysterically confiding her love to Celia – 'O coz, coz, coz ... that thou didst know how many fathom deep I am in love!' (4.1.195-196). The climax nears in 5.2, when Ganymede's masquerade can no longer suffice. The love between Celia and Oliver is too much for Orlando to witness without pain; he insists that he cannot go on with the pretence that Ganymede is Rosalind. The disguised heroine realizes that her lover has outgrown the conventional attitudes she has been teasing him about, and she prepares to resume her true identity. Her turn to magic – reprised in the appearance of the supernatural Hymen in 5.4 – is appropriate to the position she has occupied as the prime manipulator of affairs. Disguised as Ganymede, she has been invisible though entirely in control. She returns accompanied by the solemn magic of Hymen's masque, casting a spell of acceptance and reconciliation; even Jaques, despite his withdrawal, bless the couple with humor and wisdom.

Hymen's nature is problematic, but whether he is a supernatural being or a costumed human recruited by Rosalind is not as important as his role as a symbole of divine approval for the play's happy ending. This suggestion has been prepared for by religious references. Some are quite touching evocations of traditional religion, such as Adam's touching prayer, 'He that doth the raven's feed. / Yea providently caters for the sparrow. / Be comfort to my age' (2.3.43-45), and Orlando's equation of 'better days' with times when 'bells have knoll'd to church' (2.7.113-114). Others are more prosaic allusions to biblical episodes. Orlando touches on the parable of the prodigal son in describing his lot under Oliver, in 1.1.37-39; In 2.1.5 Duke Senior likens his exile to the expulsion from the Garden of Eden, and Jaques refers to the plagues of Egypt in 2.5.58. Corin assumes that one may 'find the way to Heaven / by doing deeds of hospitality' (2.4.79-80). Duke Frederick is converted by an 'old religious man' (5.4.159), and Rosalind invents an 'old religious uncle' (3.2.336) for Ganymede. The entire episode of Sir Oliver Martext, however ridiculous, raises other issues of churchly doctrine. These references subtly suggest

the parallels between Christian ideals of pity and loving-kindness and the play's themes of love and reconciliation.

-Charles Boyce, From *As You Like It* Commentary, Dictionary of Shakespeare, 1996

ON THE PASTORAL SETTING

...Externally the setting is that of a conventional pastoral play. The forest is full of shepherds, foresters, and other creatures who could live together only in an Elysium of escape from the real world. But the Forest of Arden is no mirage of wish fulfillment. It is not like the world of Italian pastoral romance, not a country in which the longings of those bored with city life were realized. It is an actual English woodland through which real winds blow, a region near the haunts of Robin Hood and his merry men... And what creatures do they find there? They meet characters who belong to the most artificial of all worlds of fiction, the pastoral romance. Silvius, the sighing lovesick swain, is there, and Phebe, the obstinately chaste shepherdess. So are William and Audrey, neither of whom has ever been washed by the romantic imagination or any other known cleansing agent. They are the shepherd and his lass as they really are, ignorant dirty louts-simple folk who know nothing but what Nature has taught them. "Here," says Shakespeare, "are two authentic children of Nature." This is the heterogeneous company to which Rosalind and Orlando must belong if they prefer Arcadia to the artifices of civilized life. The play thus ridicules the belief that life close to Nature is best. The comedy is, as Joseph Wood Krutch says, a "playfully satiric fantasy on the idea of the simple life."

-Oscar Campbell, Shakespeare's Satire, 1955

ON ROSALIND

...Rosalind loves Orlando without limit, and... she is the happiest of many happy persons in Arden. Her criticism of love and cuckooland is unremitting, yet she has not annihilated them. Rather she has preserved them by removing the flaws of their softness. That is the duty of criticism- a simple duty for a girl with sound imagination and a healthy heart. As Arden emerges from the fires of "As You Like It" a perfected symbol of the golden age, so Rosalind steps forth not burned but brightened, a perfected symbol of the romantic heroine. Romance has been tested in her until we know it cannot shatter; laughter has made it sure of itself. There is only one

thing sillier than being in love, and that is thinking it is silly to be in love. Rosalind skips through both errors to wisdom.

-Mark Van Doren, Shakespeare, 1939

ON TOUCHSTONE

Touchstone's role is that of the Court Jester, the "all-licensed fool." It is as such that he first appears at Duke Frederick's court, using the Fool's license to mock at the Knight who swore by his honor that the pancakes were good, and indulging himself at the same time with a side thrust at the Duke, who loves this honorless Knight. He is threatened, to be sure, with a whipping, the customary penalty for the Fool who overstepped his bounds- cf. Lear's warning to his Jester- but he is clever enough to sidestep the danger at Court, and once he is in Arden all danger blows away in the forest air. Here he is free to practice, unchecked, his vocation, the exposure of folly. That, presumably, is the significance of his name; he is the touchstone that distinguishes pure from base metal.

-Thomas Parrot, Shakespearean Comedy, 1949

ON JAQUES

In this utopian pastoral world the fugitives also come upon the melancholy Jaques. He has no counterpart in Lodge's novel; he is entirely Shakespeare's invention. Because his only part in the comedy is to stand aloof from the action and make satiric comment upon all that happens, critics have been tempted to regard him as Shakespeare's mouthpiece. Many readers have therefore mistaken the famous soliloquy beginning "All the world's a stage" for a succinct revelation of the pessimism which captured Shakespeare's mind about 1600. Life to him, they say, had then become just the pageant of futility of the melancholy Jaques' vision.

This is a naive view of a highly effective dramatic figure- one that had become a popular stage type. Jaques is Shakespeare's representative of the traveller recently returned from a sojourn on the continent, laden with boredom and histrionic pessimism. His melancholy is artificial and his disgust with everything at home is a pose.

-Oscar Campbell, Shakespeare's Satire, 1955

[Jaques] cannot be wholly dismissed. A certain sour distaste for life is voided through him, something most of us feel at some time or other. If he were not there to give expression to it, we

might be tempted to find the picture of life in the forest too sweet. His only action is to interfere in the marriage of Touchstone and Audrey; and this he merely postpones. His effect, whenever he appears, is to deflate: the effect does not last and cheerfulness soon breaks in again.

-Helen Gardner, "As You Like It," 1970

A FEMINIST VIEWPOINT

...In court, Celia and Rosalind have a completely equal, give-and-take relationship. However, once they enter the forest in their disguises, Celia's part diminishes. Partly this is because Rosalind's involvement with Orlando is central to the design, but partly it functions to allow Rosalind to live out a freer, more assertive and independent role than she could otherwise. This tendency is observable in II, iv, before the women are aware that Orlando is in the forest too. In male garb, Rosalind automatically becomes the dominant figure of the two. It is she who deals with the outside world, who can meet and converse with men, speak and act assertively, even authoritatively. And she is listened to seriously, bantered with, without the deferential, complimentary, and essentially trivializing address that gentlewomen receive from gentlemen in Shakespeare's plays. She is thus able to develop and demonstrate areas of her personality that could not, according to the stage conventions Shakespeare adhered to, be gracefully revealed if she were in female apparel. She restrains Touchstone's arrogance and disparages Jaques' melancholy; she chides Silvius and Phebe; she is flip with her father. Above all, she is able to speak to Orlando about love without coyness or concealment, without having to defend against romantic or erotic attitudes or demonstrations. In short, she can be a person.

-Marilyn French, Shakespeare's Division of Experience, 1981

Shakespearean Literature

A MIDSUMMER NIGHT'S DREAM

1598

INTRODUCTION

As we might expect from the range and vitality of Shakespeare's writing, Elizabethan England was an exciting and changing place. Though we know little of Shakespeare's own life, we know much about his world. For England, the sixteenth century was a period of growth and exploration, contributing to a renaissance in cultural and economic life. Under the reigns of Elizabeth I (1558-1603) and James I (1603-1625), London became one of the artistic and mercantile centers of Europe. We can still see the beauty of its half-timbered houses, its bridge-towers and churches. But above all, the literature of the period continues to excite the minds of readers, offering great riches of imagination and language.

For Shakespeare and his contemporaries, the English language was changing and growing. Dictionaries had not yet solidified spelling and meaning, and sometimes Elizabethan poetry seems to be possessed of a great unrefined power. Poets and playwrights -among them Edmund Spenser, Ben Jonson, Christopher Marlowe, as well as Shakespeare- reveled in the riches of this emerging language and created a brilliant new drama.

It is well to remember that in Shakespeare's time theater was a popular pastime (something like movies are today), attended by both common folk and royalty. It was not merely the province of an intellectual few. Folk traditions of ballad and song, as well as the Christian miracle and mystery plays, had accustomed the people to poetic drama, its speeches cast in rhyme and meter. And the Elizabethan theater highlighted the spoken word. It used few stage properties and almost no scenery. Its outdoor circular theaters surrounded a bare apron-shaped stage. The characters came and left at a fast pace, and what they said indicated who and where they were. The Elizabethan audience was attentive to the spoken word. A playwright might as easily present his ideas and actions in the form of poetic images or narrative speeches, for the theater was a place in which the ear, not merely the eye, was dazzled. And this was the kind of environment especially well suited for William Shakespeare.

You will see in 'A Midsummer Night's Dream' how appropriate this poetic method is. The fairy world comes alive not

from stage tricks, elaborate costumes, and airy sets, but through poetry. Detailed fantastic descriptions, cascades of named flowers, images of a powerful and mysterious natural world- these are what make the fairy world vivid. The magic lives in Shakespeare's language.

The world of his writing is filled with cultural riches, extraordinary characters, and historical events. But of Shakespeare's own life we know little. He was born in the small town of Stratford in 1564, around the 23rd of April. His baptism certificate tells us that. His father was a somewhat well to do merchant and councilman whose fortunes seemed to slip as Shakespeare grew older. In all probability he saw to it that William took advantage of the public education available to all the sons of Stratford's citizens. But most of what we know about Shakespeare in this early period is conjecture. The only other certain information we have is his marriage, in 1582, to Ann Hathaway, a woman eight years older than he. Since a child Susanna was born six months later, the bride was already pregnant at the time of the wedding. In 1585, the twins Hamnet and Judith were born.

For the rest- at least regarding Stratford- there is only legend. Some say Shakespeare was booted out of town for poaching at a neighboring estate; others say he taught school. We do know that around 1587 Shakespeare left Stratford for the creative opportunity to be found in the big city of London. Its lure would be the same as that of any metropolis today: a rich and varied cultural life, political power-broking, history in the making, pageantry, and the good life. Perhaps he apprenticed himself to one of the local theater companies right away. But in truth we don't know how he became such an accomplished writer so quickly. By 1592 he was already being attacked by a local playwright, Robert Greene, for being an "upstart crowe," an actor who would be better off leaving the writing of plays to real playwrights. The furor that followed this famous accusation shows that Shakespeare had established a considerable reputation by the time it was written. No one bothers to attack an unknown writer. And the accusation, importantly, also reminds us that Shakespeare was an actor as well as a writer. All his life he combined these two vocations, giving him special entry into the world of theater, its nuances, and the interplay between the acted and written word. By 1593 he'd also proved himself a commanding poet with the publication of the poem Venus and Adonis, followed the next year by The Rape of Lucrece.

For the next eighteen or twenty years Shakespeare produced a succession of plays that mark him as the premier poet and playwright of his age- perhaps the finest the English language has seen. Through comedies, histories, and tragedies he speaks of his time and world with an authority that makes them seem, generation after generation, completely contemporary. He was fortunate to have a company of actors throughout his writing life with which he could work, gaining from the traded insights and from the ability of seeing his work produced. He was able to benefit from the resources of the finest Elizabethan outdoor playhouse, the Globe, so that his work had a state-of-the-art theater in which to be performed. He had noble patronage to help him at the beginning (the Earl of Southampton) and even royal favor when his patron became embroiled in an unsuccessful coup d'etat and was imprisoned. Instead of trouble, Shakespeare found grace: by the time James I assumed the throne in 1603, Shakespeare's players, formerly associated as the Chamberlain's Men, were now called the King's Men, receiving royal patronage and favor.

Around 1611 Shakespeare retired from London and the theater, to return to his family at Stratford. He presumably lived out his life peacefully, dying in 1616. But once again legend obscures fact. A famous tombstone inscription, ascribed to him, seeks to gain him a peaceful death as well; it reads, "Blest be the man that spares these stones, / And curst be he that moves my bones." No one has moved them.

Shakespeare was unique among the world's great dramatists in his ability to create the finest examples of both comedy and tragedy. That the same writer could produce 'King Lear' and 'A Midsummer Night's Dream', 'Hamlet' and 'The Tempest', has been a source of wonderment to millions of readers. Also, his complex English-history plays, with their multiple plots and points of view, have influenced the way we think of history itself. The wide range of Shakespeare's achievement was boldly set forth in the first edition of his complete dramatic works in 1623 when the publishers divided what has come to be known as the "First Folio" into Comedies, Histories, and Tragedies.

Despite this variety, there are ways in which King Lear could only have been written by the author of 'A Midsummer Night's Dream'. One way is that in both plays no character's perspective is sufficient to judge everyone else's. Also, merely understanding a human problem will not solve it without a transformation of another sort, a genuine change of heart. And throughout his comedies, this

most witty writer kept vivid the sense that wit alone is not an adequate response to people and situations.

An early comedy, almost overflowing with witty wordplay, is Love's Labour's Lost. The lesson learned by its principal characters is that words and wit must be tempered by concern for others' feelings. And as with most of his comedies, part of the play is set in a special place where transformations can take place more freely, outside the busy world of court or city. In 'A Midsummer Night's Dream', the lovers expend great energy speaking in witty romantic repartee. And the fairies' forest is the magical place that surrounds their transformations. In 'The Merchant of Venice', another early comedy, Belmont, where Portia lives, is the special place; in 'As You Like It' it is the forest of Arden.

In the so-called "dark" comedies ('All's Well That Ends Wel'l, 'Troilus and Cressida', 'Measure for Measure') the magic place where people can be revealed and healed almost disappears. Lechery, spitefulness, and selfishness are exposed rather than transformed. But in the later comedies, sometimes called the "romances," healing magic returns: 'Pericles', 'Cymbeline', 'The Winter's Tale', and 'The Tempest'. In fact, the whole of 'The Tempest' takes place on a magic island ruled by a sorcerer who has the knowledge and power to transform the rational forces that had exiled him years before. Prospero is a wiser, more mature Oberon, and his attendant Ariel is a more spiritual Puck.

'A Midsummer Night's Dream' was probably written around 1594. Some scholars suggest it was written to be performed at a noble wedding ceremony, perhaps that of William Stanley, Earl of Denby, to Elizabeth Vere in 1595. This is pure speculation, however, fueled by the importance of marriage to the play. Its similarity in language and theme to 'Romeo and Juliet' also helps date the play. Though one is a comedy and the other a tragedy, both deal with the nature of love, its impulsive judgments and vows. Romeo and Juliet are tricked by their fate, ending in death. But fate, in the form of Oberon, interferes on behalf of the lovers in 'A Midsummer Night's Dream', and their trials end in marriage.

Though it comes early in Shakespeare's career, 'A Midsummer Night's Dream' shows his command of the different strands that combined to make great Elizabethan drama. In his courtly subplot of Theseus and Hippolyta, Shakespeare demonstrates his familiarity with classical subjects. He interweaves mythic and historical material to give his characters an imposing royal stature. With the lovers, Shakespeare shows his command of

romantic poetry, the formal language of love developed centuries earlier by the troubadors of France. Though he is mocking in tone with the lovers, he gives romantic poetry a free reign with Oberon and Titania, who draw on folk ballads and pastoral traditions to create the magic of high poetry. And with Bottom and his rustic comrades, Shakespeare develops a realism based on Christian folk plays that enables him to bring all kinds and classes of people into his art. 'A Midsummer Night's Dream' offers a unique blending of styles, characters, and realms of experience into a unified work of art.

Shakespeare's life in London was filled with a similar mix of people and types. It was a throbbing metropolis for its time, bursting the bounds of its medieval walls. But its modernity was tempered by the folk traditions and beliefs of the people who streamed to its streets. In the life of the English countryside the mythic, legendary fairies and elves- known from centuries of ancient Celtic traditions- still had a place. Shakespeare was able to combine this magic imaginary world with the contemporary urban landscape of London. Watch the ways in which he is able to include all kinds of people, and different dimensions of experience, to paint a picture that in the largest possible sense parallels the world in which he lived.

THE PLOT

In the ancient city of Athens a wedding is about to take place between Theseus, duke of Athens, and Hippolyta, the Amazon warrior queen whom he has wooed and won. They meet in the duke's palace to discuss their marriage festivities. Suddenly, Egeus storms in, extremely upset. He wants his daughter, Hermia, to marry Demetrius, who is dutifully in love with her. Hermia, however, is in love with Lysander and refuses to give in to her father's demands. The two suitors and the woman they both love state their case before the duke. Theseus explains that Athenian law is on the side of the father: Hermia must heed his wishes, not follow her own desire. In fact, Hermia must obey the law, remain a virgin and enter a nunnery, or die! Hermia is given until the next new moon- the wedding day of Theseus and Hippolyta- to make her decision. She and Lysander secretly plan, instead, to flee Athens and live outside of town with an aunt of Lysander's. Another young woman, Helena, arrives. She is in love with Demetrius, but he will have none of her. The lovers tell her of their plan to elope.

In the house of Quince, a carpenter, several Athenian workingmen meet to discuss their plans to present a play as entertainment for the wedding of the duke. Quince, Snug, Bottom, Flute, Snout, and Starveling have decided on a play entitled "The most lamentable comedy, and most cruel death of Pyramus and Thisby." Parts are assigned to each player, but only after Bottom, full of boundless energy and enthusiasm, shows how he could play all the parts himself. They agree to rehearse the following evening in a wood outside of town.

The scene shifts to that Athenian wood, but now the players are of an entirely different order. They are Oberon, the king of the fairies, his queen, Titania, and Puck (or Robin Goodfellow), a spritely attendant of the king. Oberon and Titania have been quarreling over the possession of a young Indian boy that both want, but the Queen will not hand him over. Oberon, with the aid of Puck, plans his revenge on Titania. He will drop the juice of a magic flower into the eyes of his sleeping queen. When she awakes, she will fall in love with whomever (or whatever) she sees first, preferably "some vile thing." Then she will forget about the boy!

Meanwhile, Demetrius and Helena enter the wood. Seeing Helena's loveless plight, Oberon instructs Puck to charm the eyes of Demetrius as well, so that he will love Helena.

Now Lysander and Hermia arrive, en route to their elopement. Mistaking Lysander for Demetrius, Puck anoints the eyes of Lysander, who awakes and declares his love for Helena. Hermia awakes in the woods alone, having dreamt of a serpent eating her heart.

On time for their rehearsal, the workingmen also arrive in the wood and begin to sort out "Pyramus and Thisby." Mischievous Puck jumps at the chance to cause trouble. He catches Bottom and places an ass's head on him. The other rustics flee in terror. But Titania's reaction is different. Charmed by the love juice, she immediately falls in love with Bottom, ass's head and all.

The lovers regroup in confusion. Now both Lysander and Demetrius profess love for Helena instead of for Hermia. Angers flare up and swords are drawn, but Puck leads everyone in magic circles so no real harm comes. Oberon, seeing the mistake that has taken place, has Puck remove the charm from Lysander's eyes so that his love returns for Hermia. Demetrius remains "enchanted" with his Helena.

Titania is also released from her enchantment. Reunited with Oberon, she surrenders the Indian boy to the king. The lovers, startled by the arrival of Theseus and his court, awaken as if from a mysterious dream, properly in love with each other, but startled as to how they've gotten there. Theseus, finding that things have worked out rather neatly, overrides Egeus and announces that the three weddings will take place simultaneously. Bottom is relieved of his ass's head and returns to Quince's house to continue rehearsing the play.

In the palace of Theseus, preparations commence for the wedding festivities. Bottom and company perform their "lamentable comedy." A comedy it is, and though the duke and the others offer much jesting commentary about the production, they are ultimately well pleased with the entertainment. The three sets of newlyweds adjourn to their beds.

Puck arrives to sweep away the last grains of sleepy enchantment. Oberon and Titania offer blessings upon the houses of the lovers. Puck, with a glint in his eye, asks for applause. After all, he suggests, these proceedings may have been nothing "but a dream."

THE CHARACTERS

THESEUS

As duke of Athens, Theseus occupies an important social and political position that is at the heart of his character. Though he had a lively past, filled with heroic war exploits and romantic conquests, he now is a figure of the Athenian establishment, upholding the social order. As such, he represents, in contrast to the volatile lovers, the stabilizing force of marriage.

Theseus is a traditional Greek mythic hero. He is mentioned in many ancient texts, including Homer, Euripides, Plutarch, and Ovid. He is probably most famous for having killed the monstrous Minotaur, in the labyrinth of Minos on Crete. Though there is occasional mention of his former deeds, the person of Shakespeare's Theseus is as much the playwright's invention as he is a legendary figure.

With his upholding of the social order comes Theseus's praise of reason as a primary power. He and Hippolyta are untouched by the fairy realm. They seem to be above the magic, but you might also see them as being outside of it. Theseus's reliance on reason blocks him off from some of the more mystical realms of human experience. In Act V, he draws a famous comparison between the lover, the lunatic, and the poet. He feels

they are all under the sway of their imaginations, which blinds them to reality. In consequence, some realms of passion and art are closed to him.

Theseus may be trapped in his position, or he may be filling it grandly. In either case, he has a kindly awareness of his subjects. Though he may not be appreciative of art per se, he understands the good intentions of the actors. He knows that his position alone has a certain power and seeks to use it with a clear and just mind.

HIPPOLYTA

A warrior in her own right, Hippolyta maintains a kind of aloof dignity. She too is a Greek legendary figure, an Amazon queen of fierce pride and strength. In the beginning of the play she counters Theseus's impatience for the wedding day with a cool, imperial rationality of her own. Yet she doesn't rely so completely on reason: she is charmed and a little disturbed by the lovers' stories. She's not willing to discount their tales completely. While viewing the performance of the rustic workingmen, she seems to be impatient with the amateur nature of the production, though she warms to it by the end. Perhaps she too feels the necessity to temper her natural passions with stateliness proper to her office. Compare her to the emotionally stormy lovers. How might her reserve be seen as a more mature kind of relating? Both she and Theseus bracket the play, beginning and end, like the pillars of society between which the Midsummer Madness occurs.

HERMIA

Hermia shows her spunkiness right from the beginning. Though the force of familial and social power is brought heavily to bear upon her, she sticks to her guns. Her first words are a defense of Lysander against the accusations of her father, Egeus, and Theseus. She asks that her father look with her eyes, to try to see her viewpoint. She stands up for what she believes in even though it may mean her death. It's easy to side with Hermia- but what could you say in defense of her father's position?

Hermia is unswerving in her devotion to Lysander through all his changes and always gives him the benefit of the doubt. She loves him with an authenticity that goes beyond "doting," and her pain at being betrayed by him seems equally real.

She is described as having a dark complexion and being small, but you don't get more physical detail than that. Her temper

is as fierce as her love; when it's kindled by jealousy toward Helena, she turns into a real spitfire. Although, especially in the beginning, Hermia speaks the proper courtly romantic poetry with Lysander, she shows that there is something beyond propriety in her character. But when it comes to defending her virgin modesty in the woods, she's quick to make Lysander keep his distance.

Hermia's combination of passion and judgment is set off from the feelings of all the other lovers. She knows what she wants, is willing to make great sacrifices for it, will fight like a lioness in defense of it, and ultimately trusts in her power. She's not above love-foolishness, but she gives to the romantic comedy a sturdy foundation.

LYSANDER

It's hard to get a grip on the character of Lysander. Indeed, because of the frustrating interference of Puck, it's hard for him to keep a grip on himself. As you read the play, you may have difficulty telling him and Demetrius apart. They both seem to be defined more by the object of their desires than by any qualities in and of themselves.

Lysander has the unlucky distinction of professing his undying eternal love for two different women, one after the other. It certainly makes us suspicious of the steadfastness of his character. Consequently, the beautiful, flowery, romantic poetry he speaks rings hollow. He's made the butt of Shakespeare's ironic comedy of fickle love. He goes through all the right motions, says all the right words, but doesn't show any depth of character. He defends his new infatuation with Helena by swearing it comes from reason. But since you know it comes from Cupid's magic flower, both Lysander's love and reason seems suspect. His normalcy is his main characteristic: he's just a lover, doing the foolish things that lovers do. Therefore, don't be too hard on him. Look at him through Hermia's eyes; why do you think she loves him? We see many ways in which his love seems false, but in what ways do you view his love as true?

HELENA

Helena is primarily defined by her relationship to love, but unfortunately that love is lacking. The unhappy experience of unrequited love seems to have penetrated to her very core. Although attractive, tall, and willowy, she questions her own virtues because being unloved makes her feel unworthy of love.

It's true that Demetrius originally loved her, and she has cause for being upset that he now seems to care for Hermia. But Helena is a prime example of the ill effects of "doting" too much: she loses respect for herself and, consequently, some of ours for her. Her running after Demetrius seems foolish and shallow to many readers. Do you think she is a prime target for some feminist consciousness-raising? She's throwing herself away for a man you have reason to believe isn't all that worthy.

Helena is so used to being rejected that she might not be able to recognize real love if it came her way. When both Lysander and Demetrius turn their loving gazes on her, she can only suspect that they're making fun of her. Though you know she's right to doubt their sincerity, what would have happened if one of them were sincere? Even at the end, she feels that Demetrius is hers, and yet somehow is not. Since he's the one holdover with charmed eyes, she's more correct than she knows. Neither she nor Hermia speaks in the last act. Perhaps they're both wondering about what they've gotten, having gotten what they supposedly wanted.

DEMETRIUS

Like Lysander, Demetrius is difficult to identify except by his relation to the one he loves, or, more particularly, to the one who loves him. Helena's chasing after him and his irritation with her are the primary marks of his character. Since in his uncharmed state he even threatens Helena with bodily harm, he comes off as not quite the gracious courtly lover he means to be. And you may wonder, too, about how easily Hermia distracted his eye from Helena in the first place. His constant remarks at the performance of "Pyramus and Thisby" show him to be clever, but maybe a little rude, too. In any event, as the one person still under the spell of fairy magic and therefore not seeing with true eyes, he seems a bit foolish laughing at the acted "lovers" in the play. He doesn't know it, but he's still in a play of his own.

OBERON

As king of his magical realm, Oberon is the most powerful figure in the play. Everything about him is commanding, from his language to his magic spells. He is in essence an artist: he knows his craft and how it operates, and he can use his skills to their fullest effect. Since he sets in motion the charmed encounters that are at the heart of the play, he is the author of the plot. The

characters play out their dramas to fulfill his needs and wishes. He alone has the overview that an author has.

At times Oberon seems to be almost an elemental, natural force. Because of his quarrel with Titania, the world of nature is completely out of balance: Only a primal power could wreak that kind of havoc on nature. This doesn't mean he is a perfect, all-powerful being. His anger toward Titania has overtones of both jealousy and revenge. You may feel that she has become obsessed with the Indian boy and is neglecting her royal duties as consort of the fairy king, but doesn't Oberon's response seem petulant, maybe a little mean? He is, after all, quite willing to humiliate her and seems to take inordinate joy in it. Yet from the start he is touched by the lovers' plight, and his aim is to unite them, as it is to unite himself and Titania. He knows the power of concord over discord. He isn't all-seeing enough to prevent Puck from making the mistake that brings about the confusion for the lovers, but he knows how to right the wrong that's been done.

Oberon's brilliant poetry is the key to his importance in the play. His speeches contain some of the most extravagant writing in all of Shakespeare. Oberon raises poetry to the level of magic, as if his words were part of his fairy magic lore. He has a commanding knowledge of flowers, which seem to be at the heart of the fairy realm. The dangerous love juice is contained in a flower, as is its antidote. His famous description of Titania's favorite resting place calls out the names of flowers as if just to speak them were to induce a spell. And, indeed, he does induce a spell of poetry. If he describes something, like the Arrow of Cupid striking the flower, or the dawn rising, he does so with such command of detail and sensuality that the scene comes to life before you.

When Oberon finally restores harmony to his relationship with Titania, he seems to do so for everyone else too. Bottom has his ass's head removed in a twinkling, and the lovers are reunited. The wedding of Theseus and Hippolyta can now proceed. The outer edges of the play are held down by the orderly Theseus and Hippolyta, but its inner core burns with the conflict, passion, and magic of the fairy rulers. Theseus mentions that all theater is made up of shadow plays. When Puck refers to Oberon as the "king of shadows," he's letting us see that as poet and playwright, Oberon is a master of the art.

TITANIA

Titania is a regal and commanding person. She is not readily willing to give in to the king, and her insistence on keeping the changeling shows both her strong personal will and the respect she has for her priestess. Though she may lack Oberon's knowledge of magic, she is certainly a primary power like him and has her own court of fairy attendants. She's not about to take any nonsense from him, and she throws his past romantic exploits right in his face. Try to put yourself in her position as well as in Oberon's. What do you think her rights are, especially as a partner in marriage?

Though she may not know the spells, she has the fairy charm. The world she moves in seems to have a special magical grace. She lives among flowers; even her fairy attendants have floral names. Song and dance seem to be the nature of her fairy business. She's not a match for Oberon's magic- he's able to put the doting charm on her. But her world, even more than his, seems to be an enchanted one, delicate, strange, of another dimension and size.

Titania, like Oberon, has the power of poetry. Her description of the natural world in disarray is one of the high points of the play. She seems to invest the disturbed natural forces with her own emotional distress, so that the waves, air, and mud seem to be living, breathing, personal things. She knows the range and importance of her and Oberon's power. She may not see that her obsession is as equally to blame as Oberon's jealousy, but she understands the fullest dimensions of the resulting quarrel. Her description of the changeling's mother is a marvel of poetic imagery. The comparison between the pregnant woman and the sails filled with wind makes the world seem filled with a female creative force. Titania embodies that power.

PUCK

Jester and jokester, Puck, otherwise known as Robin Goodfellow, is like a wild, untamed member of the fairy clan. Though Oberon tells him they are "spirits of another sort," Puck, with his connection to English legend and folklore, seems related to a slightly more dangerous kind of sprite.

Not that he is truly malevolent. Although his tricks make people uncomfortable, they don't seem to do any permanent damage. He casts an ironic eye on humanity. Thinking people fools, he loves to make fools of them. But laughter, not tears, is his aim. He delights in mischief making, like a boy bent on fun. He's the

childlike antidote to Oberon's seriousness; that's why he's jester as well as jokester.

With his quickness, ventriloquism, and shape-changing ability, he clearly has magic fairy powers of his own. Meddling in the affairs of lovers and administering Cupid's love juice, he's reminiscent of Pan. And like him he seems to have some animal nature. He even tells us that he likes to take the form of animals and that he communicates with them.

He is also reminiscent of the Greek god Hermes, the messenger. Like him, he's a go-between for higher powers. Most of the magic he does in the play is at Oberon's request. He's more the instrument or administerer of magic than the creator of it. He is definitely in the service of Oberon, regarding him with respect and a little fear.

As the liaison between the various groups of characters in the play, Puck is also the character who communicates directly with us, the audience. His swiftness (he can fly around the earth in forty minutes) may give him the ability to cut through dimensions, too. He steps out of the play at the end to suggest that all we've seen may be just a dream- and you can be sure he says it with a wink!

BOTTOM

Clown, actor, weaver, even romantic hero- Bottom is a complex character. He's able to attract sympathy in the midst of his absurd buffoonery and to elicit concern even though he exhibits some obnoxious qualities. This mix of characteristics has made readers feel many contradictory things about him. Some say he is a boor, that he treats his fellow players with a lack of respect; others note his large ego and need for being in the spotlight. Still other readers find him a perfect clown and take his posturing as harmless joking. He may, of course, reflect all these things. What is your analysis of Bottom?

He is certainly filled with energy; it seems to stream out of him sometimes in ways that he can't stop. He never uses one word when two will do; in the same way, he'd rather not play just one part when he could play them all. Bottom is a ham. He's also a bad actor. The two qualities together make him inevitably funny to us. His enthusiasm trips him up again and again. He is enamored of words. If he misuses or mispronounces them he doesn't notice- though we do. He thinks he knows more than he does know, and it can make him seem arrogant, just as his overabundant energy can make him seem like a bully. But the testimony of his fellow workers

makes it clear that they take it all in stride; in fact, they adore him. They seem to appreciate his energy and his acting ability. They're even a little bit in awe of him. And his fondness for them is equally apparent. When he returns to them at last, they are his "lads," his "hearts." The affection these men share is real and touching, especially amid all the confused feelings of love in the rest of the play.

Though he's a bumbler, Bottom also seems to be possessed of a special grace. As a working-class tradesman unaccustomed to finery and delicate manners, his treatment of his fairy servants is a model of courtly behavior. He's not just kind; he's interested in them. He may look like an ass at first glance, but another look reveals something deeper.

Part of his special quality is indicated by the fact that he alone of the mortals actually becomes involved with the fairy world. That Bottom doesn't think Titania's love or dalliance with him is preposterous means he is open to the fairy power in a way no one else is. He may cut a ridiculous figure, wearing an ass's head, but what's interesting is that these strange little creatures don't look ridiculous to him and he's at ease with them as with other persons. When he wakes from his dream, he's unwilling to completely let go of his experience. He feels somehow a joke has been played on him, but he also senses something deeper at the heart of the joke. He tests it on his tongue, savors it, releases it, and calls it back. He's not attached to reason like Theseus, and he does have something of the artist in him. He's willing to absorb his magical experience like a vision and let it find its own meaning. He acts like a fool, but Shakespeare shows us he's not a fool.

Bottom is larger than life. He has a huge appetite. He'd rather engage something than let it go by. He's unself-conscious about both his real abilities and his foibles. That gives him, in the truest sense, a sense of humility. And it's a peculiarity of human nature that humility is ennobling. Bottom's not such a joke, after all.

QUINCE, SNUG, FLUTE, SNOUT, AND STARVELING

These simple folk carve out their own realm in the play, with Bottom at the front. Shakespeare has them speak prose, serving as a sharp contrast to the poetry of the lovers and fairies. They stand as representatives of an innocent real world, plain, good-natured, and well meaning. Their preposterous bad acting and terrible attempts at poetry are made fun of, but their good

intentions and shared fellowship are always apparent. Shakespeare may use them to satirize elements of his theater, but he does so in a way that makes their theatrics, not them, the objects of his comedy. Their burlesque may make them look ridiculous, but as characters they fare better than the more articulate lovers do. They are a necessary adjunct to the other worlds of A Midsummer Night's Dream. They counteract the duke's stiff reliance on reason, the lovers' high moral flights of fancy, and the fairies' elegant and primal poetry. All of these realms together make a recognizably human world.

OTHER ELEMENTS

SETTING

Though 'A Midsummer Night's Dream' takes place in and around Athens in ancient Greece, you will be hard-pressed to find many details of Greek life. Instead, you will learn much about Elizabethan courtly and country life. While it professes to draw a picture of Athens, the play really seems to take place in England. Puck's descriptions of the tricks he plays on people are filled with details of English village life. And when Titania describes the pestilence and floods that have befallen the countryside since her quarrel with Oberon, she is clearly talking about England, with its manicured gardens and country games.

The real exploration of setting in this play has not so much to do with place as with realms or dimensions of experience. The beginning and the end of the play take place in the city, in the courtly urbane atmosphere of the palace of Theseus, the duke of Athens. It is daylight, and the mood is one of social order and reason. The whole middle of the play, however, takes place in the woods, during a moonlit night. The atmosphere here is one of disorder, of emotional indulgence and magic. ("Wood" was an Elizabethan word for "mad," as Demetrius observes in a pun.) When the characters enter the woods, their emotional lives are put in upheaval. Despite their protestations of rationality (Lysander, for example, pleads this continually), it is the irrational, romantic side of their natures that is revealed. So the two main settings are not just backdrops for the action. They symbolize two different emotional and psychic spheres of experience.

THEMES

Here are some major themes explored by Shakespeare in this play. You will find them explained in greater detail in the scene-by-scene discussion of the novel.

1. TRUE AND FALSE LOVE

The overriding theme of the play deals with the nature of love. Though true love seems to be held up as an ideal, false love is mostly what we are shown. Underneath his frantic comedy, Shakespeare seems to be asking the questions all lovers ask in the throes of their confusion: How do we know when love is real? How can we trust ourselves when we are so easily swayed by passion and by romantic conventions? Some readers sense bitterness behind the comedy. But you will probably also recognize the truth behind Shakespeare's satire. Often, love leads us down blind alleys and makes us do things we regret later. The lovers in the play-especially the men-are made to seem rather shallow. They change the objects of their affections, all the time swearing eternal love to one or the other. Though marriage is held up at the end as a kind of unifying sacrament, and so gives a picture of a true, sensible, and socially sanctioned love, some critics have found its order a little hollow. The confusion that precedes the weddings seems, somehow, much more to the point.

2. SEEING AND BEING BLIND

From the opening scene, "eyes" and "seeing" are shown to be at the core of how we perceive things in love. Helena says that "love looks not with the eyes but with the mind." In Shakespeare's terms, when lovers are led astray by their feelings they aren't seeing correctly; their eyes are "blind," in the same way we now say that love is blind. Lovers frequently see what they want to, not what is really there. When lovers look with such self-charmed eyes, they are said to be "doting," a key term in the play. Do you know any such doting lovers?

3. WAKING AND DREAMING

All four lovers, plus Bottom and Titania, fall asleep in the course of the play, and all wake up to have themselves or their situations changed. An opposition between waking and dreaming is continually enforced, starting, of course, with the very title of the play. After waking from their final sleep, the lovers feel that their experiences were just dreams. Puck also offers us this

explanation in his final monologue: that the play itself was a dream, and that we, the audience, were its slumbering dreamers. Moonlight is associated with dreaming, and daylight with waking. So all the fairy experiences that take place during the moonlit night may be just dreamlike hallucinations. Shakespeare leaves it for you to decide. Which of the experiences do you want to call "real"?

4. REALITY AND ILLUSION

All of the oppositions point toward our perception of reality. And nowhere can that perception be more interestingly tricked than in the theater, which is entirely built on the tension between illusion and reality, shadow and light. Shakespeare teases the audience about its gullibility at the same time he tests it. He makes fun of those who don't think we'd be able to tell the difference between a real or fake lion. He simultaneously charms the audience with a fairy world breathtaking in its magical beauty, making them want to believe in the preposterous. The theater is called a place of shadows, but with the right lighting it can come into a life of its own, challenging all our notions about what is real and what illusionary.

5. REASON AND IMAGINATION

Theseus is continually aligned with reason. Sometimes he seems to be held up as a model for social man, clear-sighted (not doting) and responsible. He intentionally sets himself in opposition to the imagination when he compares the lover, the lunatic, and the poet to each other. Their similarity, he says, comes from the fact that they are all swayed by their imaginations. Looking at the sad plight of the lovers, we might agree with Theseus's conclusions. But we can also see that a reliance on reason makes Theseus blind in a different way. The world of the fairies, of magic, mystery, and creative power, is closed to him. Shakespeare says, through Theseus, that the poet "gives to airy nothing / A local habitation and name." Though Theseus seems to say it with scorn, this is exactly what Shakespeare does for us by presenting the airy, spectral fairy world in detailed form. In that case, the workings of the imagination can be seen as something valuable, indeed. Bottom, waking from his dream, seems somehow able to hold the two worlds together. His immediate plan is to make his dream into a song. Perhaps, then, art is the bridge between the world of reason and the world of the imagination. Bottom says this is the power of "vision."

6. CHANGES AND TRANSFORMATION

People are changing their minds, their hearts, and their images throughout the play. The woods become a special arena in which these changes take place. Demetrius and Lysander both change the objects of their affection, triggered by that excellent agent of change, the love juice of Cupid. So love itself is seen as an agent of transformation. It turns people around, and sometimes makes asses of them. That is, of course, exactly what happens to Bottom, though it may seem at times that Titania is the one who has made an ass of herself.

As day changes to night and back again, the fairies present a world transformed by magic, where nothing is what it seems, and everything may evolve into something else.

STYLE

Shakespeare's understanding of a wide range of human experience as well as different levels of consciousness enables him to adapt his style to his characters and their worlds. A Midsummer Night's Dream is unique in that its different sets of characters speak in different ways. And their styles of speech tell us things about them.

The ducal court and the romantic lovers speak a conventional courtly poetry, filled with mythical allusions and witty rhetorical gamesmanship. Its conventionality tells us as much about the characters as anything else. The lovers' well-fitted rhymes speak of complacency, not a creative fire, at the core of their feelings. Note Lysander's first words to Hermia:

> *"How now, my love! Why is your cheek so pale?*
> *How chance the roses there do fade so fast?"*
> *(I, I, 128-129)*

Considering Hermia has just been threatened with death, the rose metaphor seems a little flip. The deeper, threatening emotions of the situation are masked by the poetic rhetoric. But because Shakespeare presents the lovers as comic, not tragic, figures, we can enjoy the intricacy of their metaphors and rhymes while we laugh at their shallowness.

Except for their acted parts in the play at the wedding, the workingmen speak in prose. Shakespeare gives them a sense of being down-to-earth, appropriate to their occupations and simple

hearts. When they try to speak poetically, the results are laughable. They continually misuse and mispronounce words, but Shakespeare treats them gently and their simplicity triumphs over their pretensions. Similarly, the silly verse they spout in "Pyramus and Thisby" satirizes bad acting but will probably leave you agreeing with Theseus that the actors' intentions are what matters.

The most eloquent and beautiful poetry in the play belongs to Oberon and Titania. Suddenly you feel the force of real poetry, not its false representatives. Shakespeare clearly aligns his poetry with magic, and Oberon's use of language seems to work like a magic spell. He names flowers with full recognition of their magical potentialities-including the power of the sound of their names.

> *"I know a bank where the wild thyme blows,*
> *Where oxlips and the nodding violet grows,*
> *Quite overcanopied with luscious woodbine,*
> *With sweet musk roses, and with eglantine."*
> *(II, II, 249-52)*

This famous passage is really just a list of flowers, but Shakespeare is able to infuse the naming with poetic magic, highlighting the rhythmic and sensual qualities of the language.

POINT OF VIEW

Though a playwright does not generally have an all-seeing or subjective voice to speak from, he does have characters to represent various points of view. But can you always tell what Shakespeare himself feels about things in A Midsummer Night's Dream? Do his characters speak for him? Or do you feel that he sometimes disappears behind his characters, making the reader decide what to feel about the issues?

Theseus is the voice for reason, for civil order and the mature subjugation of romantic passion in marriage. The four lovers, on the other hand, speak out for romance. Since their interactions are the basis of the comedy, and since they are all married in the end, they too make us feel the frivolity of romance. But Oberon, Titania, and Puck keep things from getting too structured or domestic. In them we feel authentic wild powers, a force of nature (we might call it magic) that need not be tamed. This natural force is also aligned with art. These different forces keep us from settling too easily into judgments about love and reason.

By presenting us with two distinct worlds - the courtly domain of order and the wild woods- Shakespeare also shows us the necessity for a balance between the two. Neither one will suffice alone. Theseus seems too constricted by reason, the lovers too driven and distracted by emotion. You may feel sympathetic with all the different characters and levels of experience of the play. Shakespeare's architecture seems to insist that all together are necessary for a rounded view of our world.

FORM AND STRUCTURE

Though Shakespeare's plays are now divided for us into acts and scenes, these are very likely the work of later editors. We do not really know where Shakespeare's players made their pauses. The Elizabethan stage was so bare and fluid that it wasn't necessary to stop frequently for scene or costume changes, as it is today. It's more interesting to look at the play itself to get a sense of form and structure.

THE FIVE-ACT STRUCTURE

ACT I: EXPOSITION. The problem with the four lovers is revealed. They each seem to be in love with the wrong person.
ACT II: RISING ACTION. The quarrel between Oberon and Titania intensifies. Lysander is given the love juice.
ACT III: CLIMAX. Oberon's plan works: Bottom is transformed and Titania humiliated. The lovers are in complete disarray.
ACT IV: FALLING ACTION. The lovers, Titania, and Bottom wake up from their "dreams." Oberon and Titania are reconciled.
ACT V: RESOLUTION. The three couples prepare for marriage, and the play within the play is performed, exorcising the tragic element in favor of the comic.

The play has very simple time architecture. Most of the action takes place during one long frantic night, framed at either end by a brief spate of day. And time parallels place. The play opens at court, in the sunny, rational, social world of Theseus the duke. The main course of the play takes place in the Athenian woods outside of town. There it is night- a mysterious world filled with spirits and human passions. At the end we are in court again. Day has returned, the order of marriage is triumphant, and the bonds of the social world are re-strengthened.

You might also find structural beauty in the way Shakespeare juggles the four realms his characters inhabit. By the way they speak and the kinds of characters they reveal, the people in the play seem to occupy distinct realms or zones of existence, which Shakespeare interweaves throughout the play. Theseus and Hippolyta, as members of the royal court, live in an extremely social world and stand for the orderly workings of society. The four lovers, in their travels from court to wood and back to court again, exist in a realm governed by the passions, and so come to stand for man's volatile emotional life. The rustic workingmen, with their simple trades, physical comedy, and earthy sensibilities, represent the material world. And the fairies- delicate, mysterious, elemental, with creative power and poetic art- represent the world of the spirit. All these worlds exist simultaneously. Shakespeare means us to see that the structure they combine to create is the human universe.

THE CRITICS

Scholars generally agree that 'A Midsummer Night's Dream' was written to be performed at an aristocratic wedding. Everything in the play is related to the theme of marriage. Theseus and Hippolyta's nuptials (*wedding*) are the goal towards which all the action is directed – the fairies have come to Athens to bless the occasion; the artisans' performance is intended for it; Hermia's judgement, and thus the climax of the lovers' story, is scheduled to coincide with it, and finally the young lovers are married along with the ducal couple. The very first line emphasizes the importance of the forthcoming 'nuptical hour' (1.1.1), and the denouement is a blessing of the three weddings in terms that suggest a performance within a dwelling, as Oberon orders the fairies to distribute blessings 'through this house' (5.1.388).

The play suits such an occasion well, for it has the formality of a MASQUE, an entertainment often performed at noble weddings. Like many masques, this comedy presents a world of magic and metamorphosis in brilliant spectacles involving picturesque supernatural beings. It also makes much use of music and dance, and its finale is itself masquelike. It is given over to celebration, with further dancing and a comcomical performance (*Pyramus and Thisbe*) similar to an anti-masque – the realistic farce that was commonly part of a masque itself. Like a masque again, Acts 1-4 are very symmetrically plotted, moving from the court of Theseus to the woods and back again. In part, this reflects an

archetypal plot pattern of withdrawal and return, common in the romance literature preceding Shakespeare and in his own work, but the arrangement here is particularly formal.

As is natural in such a formal context, the characters are stylized and unrealistic: they do not interact as people normally do. Theseus and Hipplyta are remote ideals of classical calm; Puck is a typical goblin; and Titania and Oberon are distant in their regal immorality, elemental forces of nature with the power to influence the climate and to bless marriages. Only Bottom and his fellow artisans represent ordinary people, and they are plainly character types with little personality beyond their buffoonery.

The lovers, too, are static; although Lysander and Demetrius are transformed by Oberon's magical herb, they are altered only in their stance towards another character, and in Lysander's case the change is only temporary. Demetrius is left in a position he had held before the opening of the play and thus is ultimately unchanged also. Change occurs only in the pattern of the lovers' relationships, which has often been compared to a dance: first the two men address one of the women while the other woman is alone; then one man's affection is changed, and a circular chase unfolds. Lysander woos Helena, who is still pursuing Demetrius, who continues to court Hermia, who still wants Lysander. Next, when Demetrius is put under Oberon's spell, the two men face the other woman, and the first woman is alone. Finally the only stable arrangement is achieved, with Lysander and Demetrius each returned to his original love interest.

Such intricate masquelike plotting is appropriate not only to a festive occasion but also to the world of dreamy confusion that is central to the story. Much of the action, from 2.1 into 4.1, takes place at night; the lovers assert several times that they are looking at the stars (e.g., 3.2.61, 3.2.188), thus drawing attention to the night-time setting (which was usually enacted in afternoon sunlight in an Elizabethan public theatre). The nocturnal universe of shadowy strangeness is further evoked in the play's imagery. The moon is referred to prominently, beginning in the very first few lines (1.1.3,4,9): Moonlight is mentioned three times more often in 'A Midsummer Night's Dream' than in all of Shakespeare's other plays combined. In many different contexts the moon is used in figures of speech: to indicate time of day (1.1.209-210) and of month (1.1.83); with reference to catastrophic flooding (2.1.103) and to the speed of fairies (2.1.7,4.1.97); cuckoldry (5.1.232) and in connection with chastity (1.1.73, 2.1.162) and opposition to

chastity (3.1.191-193). 'Moonshine' is even a character in the artisans' play. The eerie quality of moonlight is reinforced by frequent evocations of the beauty of the woods at night.

Flowers are frequently mentioned as well, as in 1.1.185 and 2.1.110, and of course the magical aphrodisiac is a flower (2.1.166). Even the doggerel of *Pyramus and Thisbe* provides a floral motif (3.1.88-89). Birds, too, are alluded to throughout the play. Afoot (5.1.380) and in flight (3.2.21), as emblems of sight (2.2.113, 3.2.142) and of sound (1.1.184, 1.2.78, 5.1.362), they sing (5.1.384) and soar (3.2.23) in the play's highly lyrical language. Even Bottom, when he sings, brings forth a country ditty about birds (3.1.120-128).

Animals also inhabit the enchanted woods, though they lurk ominously, for the most part. Even a bee poses a threat (4.1.15-16), however slight. Helena invokes the image of preying carnivores to describe her desperate pursuit of Demetrius in 2.1.232-233. Dead sheep are part of Titania's vision of disordered nature (2.1.97). Theseus evokes a nighttime fear that a bush may be a bear (5.1.22). Potential tragedy is presented in a humorous context only, in the artisans' INTERLUDE, but in that episode tragedy is wrought by a ravening lion. Puck, introducing the fairies' blessings with a reminder of the cruel world that they may also be associated with, remarks that 'the hungry lion roars, / And the wolf behowls the moon' (5.1.357-358).

Indeed, the dream world of the play involves several hints of nightmare, providing contrast harmonies of love. Hermia awakes from a nightmare at the end of 2.2, and the 'dropping fog, as black as Acheron' (3.2.357) summoned by Puck todeceive Lysander and Demetrius carries a hint of terror, though its purpose is benign. Shakespeare never lets the fairy world seem altogether sweet and light; Puck has touch of malice to his personality, and he reminds the audience of the fairies' alliance to dark powers in the speech, cited above, that introduces the final ritual, the blessing of the house.

One of the functions of that blessing, indeed, is to exorcise all potential evil at last. The interlude has just performed a similar task in rendering a lovers' tragedy as farce. In fact, Quince, Bottom, and the boys act as an earthy counterweight to the uncanny airiness of the fairies. This is like an exorcism, because the unreal world of Puck and Oberon, Titania and Peaseblossom is supremely alien and potentially dangerous. The mortals can be manipulated and never know it: the lovers returning to Athens, believe

themselves to have awakened from dream (4.1.197-198), as does Bottom (4.1.204)

But generations of viewers and readers and critics have left compelled to ask whether Shakespeare intends us to take the enchanted woods as dream or as reality. The title of the play – related to 'midsummer madness', proverbially a lovers' sickness – suggests that the mortals' experience in the woods is but a figment, perhaps that the whole play is. But we the audience, having witnessed it ourselves, may agree with Hipplyta that 'all the story of the night told over, ... grows to something of great constancy' (5.1.23-26). Unlike Theseus, who sees only lunacy in the 'forms of things unknown [that] imagination bodies forth' (5.1.14-15), Hippolyta recognizes the essential reality, or constancy, that 'things unknown' have, when given by the poet's pen ... a local habitation and a name' (5.1.16-17). We the audience can realize even more: that the play, the poet's embodiment of imaginary things, has made the unreal real.

We must return to our starting point, the occasion for which the play was evidently written. Shakespeare's original audience, guests at wedding, was removed from the world of reality, just as modern audiences are, and then returned to it by the ritual at its close. The exact definition of reality is not addressed by the play; indeed, the play's ambiguity on the point is deliberate. The experience is all that matters, and the experience, as Bottom knew, is a profound one. When he wakes from hs experience in the woods and observes, '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' (4.1.209-212). Bottom has experienced, though he is unable to express it, the depths of mystery that underlie all things, real and unreal alike. By evoking such awareness, the play fulfils its original and primary function as a celebratory hymn to the beauties of married love.

-Charles Boyce, From *A Midsummer Night's Dream*
Commentary, Dictionary of Shakespeare, 1996

THE PLAY

"A Midsummer Night's Dream" shines like "Romeo and Juliet" in darkness, but shines merrily. Lysander, one of the two nonentities who are its heroes, complains at the beginning about the brevity of love's course:

So quick bright things come to confusion.

This, however, is at the beginning. Bright things will come to clarity in a playful, sparkling night while fountains gush and spangled starlight betrays the presence in a wood near Athens of magic persons who can girdle the earth in forty minutes and bring any cure for human woe. Nor will the woe to be cured have any power to elicit our anxiety.... There will be no pretense that reason and love keep company, or that because they do not death lurks at the horizon.

-Mark Van Doren, Shakespeare, 1939

CHARACTERIZATION

In A Midsummer Night's Dream, then, Shakespeare defines his characters according to what they represent, according to their labels. The lovers are not individuals, they are "lovers," and the definition of that word will determine their behaviour; Puck's actions too are predicated by the definition of "Puck." Nor is the process restricted to characters; even places stand for something, are labels. Athens, established in literary tradition as the legendary seat of reason (in Boccaccio's Teseida and "The Knight's Tale") is here almost a byword for rational order. The wilderness outside Athens is called a "wood" and not a forest, as is the corresponding locale in "As You Like It", because it must also be a label for "mad," and in case we miss the point, Demetrius is made to pun on "wood" (for "mad" and "forest") and "wooed"; "And here am I, and wood within this wood...." With everything so clearly defined and with the infinite complexities of realistic character and "real life" settings so firmly excised, no wonder those who came looking for realism go away convinced that the play is a little too simple.

-Stephen Fender, Shakespeare: A
Midsummer Night's Dream, 1968

THE END OF THE PLAY

If ever the son of man in his wanderings was at home and drinking by the fireside, he is at home in the house of Theseus. All the dreams have been forgotten, as a melancholy dream remembered throughout the morning might be forgotten in the human certainty of any other triumphant evening party; and so the play seems naturally ended. It began on the earth and it ends on the earth. Thus to round off the whole midsummer night's dream in an eclipse of daylight is an effect of genius. But of this comedy, as I have said, the mark is that genius goes beyond itself; and one

touch is added which makes the play colossal. Theseus and his train retire with a crashing finale, full of humour and wisdom and things set right, and silence falls on the house. Then there comes a faint sound of little feet, and for a moment, as it were, the elves look into the house, asking which is the reality. "Suppose we are the realities and they the shadows." If that ending were acted properly any modern man would feel shaken to his marrow if he had to walk home from the theatre through a country lane.

-G. K. Chesterton, Chesterton On Shakespeare, 1971

SHAKESPEARE'S POETIC SPEECHES

No, his heart was in these passages of verse, and so the heart of the play is in them. And the secret of the play- the refutation of all doctrinaire criticism of it- lies in the fact that though they may offend against every letter of dramatic law they fulfil the inmost spirit of it, inasmuch as they are dramatic in themselves. They are instinct with that excitement, that spontaneity, that sense of emotional overflow which is drama. They are as carefully constructed for effective speaking as a messenger's speech in a Greek drama. One passage in particular, Puck's "My mistress with a monster is in love," is both in idea and form, in its tension, climax, and rounding off, a true messenger's speech. Shakespeare, I say, was from the first a playwright in spite of himself. Even when he seems to sacrifice drama to poem he- instinctively or not- manages to make the poem itself more dramatic than the drama he sacrifices.

-Harley Granville-Barker,
More Prefaces to Shakespeare, 1974

BOTTOM'S "VISION"

By contrast "vision," as it is introduced into the play, is a code word for the dream understood, the dream correctly valued. Often the user does not know that he knows; this is another of the play's thematic patterns, supporting the elevation of the irrational above the merely rational. As a device it is related to a character type always present in Shakespeare, but more highly refined in the later plays, that of the wise fool. Thus Bottom, awakening, is immediately and intuitively impressed with the significance of his "dream," which we of course recognize as not a dream at all, but rather a literal reality within the play.

-Marjorie B. Garber, Dream In Shakespeare, 1974

THE FAIRIES

What is true of the moon applies to the fairies. They are a curious mixture of wood spirits and household gods, pagan deities and local pixies. They inhabit the environs of Athens and follow the fortunes of Theseus and Hippolyta, but they are clearly the spirits whom we can consider "almost essential to a Midsummer Play," detectably English in character and habit. Through Titania and her train, Shakespeare emphasizes their innocence and delicacy; in Oberon and Puck, he expresses their darker side, potentially malevolent in the lore of the time.

-David P. Young, Something of Great Constancy:
The Art of A Midsummer Night's Dream, 1966

THE COMEDY OF LANGUAGE

The Dream's comedy of language attains its peak of extravagance in "Pyramus." One favourite effect is continued from the play proper: the misassignment of sense-experience- Pyramus sees a voice, hopes to hear his Thisby's face, and bids his tongue lose its light. In the rehearsal-scene he is supposed to have gone "but to see a noise that he heard," and the effect has been taken to its highest point in Bottom's garbling of St. Paul: "The eye of man hath not heard...." That parody would not have been possible in anything but comic prose; and prose, as is normal in Shakespeare, is the vehicle for the scenes of plebeian comedy. Bottom's adherence to it in fairyland, while Titania speaks verse, adds to the characterization and the comic effect, emphasizing how unshakeably he remains himself, and how out of touch, inhabiting still their disparate worlds, they are with each other.

-Harold F. Brooks, Introduction to Arden,
'A Midsummer Night's Dream', 1979

Chapter THREE

"HISTORICAL PLAYS"

HENRY IV, PART 1

1598

INTRODUCTION

William Shakespeare was born into a tradesman's family in Stratford-upon-Avon in late April, 1564. When he was eighteen, Shakespeare married Anne Hathaway, ten years older than he. The young couple had a baby girl named Susanna six months later on May 26, 1583. In 1585 the birth of fraternal twins, Hamnet and Judith, completed the new family. But shortly afterward, Shakespeare left Stratford and moved to London, leaving his family behind.

No one knows what Shakespeare did for a living before he arrived in London. We do know that Shakespeare established himself in the London Theater by 1592. He had become both an actor and a playwright with London's most prestigious theatrical troupe, the Lord Chamberlain's Men, headquartered in the first professional theater building built since the fall of the Roman Empire. It was called, simply, The Theater.

Open to the sky, The Theater had a large platform stage bounded on three sides by the audience. The stage was large, and was divided into upper and lower acting levels. Entrances and exits were made through two or three doors at the rear of the platform, into the "tiring house" where costumes were changed and speeches rehearsed. Scenery was kept at a bare minimum- a table and two benches might suggest a scene indoors or a tree represent a whole forest. The actors wore splendid costumes, however, and the acting style would have been broad and lively. Teenage boys played the women's parts. A gallery of musicians accompanied the actors, and the sound of battle was reproduced with effects backstage.

The audience would have been a cross-section of Londoners. Unruly apprentices stood on the ground around the stage, while merchants, fashionable women, and courtiers sat in three tiers of seats.

In the palaces along the River Thames Queen Elizabeth I ruled England amid a magnificent court. In an age when monarchs held absolute power, England was lucky to have such a queen. Elizabeth was a brilliant, outspoken, strong-willed woman, and a crafty politician who loved her country. Elizabeth I's reign was long

(1558-1603) and dynamic, if not always peaceful. England had recently-under the reign of her sister, Queen Mary ("Bloody Mary")-been a Catholic country. Now it was Protestant and Puritan. But Elizabeth still had many Catholic enemies, such as northern England's powerful lords, and her cousin Queen Mary of Scotland. In 1569 the northern lords had rebelled against Elizabeth. They were defeated, but in the following year the Duke of Norfolk unsuccessfully attempted a coup to depose Elizabeth and place her Catholic cousin on the throne.

Although these rebellions failed, they worried Elizabeth; thereafter her subjects were required to listen to sermons on civil disobedience three times a year. The sermons followed a strict doctrine that the monarch was God's deputy on earth, and no subject had a right to oppose her. Rebellion against the monarch was rebellion against God, a terribly grave sin, to be punished by chaos on earth and eternal damnation for the rebels.

In 1588, King Philip II of Spain had sent the Armada, a huge flotilla of warships, to invade England. Elizabeth sent her navy to attack Philip's fleet, and after a week of merciless fighting the Armada was roundly defeated. Elizabeth's subjects rejoiced, and celebrated their country's greatness with an unprecedented patriotic fervor. One product of this burst of nationalist pride was the history play, which celebrated England's past and, like the sermons, instructed audiences in good civil behavior. Henry IV, Part 1 is one of ten plays Shakespeare wrote to celebrate England's history.

Shakespeare died in Stratford on April 23, 1616. He left no male heirs to continue his name. His only son, Hamnet, had died at age eleven. Susanna and Judith both married, but Susanna's only child Elizabeth was Shakespeare's last direct descendant. She died childless in 1670.

But Shakespeare left another kind of heir- thirty-seven plays and three major poems. In 1623, seven years after his death, two of Shakespeare's former colleagues in the theater published thirty-six of his plays, eighteen of them for the first time. We refer to this as the "First Folio." In a prefatory poem, Ben Jonson praised his old friend and rival playwright as "the wonder of our stage." That verdict has stood through the centuries.

THE PLOT

ACT I

King Henry IV is holding a political conference with his advisory council. His preparations for a holy crusade must be postponed because England's borders are threatened. The English general Mortimer was taken prisoner by Glendower after losing a battle in Wales, and another English lord, Hotspur, who has just won a battle in the north against the Scottish leader Douglas, refuses to send the king the prisoners he captured. King Henry is angry with Hotspur, and summons him to court.

Prince Hal, who should be helping his father King Henry govern the country, is somewhere in London roistering with an old friend, the disreputable Sir John Falstaff. A young thief named Poins meets them, and arranges with Falstaff to commit a highway robbery at Gad's Hill. Hal refuses to join them, until Poins privately tempts Hal with a plan to play a practical joke on Falstaff, which will show him up as a coward.

In the palace Hotspur, Northumberland, and Worcester argue with King Henry. The Percies, powerful northern lords, then plot to rebel against Henry, with whom they rebelled two years ago against King Richard II. They intend to enlist Henry's enemies (Glendower, Mortimer, Douglas, and the Archbishop of York) to help them overthrow the king.

ACT II

Two carriers discuss the condition of England and Gadshill (a member of Poins' gang) finds out when several rich merchants will be passing Gad's Hill on their way to London.

Falstaff and the band of thieves meet with Hal and Poins at Gad's Hill. Falstaff and the thieves rob the passing merchants; then Hal and Poins (in disguise) steal the stolen money. Falstaff defends himself briefly and unsuccessfully. Hal and Poins take the stolen money to London.

Meanwhile at Warkworth Castle in the north, Hotspur receives a letter from a lord who refuses to join the rebellion conspiracy. He rides off to meet the rebel leaders in Wales.

In a London tavern Hal and Poins are waiting for Falstaff to arrive. Falstaff and the thieves burst into the tavern, and tell an exaggerated story about their encounter with an army of thieves at Gad's Hill. Hal exposes Falstaff as a liar. Then news of the Percy

rebellion reaches the tavern. Hal, who's been summoned to court, prepares for his father's inevitable scolding by rehearsing with Falstaff the meeting with Henry. At the height of their play-acted argument, a sheriff arrives to arrest Falstaff for theft. Falstaff hides, and Hal lies to protect him from criminal punishment. Falstaff falls asleep, and Hal picks his pocket before returning to court.

ACT III

In a castle in Wales the rebels meet to divide the leadership of England into three parts. Glendower and Hotspur quarrel, but peace settles among the rebels while they say good-bye to their wives. They ride to Shrewsbury, where the battle against Henry will shortly take place.

In the palace Henry accuses Hal of wasting his youth and disappointing his family. Henry compares Hal unfavorably with King Richard II and with Hotspur. Hal promises to turn over a new leaf, and vows to gain honor equal to Hotspur's by fighting a glorious battle. Father and son are reconciled, and Henry gives his son command of one-third of the royal army.

In the tavern Falstaff quarrels with the hostess over who picked his pocket. Hal arrives dressed for battle, and settles the dispute by admitting he did it. Hal gives Falstaff command over a troop of foot soldiers, and returns to court to help with battle preparations. Falstaff plots ways of turning the war to his personal profit.

ACT IV

Hotspur, Worcester, and Douglas are camped at Shrewsbury, waiting for the rest of their allies. Messengers arrive with news that Northumberland and Glendower won't be joining them in battle. Hotspur and Douglas resolve to carry out their plans anyway, despite their greatly reduced forces. Hearing that Prince Hal is leading a gloriously attired army toward Shrewsbury, Hotspur swears to kill him in single combat.

Falstaff marches his foot soldiers toward the battlefield. Their raggedy appearance shocks Hal, but Falstaff lectures him on the realities of war.

Sir Walter Blunt arrives at the rebel camp with an offer of pardon from Henry. Hotspur airs his grievances against Henry, and sends Blunt back to the royal camp without an answer.

At York, the archbishop is very worried because the king's army outnumbers the rebels three to one.

ACT V

Worcester and Henry try to reach a peaceful settlement, and Hal intervenes to offer himself in single combat to Hotspur, in place of a full-scale battle. Henry forbids this, and sends Worcester back to the rebel camp with an ultimatum.

Worcester lies to Hotspur about Henry's peace offer, and the battle challenge is given. During the battle Henry fights Douglas, and Hal fights Hotspur. Hal rescues Henry from Douglas, and kills Hotspur. Falstaff, meanwhile, leads his soldiers into the thickest fighting, yet he debunks honor, and pretends to fall down dead when challenged by Douglas. Standing between the bodies of Hotspur, his greatest rival, and Falstaff, his best friend, Hal praises Hotspur and teases Falstaff, then walks away. Falstaff jumps up and defends his seemingly cowardly behavior. Hal returns, amazed to find Falstaff still alive. Hal allows Falstaff to take credit for killing Hotspur, a lie on which Falstaff stakes his future reputation.

The king's army wins the battle. Henry orders the executions of the rebel prisoners, but Hal insists on freeing Douglas. Henry divides the royal army, proudly giving his son command of one-half. The two halves split to the north and west, marching away to fight the remaining rebel leaders.

THE CHARACTERS

KING HENRY IV

In order to understand what is troubling King Henry, you should be familiar with the events surrounding the deposition of Richard, and Henry's rise to power.

These events will be described four times in Henry IV, Part 1: by Henry, by Hotspur (twice), and by Worcester. Each account of how and why Henry became king differs, just as newspapers or history books today often disagree about a single event.

Shakespeare never makes Henry's motives entirely clear, and Henry is relatively quiet about them. You don't know if Henry rose to the throne on a tide of popular opinion that he never

anticipated when he returned from exile, or if he carefully planned the entire "election," and always meant to steal the crown from his cousin Richard.

Because Henry's motives aren't clear, you could form two perfectly feasible, but entirely different, portraits of Henry. You can see him as Hotspur does: as a "vile politician" who calculated every move up the ladder of success, and manipulated his friends and his country into making him king. Or you can see Henry as the beneficiary of irresistible political forces: a good politician who knew how to take advantage of opportunity and who understood how to use power most effectively.

Even though Henry is a usurper, he wants to unite his kingdom and uphold her laws. He may not be a legal king, but he's a better ruler than Richard.

PRINCE HAL

Hal is the Prince of Wales, Henry's son and heir. When Henry dies Hal will inherit the crown, and rule England as King Henry V. But to his father, Hal doesn't seem like much of an heir. Instead of living at court and helping his father govern England, Hal carouses in the taverns of Eastcheap with a band of drunkards and petty thieves.

Like his father, Hal wasn't born to be a king. When he was twelve, Henry usurped the throne from King Richard, and Hal suddenly found himself next in line to be king. Immediately after Henry's coronation Hal moved into the tavern world, to drink and joke with Falstaff, and to rob for him. Hal tells you early on that he's only pretending to be dissolute, and intends to stage a stunning reformation of character that will make him look even better to the eyes of the unexpecting court. This may sound like an excuse, but when war breaks out Hal does leave the tavern world, and returns to the court to fight with his father against the Percies.

Whereas Henry never seems at ease anywhere, Hal is equally at home in court and tavern. At Shrewsbury he fights like a perfect knight, with great courage and magnanimity. In the tavern he mingles easily with the commoners, and even the lowly waiters hail him as the "king of courtesy." As a nobleman aged about twenty, Hal has been trained in the arts of chivalry, good manners, and military skills. But he's still learning the art of being a prince. Some readers believe Hal goes to the tavern to escape his new serious responsibilities. Others think that he goes there to adjust to

his new role, and learn something about the lives of the people he will one day have to govern.

Hal has inherited Henry's flair for politics, as his plan for a spectacular "reformation" shows. Unlike Henry, Hal will inherit an untainted crown. The combination of political skill and rightful claim will make Hal the perfect king.

Most readers judge Hal as a person, not as a king, and find him lacking on several counts. He's cold and detached from his companions, whom he vows to banish. He uses people for personal advantage, whether as part of his self-help course in kingship or for sheer amusement. He enjoys cruel practical jokes. Honor is a commodity to Hal, something he must win for his kingly image, not something he feels is necessary for leading a virtuous life. His favorite imagery is borrowed from the accounting profession. He counts men's attributes like coins in a change purse. His behavior toward people is capricious: One moment he promises them the earth, the next he cruelly upbraids them.

Other readers sympathize with Hal, recognizing that a prince is different from other men. We may value spontaneity and warmth in our friends, but we require sensible planning and a cool head in our leaders. When asked to join a highway robbery, Hal dispassionately weighs the pros and cons of the scheme before agreeing to participate. He learns about vice from Falstaff, but ultimately he rejects the criminal life as completely as he rejects Hotspur's wild romanticism. Hal seems more in control of himself than anyone else in this play. Every other character makes grand promises he doesn't keep. Hal promises to fight loyally for his father, and he does. He promises to win honor from Hotspur in battle, and he does. In a world given to lying and stealing, Hal proves he's no counterfeit, but a true prince of England.

HOTSPUR

Northumberland's son Hotspur is often seen as the romantic hero of this play. Many readers respond to him more than to the cool, enigmatic Hal. Even King Henry wishes Hotspur were his son. The very embodiment of military courage and virtue, Hotspur is a quick-tempered, energetic young man whose straightforward approach to life is both attractive and dangerous.

On one hand, Hotspur is a knight in shining armor whose reckless and passionate nature makes him more attractive than the calculating, hypocritical politicians who surround him.

Hotspur is completely dedicated to winning honor, but this blinds him to many realities. He values honor more than his own life. He's impatient with anyone who can't understand his devotion to an ideal of knightly behavior; he ridicules Hal's tavern life, and scoffs at Glendower's interest in magic. To Hotspur, anything less than winning honor is a waste of time. Politicians enrage him with their endless talk and compromises. He dreams of being the greatest knight on earth, and challenges anyone who claims to be his rival in battle.

Hotspur's thirst for battle is self-destructive; he pursues honor like an addict. He allows events to give him direction without stopping to think about the consequences of his actions. Once he's committed to a cause, nothing and no one can stand in his way. Northumberland despairs of Hotspur's rash nature, and fears his son might ruin their plans. He refuses to listen to good counsel, and his overconfidence blinds him to the guile or weakness of others. He may love his wife, but he doesn't trust her to keep quiet about the rebellion plans. At Shrewsbury he refuses to wait for reinforcements and dies a fanatic's death, as a pawn in Worcester's political game.

King Henry sees Hotspur as a model for Prince Hal. Henry sees himself in Hotspur- both are rebels against a king, both are ambitious and capable of leading great political revolutions. But both Henry and Hotspur fail to see their moral impostures. Falstaff and Hal alone see through Hotspur's glamorous facade: Hotspur's dead body is simply a warehouse of honor from which Falstaff can steal a good military reputation and Hal can steal the honor he requires for kingship.

Hotspur is called the "king of honor," but can a rebel and a traitor be a king? His own uncle Worcester accuses him of "apprehending a world of figures"; is this a man you'd want as a leader of real men? Hotspur may be heroic, but he's misguided by his family and too narrow in his thinking. He dashes off on a quest for military glory, and rushes his country into civil war because of a personal insult. In this play Shakespeare is trying to define what makes a good king. Hotspur may be an attractive person, but when we judge his leadership qualities, he falls short.

FALSTAFF

Sir John Falstaff, knight of the realm and stealer of purses, is an endless stream of contradictions. You can't sum him up in a capsule description; he seems to evade categorization as deftly as

he evades Hal's verbal traps. He changes roles and moral postures as easily and as often as anyone else changes clothes.

He's old and young; fat and limber; cowardly and fearless; sinful and virtuous. Falstaff is a liar, a drunkard, and a thief- but he's a brilliant conversationalist, well educated in the Bible and classical and contemporary Elizabethan literature.

Although clothed in a mountain of fat, Falstaff seems to strip the world naked, and laughs at the court's pretensions about abstract ideals like honor and good government. He mocks all the serious pursuits in the play- honor, law and order, reasonableness, and justice. He even makes himself look ridiculous, and then asks you to agree that his view of the world is great fun.

Falstaff's name is a contraction of the words "false staff," which can mean a cracked or brittle cane, and a misleader. A false leader is a counterfeit king. Falstaff is King Henry's comical counterpart who distorts Henry's royal image like the trick mirrors in a carnival funhouse. Whereas Henry symbolizes authority and civil order, images of disorder cluster around Falstaff- anarchy, gluttony, and falseness surround the old knight like dancing figures of the Seven Deadly Sins.

Falstaff is also a substitute father for Hal. He preaches a kind of revolutionary politics to the young prince. Falstaff begs Hal to make thieves respectable, and to abolish capital punishment. He tries to tempt Hal into committing highway robbery. But Hal refuses to be corrupted by Falstaff's temptations. He calls Falstaff a "villainous abominable misleader of youth" and "that old white bearded Satan." He banishes Falstaff and his reign of misrule.

Falstaff's view of life is realistic and hard. He sees that friends are disloyal and money is hard to come by. The reality of war is that men are killed. It's easier to sin than to pursue the pious virtues of a devout Christian. These opinions are cynical perhaps, but Falstaff tempers his harsh view of life with good-natured enthusiasm. When confronted with adversity, Falstaff understands that a good hearty laugh is healthier than crippling anxiety, such as that which plagues humorless King Henry.

OTHER ELEMENTS

SETTING

The setting for the play is England. There are seven scenes in London and seven scenes at Shrewsbury. There are also two scenes in Rochester and one each at York, Wales, and Warkworth

Castle in Northumberland. As you can see from a map, the action covers almost the entire country. You also move through different kinds of social settings.

In London you spend time at the king's palace and in a tavern in Eastcheap. You pass along roads leading from Dover to London and from London to Shrewsbury by way of Coventry. You hear about Henry's landing at Ravenspur and his meeting with the Percies at Doncaster. You visit a hotel in Rochester and a mysterious castle in Wales. You hear about battles along the Scottish and Welsh borders.

England becomes more than a physical setting; it is almost like another character. You are shown how much her welfare depends on power and political wisdom. You are shown how important it is for a king-to-be to know all levels of life in England.

The time period of the play is the early fifteenth century- June 1402 to July 1403 to be exact- but the characters onstage really are drawn from the late sixteenth century- 1596-97, when Shakespeare wrote the play. Each character has his own sense of time. Hotspur burns it, Falstaff wastes it, King Henry worries about its passing, and Prince Hal carefully counts and measures it. This elastic sense of time is matched by Shakespeare's flexible sense of historical time in drama; he compresses the events of one year into a timespan that seems to amount to no more than a few weeks. Some scenes, especially those at court, are tense and brisk; others, such as the tavern scenes, roll along easily, taking all the time in the world.

THEMES

Many themes run through Henry IV, Part 1. The following are some of the most important.

1. A STUDY OF HISTORY

Shakespeare is dramatizing an important and insecure period of English history, when King Henry IV's reign was plagued by civil rebellions, and Prince Hal's dissolute behavior brought the safety of the succession into question. In the 1590s Elizabeth, old and childless, was in danger of dying without an heir. If the wrong candidate was chosen, England was bound to erupt into civil war. Shakespeare turned to King Henry IV's time to examine the issue of authority and rebellion so crucial for his own age.

2. AUTHORITY AND REBELLION

In Shakespeare's time it was taken for granted that a king had absolute authority over his country. But if the king does not rule by hereditary right then political power becomes important- how to win it and how to use it. The question of how to maintain order also becomes crucial, because the king's authority may not be accepted by everyone. When treason threatens the court, all of England is thrown into doubt and confusion. The very harmony between man and nature seems to be affected, and brother fights brother in an endless struggle for power.

3. THE EDUCATION OF A PRINCE

As King Henry V, Hal will be called "the mirror of all Christian kings." Prince Hal's education in becoming the perfect king is portrayed in this play. He must steer a course between Hotspur's virtues and Falstaff's vices, and satisfy the double demands of royal authority and political power.

4. A PORTRAIT OF ENGLAND

Although the events of the play took place in 1403, the characters are modeled on Elizabethan men and women. You hear or see a cross-section of Shakespeare's own society: thieves, prostitutes, ballad-singers, innkeepers, scolding wives, apprentices, carriers, merchants, pilgrims, magicians, sheriffs, soldiers, lords, ladies, and royal princes. You see the Welsh and the Scots as well as the English. You learn about Elizabethan food and drink and their prices; you learn about Elizabethan political conferences, transportation, communications networks, military weapons, and plays. These all contribute to a rich and lively picture of Elizabethan daily life.

5. HONOR

The pursuit of honor is one of the characters' chief motivations. Hotspur seeks military glory and fame above all else, and recklessly gives up his life to save his honor. His courage is thrilling, but his single-mindedness blinds him to the weaknesses of others. Prince Hal seems to lack honor; he strays from court and robs for sport. He speaks of honor as a mere commodity. Yet he shows true honor later; he is valiant in battle and generous toward both friends and enemies. Falstaff, on the other hand, scoffs at honor itself. He prefers to live in sin rather than die for honor. But Falstaff doesn't scoff at the rewards of honor. Like Hotspur, he's

ambitious to win titles and respect. Falstaff, who steals for a living, cheats to win honor at Shrewsbury. Yet, though his friends call him a coward, his brilliant wit and expansive view of humanity win him another kind of respect.

These different uses for honor lead you to wonder what honor's ultimate value really is. People talk a lot about it, but what place can honor have in a world ruled by a usurper, where a rebel is called the king of honor?

6. COUNTERFEITING

Trying to decide what's real or counterfeit, true or false, is one of the major concerns of the play. Characters ask each other, and you, to decide on the accuracy of news and reports, on different versions of history, and on the reality of a man's reputation.

The idea of counterfeiting is bound up in the king's usurpation of the crown- since his claim is dubious, all other claims for authenticity begin to be doubted. The idea is emphasized in the imagery of stolen and cracked crowns (both the coins and the symbol of kingship) that are passed off as being legal and legitimate.

7. FATHERS AND SONS

Throughout the ages fathers have wanted their sons to emulate them, and sons have displeased their fathers by showing independence of mind. Each son in this play has two fathers- one natural and one moral. Henry is Hal's natural father, and Falstaff is Hal's moral father. Whom shall Hal imitate? The false king or the thieving knight? Hotspur has two fathers- Northumberland, who scolds Hotspur's quick temper, and Worcester, who leads him into rebellion and lies to him to protect his own life. Whom should he follow? Should the sons imitate their fathers, or are they right to reject them as models and pursue their own courses of action, no matter what the consequences may be?

STYLE

The worlds of the court and the tavern speak in different styles: The court characters use stately verse, and the commoners in the tavern world use lively prose. Hal, because he spans both worlds, is the only character to speak in both styles.

Shakespeare's writing style manages to sound realistic in both Poetry and prose. His characters sound like real people with

vivid imaginations. Shakespeare varies the stresses and sound of the words and the length of sentences to create different kinds of verbal music, which gives you an illusion of real speech.

FORM AND STRUCTURE

The structure of the play is episodic; that is, scenes do not follow one line of action, but alternate from one set of characters to another. This allows two plots to develop at the same time, with connections and contrasts between them drawn continually. One plot concerns the Percies' rebellion against Henry; the second plot concerns Falstaff's life in the tavern with Prince Hal. The tavern scenes mirror the court scenes: Whatever happens in one plot happens in the other but on a different scale.

Individual characters, too, are contrasted in pairs. Hotspur and Falstaff, Henry and Hal, Henry and Falstaff, Hal and Hotspur, Worcester and Falstaff, are the most important character contrasts. They parody each other and thus you can see how they see each other. Hal parodies Hotspur and Henry; Hotspur parodies Henry, Glendower, and the king's messenger; Falstaff parodies Henry and a host of other men.

THE CRITICS

'Henry IV, Part 1', was a highly innovative work in 1596 for precisely the reasons that make it one of the greatest of Shakespeare's HISTORY PLAYS. It marks an advance both in Shakespeare's development and in the growth of English dama, for, by repeatedly shifting its focus between affairs of state and bawdy irreverence, the play presents a composite image of a whole society, something that had never been attempted before. In addition to the quarrels and alliances among the aristocracy, the principal interest of the earlier histories, here Shakespeare offers the scruffy circle of common laborers and petty criminals who frequent the Boar's Head Tavern. Both worlds are more vivid for the contrats, and a dramatic tension is established between them. Groundbreaking in its own day, *1 Henry IV* is still impressive in ours, due to the range of people, events, and language, from the most casual ribaldry to the boldest rhetoric, realistically presented on the stage.

Prince Hal belongs to both worlds; surrounding him are such boldly drawn figures as the volatile Hotspur and his charming wife, the talkative Hostess, and the many personalities evoked by

Falstaff's parodies and imitations: churchmen and highwaymen, knights and knaves. The Prince's significance lies in the choice he must make between worlds, and his dilemma emphasizes, as in the other history plays, the question of order in society. Both the Falstaffian delinquents of the Boar's Head Tavern and the rebels led by Hotspur have contributed to the decay of the social fabric, and King Henry believes that both groups have been sent by heaven in revenge for his own disturbance of society, the deposition of King Richard II. Hal's choice is indeed pivotal for the future of the realm. Of course, Shakespeare's original audiences knew that Hal went on to become the highly successful King Henry V, so there is no suspense about the Prince's choice; the tension lies instead in the presentation of the alternatives.

Although the sub-plot concerning Falstaff is highly diverting, the major concern is Hal's decisions to embrace his role as Hotspur's rival, abandoning the life of a barfly for that of military leader. This central issue is not fully resolved until the end of *2 Henry IV*, when Hal rejects Falstaff, but *Part 1* presents an initial phase of Hal's development, his acceptance of his role as princely hero.

The play's climax is the hand-to-hand combat between Hal and Hotspur at Shrewsbury. Not only does the play build to this climax through a series of episodes depicting the progress of Hotspur's rebellion, but Hal and Hotspur are repeatedly compared, both by the king – as early as 1.1.77-90 – and by Hal himself. The king regrets that his own son seems so feckless in comparison to the rebel leader. Hal assures his father that he is not the dissipated playboy he seems and that he will prove superior to Hotspur when the time is ripe. This motif – the potential readiness of the Prince – has already been established in Hal's famous 'reformation' speech (1.2.190-212). Shakespeare makes it abundantly clear that the Prince will indeed prove himself I the traditional terms of chivalry, and in the combat at Shrewsbury, an episode devised by the playwright for this purpose, Hal becomes the hero whom he has promised to be.

Hotspur's defeat attests that chivalry is not an unalloyed virtue, as does his outsised personality, which consists of impatience and an exaggerated sense of honor. Hotspur is a temperamental, driven man who is concerned only about his reputation for bravery in battle His fixation is as excessive in its way as is Falstaff's licentiousness. This leads to his own destruction, as

he cannot bring himself to postpone the battle at Shrewsbury until his side has a better chance.

Hotspur has his redeeming features as well. Hal admits that his military accomplishments are worth aspiring to, and the Prince's eulogy over Hotspur's corpse (5.4.86-100) is genuinely admiring. Moreover, while the rebellious noblemen are certainly self-serving to various degrees, Hotspur's own motive is not personal gain or power; he is driven by an ambition for honorable action that one could admire if it were in better balance in his life. Hotspur's loving marriage to the engaging Lady Percy is presented in 2.3 and 3.1, and we recognize that he is not simply a 'wasp-stung and impatient fool', as his father calls him in 1.3.233, but also a husband who credibly inspires affection. His domestic bliss does not in any way negate the problem of his flawed values, but it makes him a multi-dimensional character.

Falstaff embodies an opposite weakness to Hotspur's, that of an anarchic refusal to accept responsibility. His world of food, women, and wine has no need for 'redeeming time' – as Hal vows to do in the 'reforation' speech (1.2.190-212) – for time is of no consequence when one refuses to acknowledge any obligations. Falstaff staves off all demands and sresponsiblities – the stuff of history – with humor, continually devising witticism and propesterous excuses for his behaviour. We are as delighted with his inventive comedy as Hal is in 1.2, but, like the Prince, we can see that a ruler must live a more orderly life. In addition, the fat knight displays a chiiling disregard for ordinary values, in an episode that Shakespeare plainly intended as a satire on a military abuse of his own times, when he callously offers the soldiers he has recruited to be 'food for powder, food for powder' (4.2.65-66), meaning that they will be quickly consumed by gunpowder, i.e., combat. He later announces coolly that he has abandoned his troops under fire, where 'there's not three of my hundred and fifty left alive' (5.3.37). Falstaff's anarchy here has an unpleasant, faintly evil edge to it. His crimes and misdemenours may be forgivable in a comedy – and 1 Henry IV is somewhat comic – but they are unacceptable in the domain of history, where the hard realities of peace and war are at stake.

Just as Hotspur has an unrealistic view of the world, so does Falstaff. Falstaff lives in an immature universe where one's appetites are gratified immediately and the inevitability of age and death is denied. He has been seen as a re-creation of ancient figures of European folklore that traditionally enlivened

holidaycelebrations by behaving in perversely loose ways that are normally forbidden. These figures, which returned to ordinary behaviour after the festival, made a great show of eating and drinking to excess, of flouting authority, and, often of sexual promiscuity. Thus illicit cravings were acknowledged and vicariously satisfied without disrupting the society. Such customs were prominent in pre-modern societies and were still well known, if not widely practiced, in Elizabethan England. Falstaff's gluttony, his lechery, and his very fatness are easily associated with such figures.

However, Falstaff is not simply a temptation to be resisted or a negative lesson for Hall. Falstaff's world is also in itself useful for the prince, offering him an arena in which he can test himself and come to understand the people who will be his subjects when he is king, and learn about himself as well. At the Boar's Head, Hal tries on the roles of robber, of tavern servant, even of king. The other worlds of the play – Hotspur's inflexible, hnor-bound world or Henry's tenseworld of political calculation – do not permit the temporary attitudes and stances necessary to learning. The world of comedy thus has virtues that the world of history cannot provide.

-Charles Boyce, From *Henry IV, Part 1* Commentary, Dictionary of Shakespeare, 1996

ON KING HENRY IV

The one serious flaw in a brilliantly arranged usurpation was Henry's dependence on powerful men for the support necessary to take the crown from Richard, while at the same time seeking to maintain the independence and inherent power of the office.

-Moody E. Prior, The Drama of Power, 1973

ON PRINCE HAL

The prince, who is the hero both of the comick and tragick part, is a young man of great abilities and violent passions, whose sentiments are right, though his actions are wrong; whose virtues are obscured by negligence, and whose understanding is dissipated by levity. In his idle hours he is rather loose than wicked, and when the occasion forces out his latent qualities, he is great without effort, and brave without tumult. The trifler is roused into a hero, and the hero again reposes into the trifle. The character is great, original and just.

-Samuel Johnson, The Plays of William Shakespeare, 1785

Very conscious of the way that men respond to the image of royalty, and no less instinctive a politician than his father, Hal is the creator as well as the creature of political mythology. the author as well as the hero of his legend.

-Robert Ornstein, A Kingdom for a Stage, 1972

ON FALSTAFF

[At Gad's Hill] What he leaves behind is not jeering contempt for a butt or a coward, but affection; an affection compounded of many simples: laughing sympathy for one who has "more flesh than another man, and therefore more frailty", astonishment at the quick dexterity with which he nevertheless carries his guts away, merriment at the turning of the tables upon him, delight in the sheer absurdity of his predicament, and above all- quite illogically, though inextricably- blended with the rest, gratitude to the player for the cleverness of the whole entertainment.

-John Dover Wilson, The Fortunes of Falstaff, 1943

ON HOTSPUR

Hotspur's speech [Act I, Scene iii, lines 30-71], by far the most sustained in the play to this point, is so full of detail, so quick and apparently spontaneous in elaboration,... so varied by impersonations of the "popinjay", and yet so strong and lively in rhythm that his character is strongly established in its own right by this one manifestation. The speech glistens with light and shade and is charged with energy. Given the active performance implied by the language, Hotspur usurps all attention.

-John Russell Brown, Shakespeare in Performance, 1976

ON THE MEANING OF THE PLAY

Analysis leaves us then, with symbols of Power and Appetite as the keys to the play's meaning: Power and Appetite, the two sides of Commodity... Those who see the world of Henry IV as some vital, joyous Renaissance England must go behind the facts Shakespeare presents. It is a world where to be normal is to be anti-social, and to be social is to be anti-human. Humanity is split in two. One half is banished to an underworld where dignity and decency must inevitably submerge in brutality and riot. The other half is restricted to an overworld where the same dignity and decency succumb to heartlessness and frigidity.

-John F. Dandy, Shakespeare's Doctrine of Nature, 1949

JULIUS CAESAR

1599

INTRODUCTION

Julius Caesar is a play about a political assassination. The question it asks is: is it ever right to use force to remove a ruler from power? You, as readers, can answer that question in terms of your own experience in the last quarter of the 20th century. But if you're going to figure out what Shakespeare thought, you'll have to know something about the values and concerns of the Elizabethan world in which he lived.

History plays were popular during Shakespeare's lifetime (1564-1616) because this was the Age of Discovery, and English men and women were hungry to learn about worlds other than their own. But the Elizabethans also saw history as a mirror in which to discover themselves and find answers to the problems of their lives. A play like Julius Caesar taught the Elizabethans about Roman politics; it also offered an object lesson in how to live. What was Shakespeare trying to teach his contemporaries?

To answer that question, let's take a look at Elizabethan attitudes toward (a) monarchy and (b) order:

(A) MONARCHY

Today we believe in democracy and are suspicious of anyone who seeks unlimited power. We know what can happen when a Hitler or a Stalin takes control of a government, and we know just how corrupting power can be. But Shakespeare and his contemporaries had no such prejudice against strong rulers. Their queen, Elizabeth I, ruled with an iron hand for forty-five years (from 1558 to 1603), yet her subjects had great affection for her. Under her rule the arts flourished and the economy prospered. While the rest of Europe was embroiled in war, mostly between Catholics and Protestants, England enjoyed a period relatively free from civil strife. Elizabeth's reign- and the reign of other Tudor monarchs, beginning with Henry VII in 1485- brought an end to the anarchy that had been England's fate during the Wars of the Roses (1455-84). To Shakespeare and his contemporaries the message was clear: only a strong, benevolent ruler could protect the peace and

save the country from plunging into chaos again. Shakespeare would probably not have approved of the murder of Caesar.

(B) ORDER

In 1599, when Julius Caesar was first performed, Elizabeth was old and failing. She had never married and had no children to succeed her. Shakespeare and his contemporaries must have worried greatly that someone (like Brutus? like Cassius?) would try to grab power and plunge the country into civil war.

When the Elizabethans spoke of order, they didn't just mean political or social order. Though they lived during what we call today the English Renaissance, they still held many medieval views about man and his relation to the universe. They knew the world was round, and that the earth was one of many planets spinning in space. And they knew from explorers that there were continents besides their own. But most believed, as people in the Middle Ages believed, that the universe was ruled by a benevolent God, and that everything, from the lowest flower to the angels on high, had a divine purpose to fulfill. The king's right to rule came from God himself, and opposition to the king earned the wrath of God and threw the whole system into disorder. Rulers had responsibilities, too, of course: if they didn't work for the good of the people, God would hold them to account. No one in this essentially medieval world lived or functioned in isolation. Everyone was linked together by a chain of rights and obligations, and when someone broke that chain, the whole system broke down and plunged the world into chaos. What destroys the divine harmony in Julius Caesar- Cassius' jealousy, Caesar's ambition, or the fickleness of the mob- is something you'll have to decide for yourself. But whatever the cause, the results offend the heavens and throw the entire country into disarray.

Today a sense of hopelessness and despair hangs over us: a mistake, a simple misunderstanding, and the bomb may drop and destroy life on earth. Our fate, we feel, is out of our control. But the Elizabethans were much more optimistic. Forget chance: if something went wrong, then someone had broken God's laws, the laws of the universe. Many would suffer, but in the end the guilty would be punished and order restored.

Julius Caesar begins with a human act that, like a virus, infects the body of the Roman state. No one is untouched; some grow sick, some die. But in time the poison works its way out of the

system and the state grows healthy again. In Shakespeare's world, health, not sickness, is the natural condition of man in God's divine plan.

THE PLOT

The working people of Rome are overjoyed: Julius Caesar has beaten Pompey's sons in battle, and everyone's getting a day off from work to celebrate Caesar's triumphant return. But two Roman officers, Flavius and Marullus, chase the crowds away: how dare the citizens support a tyrant who threatens to undermine hundreds of years of Republican (representative) rule! Don't they know that Caesar wants to be king?

Caesar parades by in full glory, just in time to help celebrate the races on the Feast of Lupercal. A soothsayer bids him "Beware the ides of March" (March 15), but Caesar- anxious not to show fear in public dismisses the man as a dreamer. The procession passes by, leaving behind two Roman Senators: Cassius, a long-time political enemy of Caesar, and Brutus, Caesar's friend. Like other members of the Senate, Brutus and Cassius are aristocrats who fear that Caesar will take away their ancient privileges.

Cassius now goes to work on Brutus, flattering him, reminding him of his noble ancestry, trying all the while to determine just how unhappy Brutus is with Caesar and just how willing Brutus is to join the conspiracy. Does Brutus know where Cassius is leading him? It's hard to tell. Brutus admits only that he's dissatisfied, and agrees to discuss the matter further.

Caesar, now back from the races, tells his friend Antony that he doesn't trust a man like Cassius, with his "lean and hungry look." He has good reason to be suspicious.

Casca tells Brutus and Cassius how the Roman people three times offered Caesar the crown, and how three times he refused it. Perhaps Caesar doesn't want to be king- that's what his friends would argue; but to his enemies, Caesar was merely playing on the gullibility of the people, pretending to be humble in order to win their support.

On a stormy night full of mysterious omens, Cassius converts Casca to his cause and arranges for Cinna, a fellow-conspirator, to throw a message through Brutus' window. The note will, he hopes; win the noble Senator to their side.

Alone in his garden, Brutus tries to justify the part he is about to play in the murder of his friend, Caesar. He decides finally

that Caesar's ambition poses a grave danger to the future of the Republic and that Caesar should be destroyed, not for what he is, but for what he's likely to become. The conspirators arrive at Brutus' house and agree to murder Caesar the next day at the Capitol. They would like to murder Antony, too, but Brutus, anxious to keep his hands clean and to preserve his precious honor, insists that Antony be spared.

After the conspirators leave, Brutus' wife Portia enters. She wants to know what's happening. Brutus worries that the news may be too frightening for her to bear, but nevertheless confides in her.

Caesar has had a restless night, too. His wife Calpurnia tries to keep him home- she senses evil in the air- and at first he relents. But the conspirators arrive and persuade him to go to the Senate as planned. What would happen to his reputation if his public thought the mighty Caesar was swayed by a superstitious wife!

Calpurnia's fears turn out to be more than superstitions, for the day is March 15, the ides of March. Caesar ignores two more warnings and, after delivering a speech full of extravagant self-praise, he is stabbed by the conspirators and dies.

Antony, learning of the murder of his dearest friend, begs the conspirators to let him speak at the funeral. Believing that right is on his side, Brutus agrees, over the objections of his more realistic friends. Left alone, Antony vows to revenge the death of Caesar, even if it means plunging his country into civil war. In the meantime, Caesar's adopted son and heir, Octavius, has arrived on the outskirts of Rome, and Antony advises him to wait there till he can gauge the mood of the country.

Brutus' funeral oration is a measured, well-reasoned speech, appealing to the better instincts of the people and to their abstract sense of duty to the state. For a moment he wins them over. But then Antony inflames the crowds with an appeal to their emotions. Showing them Caesar's bloody clothes turns them into an angry mob, hungry for revenge. Blind with hate, they roam the streets and tear apart the innocent poet Cinna.

Antony and Octavius now join forces with Lepidus to pursue and destroy the conspirators, who have fled from Rome. Anyone who might endanger their cause is coldly put to death. Brutus and Cassius await this new triumverate at their camp near Sardis in Asia Minor. Should Cassius let an officer take bribes? Brutus, standing on his principles, says no, and vents his anger on his friend. At the root of his anger, however, is his unspoken sorrow

at the death of his beloved wife Portia. Apparently unable to deal with such an unsettling situation, she went mad and took her life by swallowing hot coals. Sadness over her death brings Brutus and Cassius back together again, closer perhaps than before.

At night Brutus is visited by the ghost of Caesar, who vows to meet him again on the battlefield at Philippi in Greece. The next day the two armies- the army of Brutus and Cassius, and the army of Antony and Octavius- stand in readiness at Philippi while the four generals battle each other with words. In the first encounter, Brutus' troops defeat Octavius', and Antony's troops overcome Cassius'. Cassius, retreating to a nearby hill, sends his trusted friend Titinius to find out whether approaching troops are friends or foes. Is Titinius captured? It appears so; and Cassius, believing he has sent his good friend to his death and that the battle is lost, takes his life.

If only Cassius hadn't acted so rashly he might have saved his life, for the reports turn out to be false and Titinius still lives. Brutus, not the enemy, arrives, and mourns the death of his friend.

The tide now turns against Brutus. Sensing defeat, and unwilling to endure the dishonor of capture, he runs on his sword and dies. Like Caesar and Cassius, he thinks in his final moments not of power or personal glory, but of friendship.

Antony delivers a eulogy over Brutus' body, calling him "the noblest Roman of them all." Octavius agrees to take all of Brutus' men into his service, a gesture of reconciliation that bodes well for the future.

THE CHARACTERS

JULIUS CAESAR

In order to discuss Shakespeare's play intelligently you have to make up your mind about (1) Caesar's character, and (2) Caesar's threat to the Roman Republic. Either Caesar deserves to be assassinated, or he doesn't. On your answer hangs the meaning of the play.

On one hand, Caesar is a tyrant whose ambition poses a real danger to the Republic. In that case, the hero of the play is Brutus. On the other hand, Caesar may be vain and arrogant, but he is the only ruler strong enough to hold the Roman Republic together, and a flawed ruler is better than none at all. In that case, Brutus becomes an impractical idealist who is manipulated by a group of scheming politicians.

Whatever your position, there's no doubt that Shakespeare wants to show us the private side of a public man, and to remind us that our heroes are, like the rest of us, only human. In public, Caesar is worshipped like a god; in private, he is superstitious, deaf, and subject to fits of epilepsy (falling sickness). Caesar's public image is like a mask he wears to hide his weaknesses from others and from himself. Yet at the moment of death his mask slips, and we see another Caesar who values friendship above all.

Let's look at Caesar in three different ways.

1. Caesar's personal shortcomings are one reason to remove him from power. Another is his ambition, which threatens to undermine the power of the people and their elected representatives.

It's true that Antony calls Caesar "the noblest man / That ever lived in the tide of times" (Act III, Scene i, lines 256-257), but why believe Antony- a man blindly devoted to his master, who is so bad a judge of character that he says of Cassius:

> *Fear him not, Caesar, he's not dangerous;*
> *Act I, Scene ii, line 196*

Caesar's refusal to accept the crown is no more than a cynical political gesture to impress the masses. His speech comparing himself to the North Star is the height of arrogance and blasphemy. His refusal to pardon Publius Cimber is the mark of a man incapable of justice or pity. Such a man is a tyrant who knows no limits and deserves to be destroyed.

2. Caesar may be ambitious, but what of it? Ambition in itself is neither good nor bad. Today, in our democratic age, we are suspicious of politicians who seek unlimited power, but the Elizabethans in Shakespeare's time lived under a strong monarchy and would have had no such prejudice against strong rulers. If Shakespeare had wanted to show that Caesar was unfit to rule, he could have found evidence to support that point of view in Elizabethan history books; but nowhere in the play does he show Caesar suppressing civil liberties. Brutus himself is forced to admit:

> *...and, to speak truth of Caesar,*
> *I have not known when his affections swayed*
> *More than his reason.*
> *Act II, Scene i, lines 19-21*

A politician should be judged for his accomplishments, not for his private life. Even if Caesar is inflexible, the times demand such behavior.

In his personal life, Caesar is considerate to his wife, courteous to the conspirators, and generous to the Roman people. He may be vain, but he has something to be vain about. Friends and enemies alike praise his courage and his accomplishments on the battlefield- can they all be wrong?

3. Caesar may be neither a hero nor a villain, but, like people in real life, a mixture of both. Educated theater-goers in Shakespeare's time had this double image of Caesar, and Shakespeare may have enjoyed reinforcing and undercutting their preconceptions without ever resolving them.

Shakespeare had one other reason to make Caesar a mixture of good and evil: if Caesar were too noble, Brutus would become a simple villain; if Caesar were too evil, Brutus would become a simple hero. In either case the moral dilemma raised by the assassination would no longer exist.

How you yourself react to Caesar will perhaps say as much about you as it says about him. People with a strong need for political order in their lives may want to defend him. Those of you with a more democratic faith in the individual may prefer to see him as a threat to the people, and sympathize with Brutus.

BRUTUS

Scholars, actors, students- all have disagreed about Brutus and will continue to disagree as long as Julius Caesar is being read and performed.

You can view Brutus as a man of high principles and integrity- a man who is defeated, not by any personal shortcomings, but by the underhandedness of Cassius, the fickleness of the mob, and the inevitable march of Roman history from a republic to a monarchy.

You can also see Brutus as a windbag- an unfeeling, self-righteous bore who cloaks his evil deeds in high principles and plunges his country into civil war.

Which is the "real" Brutus? It depends in part on whether you think the assassination was necessary. It also depends on whether you think Brutus uses language to convey the truth, or to hide from it. Take these lines of his:

For let the gods so speed me, as I love
The name of honor more than I fear death.
Act I, Scene ii, lines 88-89

Brutus thinks he is telling the truth- but is he? Would a truly honorable man need to call attention to his honor?

One point is indisputable: Brutus believes in his principles, and his principles do, to some extent, control his behavior. He stands apart from all the other characters in the way he is influenced by ideas, rather than by feelings or the wish for personal gain. Cassius assassinates Caesar because he is jealous of him; Brutus acts only for what he considers the best interests of the state. Antony is a man of action who pauses only to consider the best way of getting from A to B; Brutus is a man of ideas who weighs his behavior in terms of Right and Wrong. Antony believes that brute strength and passion rule the world, and manipulates people accordingly; Brutus believes that reason rules the world, and that people can be swayed by the power of truth and logic. Cassius and Antony see life as a game or competition in which rewards go to the strongest or swiftest; Brutus sees life as a confrontation of ideas in which rewards go to the just. He is such a private and self-contained man that he won't even share the news of his wife's death with his good friend Cassius.

Brutus is high-minded, but his principles do not seem to prepare him very well for dealing with a corrupt world. He cannot recognize motives that are less noble than his own, and is therefore preyed upon by unscrupulous politicians. As Cassius himself says behind Brutus' back:

Well, Brutus, thou art noble; yet I see
Thy honorable mettle may be wrought
From that it is disposed; therefore it is meet
That noble minds keep ever with their likes;
For who so from that cannot be seduced?
Act I, Scene ii, lines 308-312

Brutus' principles force him to spare Antony's life and to let Antony speak at Caesar's funeral. His own speech lacks power (compared to Antony's) because he assumes that people can be led by reason. An honorable man, he uses language to communicate the truth rather than to stir up the emotions of the people; he doesn't understand that people want to be led- if not by Caesar, then by someone else.

Some readers see Brutus as a bookish man who can function only in a world of ideas. True, he is not much of a politician; but is it fair to describe him as a man whose head is in the clouds? Cassius, after all, is constantly asking and taking his advice. It is Brutus who calls for action and who takes the offensive at Philippi; and it is Brutus, not Antony, who wins the battle. Brutus does make some unwise decisions, but does that mean he is incapable of functioning in the world?

Almost all the characters in Julius Caesar struggle to be better than they are, and Brutus is no exception. He, too, falls short of his ideals. Although he insists on living by the loftiest principles, Cassius gets him to join the conspiracy by flattering him and appealing to his sense of family pride.

Brutus tries to live by reason alone, yet he cannot sleep at night, and is so plagued by a guilty conscience that Caesar's ghost appears to him in a dream. In his argument with Cassius, Brutus is reduced to a squabbling child- perhaps because he is mad with grief (though he tries not to show it) over the death of his wife. In the end Brutus takes his own life, in violation of his Stoic philosophy, which demands that he accept whatever fate holds in store for him. Is Brutus a hero, then- or is he a villain? Let's look at him in both lights.

1. Brutus is a man who cares more about principles than people- who uses principles to justify the murder of a friend. He is so blinded by ideals that he cannot see into his own heart, or recognize the needs of the world. He is a moral snob who dislikes debate or compromise and always insists on getting his own way.

This Brutus knows exactly what Cassius is up to, but lets himself be led in order to keep his own hands clean. He is a hypocrite who hides behind lofty principles and pretty phrases. Despite his reputation for honor, he is easily flattered and concerned about his reputation. His pride causes him to dismiss Cicero- a potential rival-even though Cicero is the greatest orator of the times.

In his refusal to accept his human limitations, Brutus is as vain and dangerous as Caesar.

2. Brutus is simply too noble for the world he lives in. He sacrifices his friend Caesar to do what is best for his country. He remains faithful to his principles to the end. Everyone, even

Caesar, admires him and seeks his friendship. He is a tragic figure only because he tries to be better than he can, and falls.

Hero or villain- could Brutus possibly be both? Does the world need more men of principle, or less? Shakespeare forces us to ask these questions, but lets us find answers for ourselves.

CASSIUS

There are many sides to Cassius. This makes him difficult to pin down or sum up in a phrase- but it also makes him true to life.

Here are two opinions of Cassius. From Caesar:

Yond Cassius has a lean and hungry look;
He thinks too much: such men are dangerous.
Act I, Scene ii, lines 194-195

From Brutus:

The last of all the Romans, fare thee well!
It is impossible that ever Rome
Should breed thy fellow [equal].
Act V, Scene iii, lines 99-101

Both judgments are true- and false, for Cassius is a different man to different people. Depending on how a person treats him, he can be loving or ruthless, gentle or hard, passionate or aloof. One moment he is deceiving his dear friend Brutus; the next, he is craving affection from him.

When we first meet Cassius, he is busy lying, flattering, forging letters, and subverting the principles of his good friend Brutus. Caesar's opinion of him seems right on target. He's not motivated by the best interests of Rome, but by the desire for revenge on a man who doesn't like him, Jealousy moves him- jealousy of the fame and power of a man he considers no more worthy than himself.

Caesar calls Cassius a "lean and hungry" man, and you may want to take this as the final word on Cassius and interpret all his actions in this light. But Caesar's verdict is not the only one. Cassius' love for Brutus, for instance, seems quite genuine- particularly after the assassination. Cassius has many admirers and friends who are willing to fight and die for him. After the argument with Brutus, Cassius shows good-natured tolerance for the Poet. As death approaches, Cassius realizes that he is not the measure of all

things, and that there are forces at work in the universe beyond his understanding and control. He takes his life, not because he has lost the battle, but because he believes (mistakenly) that he has caused the death of a friend.

Almost everything Cassius says and does, both before and after the assassination, can be interpreted as a direct, emotional reaction to people. He responds to people as Brutus responds to ideas. Whether he is conspiring to kill Caesar or asking for Brutus' love, Cassius is motivated by a boyish need for affection, and by a boyish hatred of those who refuse it. His reasons for killing Caesar seem to be strictly personal. Caesar, his close boyhood friend, has rejected him. "Caesar doth bear me hard," he says- Caesar bears a grudge against me and therefore must be destroyed.

When Cassius meets Brutus, he is disturbed by the absence of "that gentleness / And show of love as I was wont [accustomed] to have" (Act I, Scene ii, lines 33-34). In the quarrel scene, Cassius tells Brutus, like a pouting child, "You love me not" (Act IV, Scene iii, line 88). What upsets Cassius most are not Brutus' accusations but the fact that Brutus does not have "love enough" to bear with him.

Cassius' spitefulness and his craving for affection are childlike. He seems genuinely perplexed that Caesar, a man no stronger than himself, could become so powerful. He behaves like a boy who discovers that his idol has clay feet, and destroys it rather than live with its imperfections. "Such men as he be never at heart's ease" (Act I, Scene ii, line 208), says Caesar.

If you reread Cassius' speech against Caesar (Act I, Scene ii, lines 90-161), you'll see how Cassius equates worthiness with such traditionally masculine traits as physical strength and endurance. Perhaps because he has so little sense of himself, and of his own worth, he suffers from a sensitive ego, and measures himself not against some abstract standards of right and wrong (as Brutus does), but against others.

Cassius blames himself for giving Caesar so much power:

The fault, dear Brutus, is not in our stars,
But in ourselves, that we are underlings.
Act I, Scene ii, lines 140-141

These are the words of a spiritual outcast, who sees himself alone in the universe. Only as death nears does Cassius recognize himself as part of a divine plan, and achieve some measure of peace.

Cassius, we learn from Caesar, "hears no music." Here's what Lorenzo in Shakespeare's play The Merchant of Venice says about his type:

The man that hath no music in himself,
Nor is not mov'd with concord of sweet sounds,
Is fit for treasons, stratagems, and spoils;
The motions of his spirit are dull as night,
And his affections dark as Erebus.
Let no such man be trusted
Act V, Scene i, lines 83-88

To Shakespeare, an inability to hear music was, quite literally, an inability to hear the harmonies of the universe. The fact that Cassius hears no music does not in itself make him evil, but it does reveal a lack of inner harmony, and a restlessness that can never be satisfied.

Cassius and Caesar are enemies in life, but the two are almost indistinguishable at the moment of death. Both let their masks slip, and reveal the gentleness that lies beneath. At this moment of truth, there is no masculine talk of revenge- no war cries or curses- but a simple lament for the betrayal of friends.

ANTONY

There are many "Antonys." One of them is passionate and impulsive; the other is in complete control of his emotions. One can cry over the death of his dear friend Caesar; the other condemns his associates to death without batting an eyelash. One makes a powerful political speech with perfect understanding of human nature; the other can be so mistaken about human nature that he calls Cassius "not dangerous."

Can such opposites exist within the same man? It's possible that Shakespeare couldn't make up his mind about Antony, and painted an unfinished portrait of him. It's also possible that Shakespeare was trying to portray the many sides of an opportunist. An opportunist is a person who adjusts his values to suit his purposes; who uses people and events to get what he wants, regardless of principles or consequences. If Antony is such a man, it is understandable that, like a chameleon, he would change colors from one moment to the next.

How different Antony is from Brutus! Brutus stands behind his principles, refusing to be swayed by circumstance; Antony never lets principles stand in the way of success. Brutus' conscience keeps

him up at night; tactics, manoeuvres, schemes- these are what concern Antony.

A modern man, Antony takes the world as he finds it and uses whatever means are necessary to get what he wants. Life for him is a game- serious, but a game nonetheless- and he is a skillful player who knows how to win.

Antony is an opportunist, yes, but is he evil? Look closely at his words and actions, and you can find evidence to support that point of view. In his famous funeral oration, for instance, nothing could be more offensive than the way he fires up the masses by appealing to their basest emotions. And nothing could be more irresponsible than the way he unleases the "dogs of war"- bringing death and destruction to innocent and guilty alike.

Antony is cynical, callous and unprincipled, yet he is motivated not by personal ambition but by the desire to revenge the death of a friend. His almost dog-like devotion to Caesar reveals a deep capacity for loyalty and affection. He is cunning, but, unlike Brutus, completely honest with himself. He may manipulate people, but he speaks with conviction, and what he says is deeply felt. His funeral oration is more effective than Brutus' because he speaks from the heart.

In the end, Antony (with Octavius' help), triumphs. Is Shakespeare suggesting that realists like Antony are the hope of the future? Perhaps Shakespeare is merely pointing out that Antony and his kind are more likely to succeed in a world as imperfect as the one we live in.

OCTAVIUS

Octavius- Caesar's adopted son- is more important a character than his appearances (only four) and his lines (only 30) would indicate, since the fate of Rome rests in his hands after the death of the conspirators. From such limited information, we have to decide whether Rome has been left in good hands.

What we should be able to agree on is this: Octavius is a capable soldier who accomplishes the work at hand by whatever means are needed to achieve it. Honorable men like Brutus can be dangerous; perhaps Rome needs pragmatists like Octavius to reestablish order.

The first time Octavius appears (Act IV, Scene I, line 2) he is busy checking off names of people who must die- including the brother of his friend Lepidus. Is he a cold-blooded murderer, then? Perhaps. But he is also a hardened soldier, who knows that it is

sometimes necessary to sacrifice individuals for the sake of victory. Like Brutus, he kills for what he considers the greater good; but, unlike Brutus, he has no qualms about it.

Moments later (Act IV, Scene i, lines 27-28), Octavius tries to save Lepidus' life. Since he showed no mercy to Lepidus' brother, we can assume he is not just being a good guy, but that he recognizes the practical value of having a "tried and valiant soldier" in his ranks.

Yet Octavius lets Antony decide Lepidus' fate. Is this a sign of weakness? Or is it the wise decision of a practical man, who knows the issue isn't worth fighting over?

The second time Octavius appears (Act V, Scene i, lines 1-20), he ignores Antony's wishes and insists on keeping his forces to the right side of the battlefield. "I do not cross you," he tells Antony, "but I will do so." Octavius seems to be behaving like a willful young Caesar, insisting on his natural right to rule. Whether his tone is spiteful, or firm but polite, you'll have to decide for yourself.

Only moments later (line 24), Octavius asks Antony if they should attack, and this time he gives in to Antony's wishes. Once again you'll have to decide: is Octavius incapable of important decisions-or is he simply smart enough to listen to someone with more experience?

The four generals now confront each other before the battle (lines 27-66)- Octavius and Antony on one side, Brutus and Cassius on the other. Antony, Brutus and Cassius squabble like children- only Octavius keeps his perspective. "Come, come, the cause," he says-let's keep our sights on what's important and get to the matter at hand.

The third time we see Octavius (Act V, scene v, line 60), he offers to take all of Brutus' men into his service. This may be an act of charity, but from what we know of Octavius, he is probably motivated by the practical need to end the war and bring both sides together under his single rule. His intentions may not matter so much as the fact that he is trying to end the bloodshed and reestablish order.

As the successor to Caesar, Octavius is given the final words of the play. It is as a soldier, not as a noble man, that Octavius praises Brutus, for nobility is a quality Octavius seems indifferent to. His tribute to Brutus may not be genuine- he is probably only doing what is expected of him- but whatever his

motives, he seems to have no interest in revenge. His desire to reunite the country bodes well for the future of Rome.

(The historic Octavius did restore order. He also restored the Republic- but more in name than in fact. The Senate retained its forms and privileges, but the power resided in Octavius, who controlled the army. In 27 B.C. Antony took the name of Augustus and became the first Roman Emperor. Shakespeare portrays him principally as a soldier, yet during his reign he became more interested in peace than in war, and his rule became known as the golden age of Roman literature and architecture.)

PORTIA

There are two ways to view Portia. Let's look at them.

1. Portia is often seen today as a champion of women's rights- a feminist living nearly four centuries ahead of her time.

According to this view, Portia is a woman who demands equality with her husband. She insists on being treated as an individual, not as an object or an idea. She speaks of herself and Brutus as "one" (Act II, Scene i, lines 261-278), and of Brutus himself as "your self, your half." She demands to know his secret, however painful it may be. She will not be condescended to; she will not be treated as a child.

This Portia is strong-willed but modest, dignified but tender. She is one of the few characters in the play who uses language to communicate the truth rather than to hide from it. She has an innate sense of wisdom that lets her see through words to the very heart of things. (When Brutus attributes his moodiness to bad health, for instance, Portia immediately knows he is lying to protect her.) Though Portia is high-minded and independent, she is also a loving and devoted wife, who kills herself rather than lives alone.

2. That is one view of Portia- there is another.

According to this less flattering view, Portia makes the mistake of trying to be more than a woman, fails miserably, and brings about her own destruction.

Portia points proudly to her self-inflicted wound (Act II, Scene i, lines 299-302) to prove to Brutus just how capable she is of functioning in a world of men. She also prides herself on being the daughter of Cato, a man famous for his integrity, who took his own life rather than be taken prisoner (in the civil war between Caesar and Pompey). Says Portia:

> *Think you I am no stronger than my sex,*
> *Being so fathered and so husbanded?*
> *Act II, Scene i, lines 296-297*

Brutus takes her at her word, confides his secret to her, and what happens? Portia goes mad with grief, and eventually takes her own life.

Portia's mistake is to confuse her private self with her public image as Cato's daughter. Like Brutus and Caesar, she tries to live up to her name and be someone she is not- with disastrous results. In her death- as in Brutus' and Caesar's- we see the danger of wearing a public mask, and forgetting whom we are underneath.

Note that Portia wants to be Brutus' equal only so that she can be more a part of his life; nowhere does she suggest that she expects him to be part of hers. The very fact of losing him drives her mad. Portia thus sums herself up best:

> *Ay me, how weak a thing*
> *The heart of woman is!*
> *Act II, Scene iv, lines 39-40*

Is this Shakespeare's unhappy view of women, and the final word on Portia? Or are the other critics right- the ones who see her as the ideal, modern woman, who dies for love?

Either interpretation can be correct- depending on how you choose to view her.

CALPURNIA

Caesar's wife speaks only 26 lines, so we never get to know her very well.

There are at least two ways to view her- one of them more flattering than the other.

On one hand, she is undignified, nervous, and weak. She is also superstitious and haunted by unreasonable fears, and Caesar cannot be blamed for treating her like a child.

On the other hand, Calpurnia is a devoted wife- as concerned about Caesar's well-being as Portia is about Brutus'. True, she has strange dreams, but all of them come true. Perhaps in her intuitive, female way she is closer to the truth than Caesar.

Whichever way you view Calpurnia, you will have to admit that her relationship with Caesar is less than ideal.

Calpurnia's talk with Caesar follows closely on Portia's meeting with Brutus, as if Shakespeare were drawing attention to the differences between the two relationships.

Portia greets her husband with respect as "my lord" (Act II, Scene i, line 234). She may be flattering him to get what she wants, but she at least follows the forms of courtesy. Brutus is as concerned about her health as she is about his.

How does Calpurnia greet Caesar? With an order:

Think you to walk forth?
You shall not stir out of your house today.
Act II, Scene i, lines 8-9

And Caesar replies:

Caesar shall forth.

Calpurnia is foolish enough to turn her request into a battle of wills. She makes the mistake of treating her husband in public as the mortal he is; and Caesar, to preserve his public image, has to take a stand against her.

Caesar, of course, has been equally tactless or unfeeling- announcing to all the world (Act I, Scene ii, lines 6-9) that his wife is sterile.

Can you blame a wife for treating her husband as a mortal and not as a god? The fact that she can see the man behind the mask points up her strength- or her weakness.

OTHER ELEMENTS

SETTING

All scenes through Act IV, Scene i are set in Rome. Act IV, Scenes ii and iii, take place near Sardis in Asia Minor. All of Act V is set near the plains of Philippi in Greece. The play begins on February 15, 44 B.C., on the Feast of Lupercal; continues through the assassination of Caesar a month later; and concludes with the Battle of Philippi in 42 B.C., when Brutus and Cassius commit suicide and Caesar's heir, Octavius, assumes power. Shakespeare, of course, was a dramatist, not a playwright, and in order to

preserve the dramatic unity of the action he telescoped a period of three years into six days.

THEMES

Here is a list of the major themes of Julius Caesar. They will be studied in depth in the scene-by-scene discussion of the play. Notice that some themes contradict each other- since critics disagree, it's up to you to decide which ones are true. This book will help you find evidence to support your position.

1. A PORTRAIT OF CAESAR OR OF BRUTUS

Caesar: The play is a portrait of Caesar- why else would Shakespeare name the play after him? Though Caesar is killed in the third act, his spirit- what he stands for- dominates the action of the play until Brutus' death, and then is reborn in the person of Octavius.

Brutus: The play is a portrait of Brutus- why else would Shakespeare end the play with Brutus' death, and with the opposition's tributes to him? Brutus is studied in greater depth than any other character, and the action of the play revolves around his role in the assassination. Shakespeare called his play Julius Caesar only because he was writing about the period in Roman history when Caesar reigned.

2. FRIENDSHIP

Friendship is at the center of Shakespeare's vision of an ordered, harmonious world. Disloyalty and distrust cause this world to crumble. Relationships suffer when people put their principles to crumble. Relationships suffer when people let their roles as public officials interfere with their private lives. As death approaches, characters forget their worldly ambitions, and speak about the loyalty of friends.

3. LANGUAGE

We think of language as a way of sharing our thoughts and feelings, and of communicating the truth; but in Julius Caesar people use language to disguise their thoughts and feelings, and to distort the truth. Language is used to humiliate and flatter. Words are powerful weapons that turn evil into good and throw an entire country into civil war.

4. A STUDY OF HISTORY

Shakespeare is dramatizing an important period in Roman history, when Rome developed from a republic (with a representative form of government) to a monarchy (with a single ruler). He is not blaming or praising anyone, but objectively portraying the major factors that contributed to this development: Caesar's ambition; the frustrations of a weakened and divided Senate; and the needs and wishes of the Roman people.

5. THE PRIVATE LIVES OF PUBLIC FIGURES

We like to think that our political heroes are free from ordinary human weaknesses. Shakespeare reminds us that behind their masks of fame are mortals like the rest of us- with the same prejudices, physical handicaps, hopes, and fears. When these public figures try to live up to their own self-images, they bring destruction on themselves, and on the world.

6. FATE AND THE SUPERNATURAL

A sense of fate hangs over the events in Julius Caesar- a sense that the assassination is inevitable and that the fortunes of the characters have been determined in advance. The characters are foolish to ignore prophecies and omens, which invariably come true; yet they are free to act as though the future were unknown. They are the playthings of powers they can neither understand nor control, yet they are held accountable for everything they do.

7. PRAGMATISTS AND MEN OF PRINCIPLE

Shakespeare is comparing two types of people: the man of fixed moral standards, who expects others to be as honorable as himself; and the pragmatist, who accepts the world for what it is and does everything necessary to achieve his goals. The pragmatist is less admirable, but more effective. Shakespeare is either (a) pointing out the uselessness of morals and principles in a corrupt world, or (b) dramatizing the tragedy of a noble man destroyed by a world less perfect than he is.

8. THE ASSASSINATION

The Murder Is Just

A ruler forfeits his right to rule when he oversteps the heaven-appointed limits to his power. Caesar deserves to die on two counts: first, he considers himself an equal to the gods; and

second, he threatens to underline hundreds of years of republican (representative) rule. Brutus sacrifices his life to preserve the freedom of the people, and to save his country from the clutches of a tyrant.

The Murder Is Unjust

Shakespeare's contemporaries respected strong rulers, who could check the dangerous impulses of the masses and protect their country from civil war. They believed that order and stability were worth preserving at any price. Shakespeare's play may therefore be a warning against the use of violence to overthrow authority. The assassination destroys nothing but the conspirators themselves, since Caesar's spirit lives on in the hearts of the people.

STYLE

There's not much poetry in Julius Caesar. Perhaps because the action takes place in Rome, the characters all seem to speak like orators. On the battlefield, or even with friends, they're always making speeches! Read some of the longer ones aloud; you'll see how alike everyone sounds, how everyone speaks clearly and simply and says exactly what he thinks. The men in Shakespeare's play are politicians who avoid flowery language and metaphor; they express themselves often in one-syllable words strung together in simple, declarative sentences. This is the language of people who are- or who try to be- in control of their emotions, and who use words not to create beauty, but to manipulate each other and to get things done. Shakespeare may be using language to mirror the restrained and formal mood of classical Rome. Perhaps, too, he wants to show how people use language to mask their feelings from themselves and from others. As readers, we have to look beneath these masks and ask ourselves: who are these people? what do they really think, and what are they really saying?

AN HISTORICAL NOTE

When you think of Senators, you naturally think of elected representatives of the people. But in ancient Rome the Senate was made up of wealthy aristocrats and conservatives who sought to defend their ancient privileges. Caesar was a reformer who wanted to reduce the power of the Senate, and to share their lands and privileges with the common people.

Both Senators and reformers looked to the generals for support. Pompey represented the interests of the Senators, Caesar defended the reformers. In 47 B.C. Caesar crossed the Rubican and defeated Pompey; two years later he defeated Pompey's sons in Egypt. No wonder the Roman officers Flavius and Marullus (Act I, Scene i) are upset by Caesar's triumphant return from battle! And no wonder the common people are overjoyed! Caesar may have wanted to be king or dictator, but it was he, not the Senators, who had the interests of the people at heart. Perhaps that's why in Shakespeare's play we never see Caesar depriving the Romans of their civil liberties, or the Senators discussing what they'll do for the people of Rome once Caesar is destroyed.

POINT OF VIEW

Shakespeare's characters are too true-to-life to be pinned down in a phrase. They behave differently with different people, showing sides of themselves to friends that they hide from enemies. They have public selves and private selves. They are neither good nor evil, but a mixture of qualities. They are often inconsistent and unpredictable-gentle and considerate one moment, harsh and thoughtless the next. Don't ask Shakespeare to tell you what to think about them- he breathes life into his characters and lets them go. The rest is up to you.

FORM AND STRUCTURE

The play tells a single story that moves chronologically forward from (a) the plot against Caesar, to (b) the assassination, to (c) the results of the assassination (the retribution). The assassination takes place in Act III- the middle of the play; everything leads up to that moment, and away from it.

As in most Shakespeare plays, the action begins with the breakdown of order. Caesar has defeated the sons of Pompey, and the Senators are plotting against their ruler. The natural laws that bind a leader to his people have broken down. The divine plan has been shattered. The result is much like a sickness that infects everyone and everything-the conspirators, the people of Rome, the heavens themselves. At the end of the play, the Roman state is exhausted by war but on its way to recovery. The sickness has been controlled, and order reestablished.

Some say that Julius Caesar is a poorly structured play because the main character (Caesar) dies halfway through the play. Others argue that even though Caesar dies, his spirit dominates the entire play: it is Caesar's spirit that takes revenge on the conspirators; it is Caesar's spirit that lives on in the hearts of the people, and in the person of Octavius.

Caesar is well structured, even if you consider Brutus the main character, since the action begins with his involvement in the plot, and ends with his death and the eulogy over his body.

THE CRITICS

'Julius Caesar' is a play about moral ambiguity in a political setting and the personal tragedy that results. It resembles both the HISTORY PLAYS, written somewhat earlier, and the great TRAGEDIES, soon to come. Like the tragedies, it presents a protagonist who aspires to heroism and fails because of his own moral shortcomings. At the same time, 'Julius Caesar' also reflects the political philosophy that had informed the playwright's picture of English civil disorder and violence are tragic for the entire society, their avoidance is a higher moral obligation than the pursuit or control of power, even for apparently just or moral purposes. Therefore, for Shakespeare, the preservation of the political status quo is a primary good.

Brutus, the protagonist of Julius Caesar, is an ambivalent figure who may be seen as both good and evil – an honorable man dedicated to the good of his country, but also destroyer of its peace. The play's central action – murder of Caesar – may seem an act of disinterested idealism or one of inflated self-love. Twentieth-century views of the play reflect these possibilities: with the rise of fascism in the 1920s and 1930s, Brutus was aggrandized as a model of republican virtues and Caesar identified with Mussolini and Hitler. More recently, however, Caesar has been defended as a hero who is destroyed by a neurotically envious Brutus, who pursues glory without regard for the disaster he provokes.

-Charles Boyce, From *Julius Caesar* Commentary, Dictionary of Shakespeare, 1996

ON SHAKESPEARE

In approaching Shakespeare, we must remember that he wrote, not for a small group of intellectuals, but for every man, from courtier to apprentice, for the man in the street, for anyone who could be lured to pay a penny or a tuppence to get into the theatre to see a play. Shakespeare wrote with one or both eyes on the box office. He wanted to be popular and he tried to write in such

a manner and on such themes that Everyman would welcome his efforts- and pay for them.

-Louis B. Wright, Shakespeare for Everyman 1964

ON OMENS

"He is a dreamer, let us leave him: pass," says Caesar, dismissing the Soothsayer who called out to him "Beware the ides of March." The event showed that he dismissed him at his peril. Shakespeare was growing more convinced that we neglect dreams and dreamers at our peril. He was a humanist, to be sure, and remained one to the end of his days. But from Julius Caesar on, his greater characters and greater plays are touched with the dream-light and dream-darkness of something that... transcends the merely human.... The secret of human life, [Shakespeare] seems to say, lies beyond... life as well as within it.

-Harold C. Goddard, The Meaning of Shakespeare, 1960

ON CAESAR

Caesar, unlike other Shakespearean characters who suffer from ambition, never says he wants the crown. But even if he did, would it seem so wicked to an Englishman, living under the rule of Elizabeth that a man already at the helm of state should seek to be King? We know from the historical plays that Shakespeare thought it wrong to usurp a crown, but Caesar would not have been usurping one. What the Senate planned to offer him was only the outward and visible form of a power he already enjoyed.

It has also been argued that Caesar is shown in the play as an arrogant and unyielding man who has the soul of a despot and who could reasonably be expected to trample any remaining liberties of the Romans under his feet. Of course, the pomposity of Caesar's speeches offers some support for this, but I doubt that Shakespeare intended Caesar to be as pompous as his part reads to a twentieth-century eye. It is true that he sometimes speaks of himself in the third person, which has a grandiloquent ring in a nonmonarch, but he is the undoubted ruler of a great empire, and Shakespeare may have considered this form of expression perfectly fitting. He allows many rulers in his plays to take themselves very seriously indeed without seeming to denigrate them. What seems pompous to us, accustomed as we are to the compulsive humility of our own political candidates, may have appeared to Elizabethans as the gravity and majesty expected of a chief of state.

Caesar's statements about Cassius and his distrust of thin men are frequently read as the mutterings of a dictator who cannot abide the least independence of thought. But Caesar has every justification for distrusting Cassius, who is already plotting his murder, and he puts his finger on Cassius' primary motive, which is simple envy.

-Louis Auchincloss, Motiveless Malignity, 1969

The essential greatness of Caesar being thus assumed, Shakespeare is free to exhibit in him human weaknesses apparently inconsistent with it. There are many advantages in this method of presentation. It gives reality to Caesar, the man; it suggests that Caesar's spirit is mightier than his person, a suggestion which is essential to the unity of the play; it enables the dramatist to present him in flesh and blood without reducing in stature the men who murder him; finally, it permits the audience to sympathise with Brutus just sufficiently to give poignancy to the disaster which overtakes him.

This last point is of major dramatic importance. The play could not easily have risen to the level of tragedy if Caesar had been portrayed consistently in full majesty. The conspiracy must then have inevitably impressed the audience as no more than a stupid plot contrived by a group of self-seeking politicians under the leadership of a misguided political crank. Such, in effect, it was, but the skillful dramatist, if he is to retain the sympathetic attention of his audience, will not obtrude the fact, but allow it to become fully apparent only at the close.

The infirmities of Caesar are not inventions of the dramatist. They are in part historical and in part derived from Plutarch's delight in the foibles of great men and his tendency to find such foibles more pronounced in his Roman heroes than in the heroes of his native Greece.

-John Palmer, "The Character of Caesar," from Political Characters of Shakespeare, reprinted in Shakespeare: Julius Caesar, 1969

Perhaps more than any other figure in history, Julius Caesar has evoked a divided response in the minds of those who have written about him. Indeed, it would not be an exaggeration to say that such a response, made up of attraction and repulsion, admiration and hostility, was the prevailing one among informed and educated men throughout Antiquity, the Middle Ages, and the

Renaissance, so that we can speak of it as forming a tradition extending from Caesar's own day down to that of Shakespeare.

In Plutarch's attitude towards Caesar dislike and admiration mingle.... However divided in his attitude toward Caesar, Plutarch's prevailing opinion seems to have been that his offences were committed under the influence of bad friends and against his better nature and that, although his motives were unworthy, his influence upon the state of Rome was largely beneficial.

In a sense, all that Shakespeare does is to dramatize the views of Caesar and the conspirators which he found in his 'sources', and especially Plutarch, distributing what are the divided and contradictory responses of a single writer among several characters who take different sides...

-Ernest Schanzer, The Problem Plays of Shakespeare, 1963

ON BRUTUS

Brutus is humorlessly good. If his duty is to know himself, his performance fails. Nobility has numbed him until he cannot see himself for his principles. When his principles are expressing themselves they are beautiful in their clarity; but when he speaks to himself he knows not who is there; he addresses a strange audience, and fumbles.... Shakespeare has done all that could be done with such a man, but what could be done was limited.... He is not mad, or haunted, or inspired, or perplexed in the extreme. He is simply confused.

-Mark Van Doren, Shakespeare, 1953

Shakespeare's sympathy with Brutus does not imply approval of the murder of Caesar; it only means that he ultimately finds the spiritual problem of the virtuous murderer the most interesting thing in the story. Brutus best interprets the play's theme: Do evil that good may come, and see what does come!

-Harley Granville-Barker,
Prefaces to Shakespeare, Vol. 11, 1946

In Brutus, then, Shakespeare discovered the noble hero with a tragic flaw. By that discovery he made it possible for English tragedy to reach greatness hitherto attained only by Greek tragedy. All his tragedies written after Julius Caesar benefited by the discovery.

Julius Caesar is a landmark not merely in the history of Shakespearean tragedy but in the history of English tragedy. Before

Brutus there had been no tragic hero on the English stage whose character had combined noble grandeur with fatal imperfection.

William Farnham,
"'High-minded Heroes' from Shakespeare's Tragic Frontier,"
reprinted in Shakespeare: Julius Caesar, 1969

ON CASSIUS

Cassius, the man of passion, is set in strong contrast to Brutus, the philosopher.

An egoist certainly; yet not ignobly so, seeking only his own advantage. Convinced in a cause- as we find him convinced; that Caesar's rule in Rome must be free Rome's perdition- he will fling himself into it and make no further question, argue its incidental rights and wrongs no more, as Brutus may to weariness.

Egoist he is, yet not intellectually arrogant. He sees in Brutus the nobler nature and a finer mind, and yields to his judgment even when he strongly feels that it is leading them astray.

-Harley Granville-Barker,
Prefaces to Shakespeare, Vol. 11, 1946

ON THE TWO FUNERAL ORATIONS

Editor after editor has condemned Brutus' speech as poor and ineffective, and most of them have then proceeded to justify Shakespeare for making it so. It is certainly not meant to be ineffective, for it attains its end in convincing the crowd. Whether it is poor oratory must be to some extent a matter of taste. Personally, accepting its form as one accepts the musical convention of a fugue, I find that it stirs me deeply. I prefer it to Antony's. It wears better. It is very noble prose.

One may so analyze [Antony's] speech throughout and find it a triumph of effective cleverness. The cheapening of the truth, the appeals to passion, the perfect carillon of flattery, cajolery, mockery and pathos, singing to a magnificent tune, all serve to make it a model of what popular oratory should be. In a school for demagogues its critical analysis might well be an item in every examination paper. That is one view of it. By another, there is nothing in it calculated or false. Antony feels like this; and, on these occasions, he never lets his thoughts belie his feelings, that are all. And he knows, without stopping to think, what the common thought and feeling will be, where reason and sentiment will touch bottom- and it if be a muddy bottom, what matter!- because he is

himself, as we said, the common man raised to the highest power. So, once in touch with his audience, he can hardly go wrong.

-Harley Granville-Barker,
Prefaces to Shakespeare, Vol. 11, 1946

[Brutus' speech] is one of the worst speeches ever made by an able and intelligent man. Its symmetrical structure, its balanced sentences, its ordered procedure, its rhetorical questions, its painfully conscious and ornamental style, its hopelessly abstract subject matter, all stamp it as the utterance of a man whose heart is not in his words. It is a dishonest speech.

The cry of the Third Citizen, "Let him be Caesar," measures its practical effectiveness. Those four words have often been pointed out as one of the most crushing ironies in the play. They are, and with the other comments of the populace. show how hopeless the cause of the conspirators was. These people did not deserve liberty. They were ready for slavery.

Antony's speech, on the other hand, for all its playing on the passions of the people, and for all its lies, is at bottom an honest speech, because Antony loved Caesar. Because to that extent he has the truth on his side, he is as concrete as Brutus was abstract. A sincere harangue by a demagogue is better than the most "classic" oration from a man who speaks only with his lips.

-Harold C. Goddard, The Meaning of Shakespeare, 1960

ON THE ASSASSINATION

We shall notice throughout it a strong distrust of subversion and conspiracy. These were, in the knowledge and experience of all Elizabethans, the greatest disruptions of the state. The Homilies: appointed to be read in churches throughout the realm, have already been mentioned. Shakespeare not only knew these; he apparently accepted their instruction. In them he would have found the lesson driven home that conspiracy is dangerous, that it is never to be trusted, and that directed against the king or ruler it is both against God's commandment and doomed to create confusion involving both conspirators and the country. It could be nothing but evil.... It is probably with a mind made up on these points that Shakespeare read Plutarch and wrote his play.

-E. F. C. Ludowyk, Understanding Shakespeare, 1962

Caesar's death is followed by a civil war in which Shakespeare must have seen a parallel to the Wars of the Roses

that had so obsessed his earlier years. Certainly we know that Shakespeare stood for civil order above everything, and Caesar's death was followed by the destruction of the existing order.

-Louis Auchincloss, Motiveless Malignity, 1969

ON CASCA

I am going to risk a generalisation about Shakespeare. He was an Elizabethan dramatist, and I do not think the Elizabethans were conscientious over their characters; they would often alter them in the middle in order to get on with the play. Beaumont and Fletcher contain glaring examples of this. Good men become bad and then good again; traitors turn into heroes and vice versa without any internal justification. And Shakespeare sometimes does it too. There is an example- not a glaring one- in this play, in the character of Casca. Casca first appears as extremely polite and indeed servile to Caesar, 'Peace ho! Caesar speaks,' he cries. Then he shows himself to Brutus and Cassius as a sour blunt contradictious fellow, who snaps them up when they speak and is grumpy when they invite him to supper. You may say this is subtlety on Shakespeare's part, and that he is indicating that Casca is a dark horse. I don't think so. I don't think Shakespeare was bothering about Casca- he is merely concerned to make the action interesting and he alters the character at need. Later on, during the thunderstorm, Casca becomes different again; he walks about with a drawn sword, is deeply moved by the apparitions, and utters exalted poetry. At the murder-scene he wounds Caesar in the neck, and then we hear of him no more. His usefulness is over.

-E. M. Forster, Two Cheers for Democracy,
reprinted in Shakespeare: Julius Caesar, 1969

Shakespearean Literature

Chapter FOUR

"TRAGEDIES"

HAMLET

1604

INTRODUCTION

William Shakespeare lived in a time of great change and excitement in England- a time of geographical discovery, international trade, learning, and creativity. It was also a time of international tension and internal uprisings that came close to civil war.

Under Elizabeth I (reigned 1558-1603) and James I (reigned 1603-1625), London was a center of government, learning, and trade, and Shakespeare's audience came from all three worlds. His plays had to please royalty and powerful nobles, educated lawyers and scholars, as well as merchants, workers, and apprentices, many of whom couldn't read or write. To keep so many different kinds of people entertained, he had to write into his plays such elements as clowns who made terrible puns and wisecracks; ghosts and witches; places for the actors to dance and to sing the hit songs of the time; fencing matches and other kinds of fight scenes; and emotional speeches for his star actor, Richard Burbage. There is very little indication that he was troubled in any way by having to do this. The stories he told were familiar ones, from popular storybooks or from English and Roman history. Sometimes they were adapted, as Hamlet was, from earlier plays that had begun to seem old-fashioned. Part of Shakespeare's success came from the fact that he had a knack for making these old tales come to life.

When you read Hamlet, or any other Shakespearean play, the first thing to remember is that the words are poetry. Shakespeare's audience had no movies, television, radio, or recorded music. What brought entertainment into their lives was live music, and they liked to hear words treated as a kind of music. They enjoyed plays with quick, lively dialogue and jingling wordplay, with strongly rhythmic lines and neatly rhymed couplets, which made it easier for them to remember favorite scenes. These musical effects also made learning lines easier for the actors, who had to keep a large number of roles straight in their minds. The actors might be called on at very short notice to play some old favorite for a special occasion at court, or at a nobleman's house,

just as the troupe of actors in Hamlet is asked to play The Murder of Gonzago.

The next thing to remember is that Shakespeare wrote for a theater that did not pretend to give its audience an illusion of reality, like the theater we are used to today. When a housewife in a modern play turns on the tap of a sink, we expect to see real water come out of a real faucet in something that looks like a real kitchen sink. But in Shakespeare's time no one bothered to build onstage anything as elaborate as a realistic kitchen sink. The scene of the action had to keep changing to hold the audience's interest, and to avoid moving large amounts of scenery, a few objects would be used to help the audience visualize the scene. For a scene set in a kitchen, Shakespeare's company might simply have the cook come out mixing something in a bowl. A housewife in an Elizabethan play would not even have been a woman, since it was considered immoral for women to appear onstage. An older woman, like Hamlet's mother Gertrude, would be played by a male character actor who specialized in matronly roles, and a young woman like Hamlet's girlfriend Ophelia would be played by a teenage boy who was an apprentice with the company. When his voice changed, he would be given adult male roles. Of course, the apprentices played not only women, but also pages, servants, messengers, and the like. It was usual for everyone in the company, except the three or four leading actors, to "double," or play more than one role in a play. Shakespeare's audience accepted these conventions of the theater as parts of a game. They expected the words of the play to supply all the missing details. Part of the fun of Shakespeare is the way his plays guide us to imagine for ourselves the time and place of each scene, the way the characters behave, the parts of the story we hear about but don't see. The limitations of the Elizabethan stage were significant, and a striking aspect of Shakespeare's genius is the way he rose above them.

Theaters during the Elizabethan time were open-air structures, with semicircular "pits," or "yards," to accommodate most of the audience. The pit could also serve as the setting for cock fights and bear baiting, two popular arena sports of the time.

The audience in the pit stood on three sides of the stage. Nobles, well-to-do commoners, and other more "respectable" theatergoers sat in the three tiers of galleries that rimmed the pit. During breaks in the stage action - and sometimes while the performance was underway - peddlers sold fruit or other snacks,

wandering through the audience and calling out advertisements for their wares.

The stage itself differed considerably from the modern stage. The main part, sometimes called the "apron" stage, was a raised platform that jutted into the audience. There was no curtain, and the audience would assume when one group of actors exited and another group entered there had been a change of scene. Because there was no curtain someone always carried a dead character off. It would, after all, have spoiled the effect if a character who had just died in the play got up in full view of the audience and walked off stage to make way for the next scene. The stage often had one or more trapdoors, which could be used for entry from below or in graveyard scenes.

Behind the main stage was a small inner stage with a curtain in front of it. During productions of Hamlet, the curtain served as the tapestry (or arras) that Claudius and Polonius hide behind when they spy on Hamlet, and later it was opened to disclose Gertrude's bedchamber.

Above the apron stage, on the second story, was a small stage with a balcony. In Hamlet this small stage served as a battlement and in Romeo and Juliet as the balcony in the famous love scene.

Still higher was the musicians' balcony and a turret for sound effects- drum rolls, trumpet calls, or thunder (made by rolling a cannon ball across the floor).

Now that you know something about the theater he wrote for, who was Shakespeare, the man?

Unfortunately, we know very little about him. A writer in Shakespeare's time was not considered special, and no one took pains to document Shakespeare's career the way a writer's life would be recorded and studied in our century. Here are the few facts we have.

Shakespeare was born in 1564, in the little English country town of Stratford, on the Avon River. He was the grandson of a tenant farmer and the son of a shopkeeper who made and sold gloves and other leather goods. We know that Shakespeare's family was well off during the boy's childhood- his father was at one point elected bailiff of Stratford, an office something like mayor- and that he was the eldest of six children. As the son of one of the wealthier citizens, he probably had a good basic education in the town's grammar school, but we have no facts to prove this. We also have

no information on how he spent his early years or on when and how he got involved with the London theater.

At 18 he married a local girl, Anne Hathaway, who gave birth to their first child- a daughter, Susanna- six months later. This does not mean, as some scholars believe, that Shakespeare was forced into marriage: Elizabethan morals were in some ways as relaxed as our own, and it was legally acceptable for an engaged couple to sleep together. Two years later, Anne gave birth to twins, Hamnet (notice the similarity to "Hamlet") and Judith, but by this time Shakespeare's parents were no longer so well off. The prosperity of country towns like Stratford was declining as the city of London and its international markets grew, and so Shakespeare left home to find a way of earning a living. One unverified story says Shakespeare was driven out of Stratford for poaching (hunting without a license) on the estate of a local aristocrat; another says he worked in his early twenties as a country schoolmaster or as a private tutor in the home of a wealthy family.

Shakespeare must somehow have learned about the theater, because the next time we hear of him, at age 28, he is being ridiculed in a pamphlet by Robert Greene, a playwright and writer of comic prose. Greene called Shakespeare an uneducated actor who had the gall to think he could write better plays than a university graduate. One indication of Shakespeare's early popularity is that Greene's remarks drew complaints, and his editor publicly apologized to Shakespeare in Greene's next pamphlet. Clearly, by 1592 the young man from Stratford was well thought of in London as an actor and a new playwright of dignity and promise.

Though England at the time was enjoying a period of domestic peace, the danger of renewed civil strife was never far away. From abroad came threats from hostile Roman Catholic countries like Spain and France. At home, both Elizabeth's court and Shakespeare's theater company were targets of abuse from the growing English fundamentalist movement we call Puritanism. In this period, England was enjoying a great expansion of international trade, and London's growing merchant class was largely made up of Puritans, who regarded the theater as sinful and were forever pressing either the Queen or the Lord Mayor to close it down. Then there were members of Elizabeth's own court who believed she was not aggressive enough in her defiance of Puritans at home or Catholics abroad. One such man was the Earl of Essex, one of Elizabeth's court favorites (and possibly her lover), who in 1600 attempted to storm the palace and overthrow her. This incident

must have left a great impression on Shakespeare and his company, for they came very close to being executed with Essex and his conspirators, one of whom had paid them a large sum to revive Shakespeare's Richard II, in which a weak king is forced to abdicate, as part of a propaganda campaign to justify Essex's attempted coup d'etat.

The performance, like the coup, apparently attracted little support. Elizabeth knew the publicity value of mercy, however, and Shakespeare's company performed for her at the palace the night before the conspirators were hanged. It can hardly be a coincidence that within the next two years Shakespeare wrote Hamlet, in which a play is performed in an unsuccessful attempt to depose a reigning king. The Essex incident must have taught him by direct experience the risks inherent in trifling with the power of the established political order.

Elizabeth's gift for keeping the conflicting elements around her in balance continued until her death in 1603, and her successor, James I, a Scotsman, managed to oversee two further decades of peace. James enjoyed theatrical entertainment, and under his reign, Shakespeare and his colleagues rose to unprecedented prosperity. In 1604 they were officially declared the King's Men, which gave them the status of servants to the royal household.

Shakespeare's son Hamnet died in 1596, about four years before the first performance of Hamlet. Whether he inspired the character of Hamlet in any way, we probably will never know. Some scholars have suggested that the approaching death of Shakespeare's father (he died in 1601) was another emotional shock that contributed to the writing of Hamlet, the hero of which is driven by the thought of his father's sufferings after death. This is only speculation, of course. What we do know is that Shakespeare retired from the theater in 1611 and went to live in Stratford, where he had bought the second biggest house in town, called New Place. He died there in 1616; his wife Anne died in 1623. Both Shakespeare's daughters had married by the time of his death. Because Judith's two sons both died young and Susanna's daughter Elizabeth- though she married twice and even became a baroness- had no children, there are no descendants of Shakespeare among us today.

On Shakespeare's tombstone in Stratford is inscribed a famous rhyme, putting a curse on anyone who dares to disturb his grave:

Good friend, for Jesus' sake forbear
To dig the dust enclosed here.
Blest be the man that spares these stones,
And curst be he that moves my bones.

The inscription had led to speculation that manuscripts of unpublished works were buried with Shakespeare or that the grave may in fact be empty because the writing attributed to him was produced by other hands. (A few scholars have argued that contemporaries like Francis Bacon wrote plays attributed to Shakespeare, but this notion is generally discredited.) The rhyme is a final mystery, reminding us that Shakespeare is lost to us. Only by his work may we know him.

THE PLOT

Hamlet, prince of Denmark, is at school in Wittenberg, Germany, when his father, King Hamlet, dies. He comes home to Elsinore Castle to find his mother, Queen Gertrude, married to his uncle Claudius, the late king's younger brother. Claudius has had himself crowned king. Soldiers guarding Elsinore report to Hamlet through his friend Horatio that his father's ghost has been seen on the battlements. Hamlet goes with them to see the ghost, which speaks to him, saying that Claudius has murdered the king by pouring poison in his ear and that he, Hamlet, must avenge his father's murder. Hamlet swears to do this, but his philosophic mind is deeply upset at the shock of his uncle's treachery and his mother's possible involvement in it.

In the meantime, three related series of events are happening at the Danish court. First, the nations of Denmark and Norway have been engaged in border disputes with each other and with the neighboring country of Poland; King Hamlet became a hero in the eyes of his people by winning one such battle. Now Fortinbras, son of the late king of Norway, and nephew of the present, ailing king, wants Claudius' permission to march his army through Danish territory on the way to fight the Poles.

Second, Claudius' chief adviser, the elderly Polonius, is troubled by the behavior of his hotheaded son, Laertes, and his sensitive daughter, Ophelia. He is sending Laertes off to Paris to acquire polish and courtly manners, and instructs young Reynaldo to spy on him and report back if he falls into bad company. As for Ophelia, both Polonius and Laertes are concerned that she may be becoming too attached to young Hamlet, who has been sending her

trinkets and love poems. They caution her to be careful, since it's not likely that the heir to the throne would marry someone below his royal station.

Third, Claudius and Gertrude are concerned over Hamlet's behavior, which was moody before the ghost spoke to him and has become increasingly disturbed, though they of course do not know why. They send for two of his school friends from Wittenberg, the Danish nobles Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, to try to discover the source of his moodiness. Arriving at the court, these two try to cheer Hamlet with news of a traveling company of actors on their way to Elsinore. This gives him a solution to one of his major worries- how to determine whether the ghost is really his father's spirit and is telling the truth, or is an evil spirit sent to tempt him into sin. He will have the actors put on a play about a courtier who poisons a king and seduces the queen. Claudius' reaction to the play will reveal the truth.

Meanwhile, Ophelia tells her father about a disturbing encounter she has had with Hamlet, who was behaving strangely. Polonius concludes that Hamlet's frustrated love for her has made him go mad. To prove this to Claudius, he has his daughter confront Hamlet in a corridor where he and the king can spy on them. Hamlet comes in, musing on death and whether or not he has the right to take a man's life. When Ophelia interrupts him, he becomes emotionally violent, denies he ever loved her, and urges her to go into a convent. Claudius is greatly upset by the scene, which makes him begin to fear that Hamlet has found out the truth about his father's death.

The performance of the play confirms Claudius' worst fears. During the pantomime prologue, Hamlet starts making double-edged remarks that drive Claudius out, angry and ashamed, when the actors have barely begun to speak. The court scatters in confusion, and Hamlet tells Horatio he is now totally convinced the ghost was telling the truth. Gertrude, furious with her son sends Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to tell him she wants to see him in private, in her chambers. On the way there Hamlet sees Claudius, defenseless, kneeling and attempting to pray. Hamlet thinks about killing him then and there, but holds back, believing that a man killed while praying would go to heaven, hardly a suitable punishment for Claudius' crimes. Hamlet cannot of course hear Claudius' thoughts, which are preoccupied with his inability to pray and his unwillingness to show true repentance by renouncing both the throne and his marriage to Gertrude.

Arriving at his mother's room, Hamlet is harsh and bitter with her, despite having promised himself (and earlier the ghost) to treat her gently. He accuses her of murder and incest- her new husband is her brother-in-law- attacking her so forcefully that Polonius, who has hidden behind a tapestry ("arras") in case she needs assistance, cries for help. Hamlet stabs what he thinks is Claudius, and is disappointed to learn he has killed only the meddling old man. Over the corpse, he tries to convince the now-frantic Gertrude to give up her second marriage. He is interrupted by the ghost, who reminds him that he has sworn to kill Claudius and leave his mother in peace. Their conversation convinces Gertrude, who cannot see the ghost, that her son is indeed mad.

In the meantime, Claudius has worked out a plan: He will send Hamlet, guarded by his former friends Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, on a diplomatic mission to England, carrying a sealed letter that asks the English king to arrest the troublesome heir and put him to death. After a bitter confrontation Rosencrantz and Guildenstern capture Hamlet and bundle him off to the ship bound for England. On the way there they pass Fortinbras' army marching to Poland. The sight makes Hamlet reflect on his failure to avenge his father, while Fortinbras is bringing honor to his.

When Ophelia learns of her father's death, she goes insane. Laertes returns from Paris, swearing vengeance on his father's murderer. The sight of his mad sister deflates his anger, and he allows Claudius to convince him that her madness is all Hamlet's fault. Meantime, Horatio learns that an unexpected stroke of luck has saved Hamlet's life: The ship he sailed on was attacked by pirates, who took him prisoner but let the others continue. Since Hamlet had discovered the treachery in Claudius' letter and replaced it with one requesting instead the execution of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, the two have sailed to certain death. In return for the promise of ransom Hamlet is released by the pirates on the Danish coast.

Claudius, told of Hamlet's return, persuades Laertes to take his revenge in a formal duel, in which he will wound Hamlet with a poisoned sword. Before it takes place, the two have an unexpected clash in the graveyard where Ophelia, who has drowned herself, is being buried. Hamlet, who did not know of her death, is shocked into anger at the sight of Laertes leaping emotionally into the grave, and the two young men nearly get into a brawl over her coffin.

Having received Laertes' formal challenge, Hamlet apologizes to him graciously before the assembled court and the duel begins. They are evenly matched, so Claudius attempts to improve the odds by offering Hamlet a cup of poisoned wine, which, however, Queen Gertrude drinks. Laertes manages to wound Hamlet with the poisoned sword, but in the scuffle that follows they switch weapons and Laertes is wounded with it, too. Feeling the effect of the poisoned wine, Gertrude collapses, and the court finally realizes what Claudius has been up to. Hamlet at last achieves his revenge by stabbing Claudius with the poisoned weapon. Laertes, dying, confesses and begs Hamlet's forgiveness. Hamlet has just enough strength left to stop Horatio from drinking the dregs of the poisoned wine, and dies in his friend's arms, begging him to tell the world the true story. Fortinbras, whom Hamlet names as his successor, arrives in time to claim the throne and lament the horrible events.

THE CHARACTERS

HAMLET

Hamlet may be the most complex character any playwright has ever placed onstage. Over the centuries critics have offered a multitude of explanations for Hamlet's behavior, but none of them has wholly been able to "pluck out the heart of my mystery," as Hamlet himself puts it. Eighteenth- and nineteenth-century theatergoers saw him as the classic ideal of the Renaissance courtier, poet, and philosopher. You can make a case for this view, since Hamlet often sees immediate events in a larger perspective. Ophelia's "O what a noble mind" speech is one of many suggesting that Shakespeare meant us to think of him this way.

Yet Hamlet is a deeply troubled young man who may strive for philosophy and poetry, but has in fact, by the end of the play, caused a good many violent deaths. While the earliest view was that Hamlet is simply a victim of circumstances, later critics saw him as a beautiful but ineffectual soul who lacked the strength of will to avenge his father. Passages in the play provide justification for this point of view, most notably in Hamlet's own soliloquies. Detractors of this view point out the cruel and barbaric aspects of Hamlet's behavior-his badgering of Ophelia, his rough treatment of Polonius' corpse, his reason for refusing to kill Claudius at prayer, and most of all the callous and seemingly unjust way he has Rosencrantz and Guildenstern put to death. To these

commentators, either Shakespeare had badly assimilated such crudities from his source material, or Hamlet is himself a crude and unpleasant character and his poetic speeches merely sugarcoat the bitter pill.

As the study of psychology developed into a science in the late nineteenth century, critics began applying its precepts to the play, viewing Hamlet as something close to a manic-depressive whose melancholy moods- as his failure to take revenge continues- deepened into self-contempt. This attitude draws some historical support from the Elizabethan belief that every human is dominated by one of four mental conditions called humors, each caused by the dominance in the body of one internal organ and its secretions. Hamlet, the notion runs, would have been seen by Shakespeare's contemporaries as a victim of the melancholy humor, which was especially associated with thinkers and philosophers. The trouble with this interpretation is that it does not explain Hamlet's frequent jokes and his many attempts at action.

The advent of Freudian psychology provided an additional twist to the "melancholy" interpretation. Freud's disciple Ernest Jones asserted that Hamlet was a victim of what Freudians call the Oedipus complex, that is, a desire to take his father's place in his mother's affections, a desire that would naturally trigger intense feelings of guilt if the father suddenly died. Jones' version, which partially inspired Sir Laurence Olivier's film adaptation (1948), is made believable by the intense overemphasis Hamlet puts on his mother's actions, despite the ghost's commands.

Many, many other explanations of Hamlet's motives have been offered, ranging from an excessive ambition that uses the ghost as a chance to seize the crown and then feels guilty about doing so, to an apathy that makes him hold back on philosophic grounds, since all action is futile. A few commentators have even proposed the unlikely possibility that Hamlet is a woman who has been raised as a man to provide the throne with an heir, thus explaining Hamlet's reluctance to commit the "masculine" act of revenge.

What commentators and interpreters sometimes forget is that Hamlet is first a character in a play, and only secondly (if at all) a demonstration of this or that view of human life. You might say that Hamlet is not a classifiable type of person because he is a specific person, who, like ourselves, is made up of many different impulses and moods. It's possible for a soft-spoken professor of philosophy, under the right circumstances, to commit murder, just

as it's possible to be depressed one day and crack jokes the next. Hamlet is a person of exceptional intelligence and sensitivity, raised to occupy a high station in life and then suddenly confronted with a violent and terrifying situation in which he must take drastic action. It's hardly surprising to find him veering between extremes of behavior, hesitating, demanding proof, looking for the most appropriate way to carry out his task.

The fact that Hamlet is a thinking as well as a feeling person, conscious of the good and bad points in every step he takes, makes the act of revenge particularly painful for him. Revenge is not Christian, and Hamlet is a Christian prince; it is not rational, and Hamlet is a philosopher; it is not gentle, and Hamlet is a gentleman.

Unlike the typical hero of an Elizabethan revenge play (or a modern gangster movie), Hamlet does not approach his task in an unquestioning, mechanical way. He has qualms about it, as any of us might if asked to do the same thing. It releases violent emotions in him, the intensity of which shocks and unbalances him. This questioning of what is instinctive and preordained, the testing of the old tribal code by a modern, troubled consciousness, is perhaps what makes the play so great and so universal in its interest.

As you read Shakespeare's play you will discover for yourself the specific things Hamlet says and does that make his motives understandable to you, just as every critic, reader, and playgoer over the centuries has picked the elements he or she most responded to in the young prince's tragic story. That will be your interpretation of Hamlet. If you follow the play closely and seriously, your opinions are likely to be every bit as valid as those of professional critics or teachers.

OTHER CHARACTERS

Hamlet is the unquestioned center of the play. If he is not onstage he is almost always the subject of discussion in virtually every scene. Nevertheless, Shakespeare has taken pains to give the other characters as strong and independent an existence as possible. They are not mere foils for Hamlet, but distinct individuals who coexist and conflict with him, though their stories are told in a more fragmentary fashion.

GERTRUDE

Hamlet's mother, the queen of Denmark, is a touching and mysterious figure. You never learn explicitly how much Gertrude knows about her husband King Hamlet's death, or how deeply she is attached to her new husband, Claudius. She never expresses her feelings, either, about the morality of marrying her brother-in-law, though this was considered incestuous at the time. But she expresses her concern for her son and her affection for Ophelia, plus (in the Closet Scene) a vague sense of guilt that only adds to the mystery about her. The ambiguity of Gertrude's position reaches its height in the final scene, when she drinks from the poisoned cup. Whether she knows it's poisoned is something you will have to decide for yourself.

CLAUDIUS

The king of Denmark, Hamlet's uncle and later his stepfather, is shaped from a stock type familiar to Elizabethan theatergoers- the neglected younger brother who seeks to take over his older brother's title by unscrupulous means. Claudius, however, is a complex figure about whom Shakespeare gives you a good deal of information. You learn how the public attitude toward him has changed in Denmark (and changes again after Polonius' death); you learn about his drinking habits and his personal appearance as compared with his late brother's. Above all, you see him in action politically- manipulating, placating, and making pronouncements- and you see how his tactics in dealing with Norway or Poland link up to the conduct of his personal affairs. There is no question about his political ability, which is tied in with his talent for manipulating people and converting them to his point of view, as he does with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. Some interpretations of the play suggest that we are meant to see him as more suited to the role of king than Hamlet is. His constant hypocritical smiling makes him easy to dislike, yet his genuine remorse in the Prayer Scene makes him more sympathetic, and hence more difficult for Hamlet to kill. Note that nowhere in the play does he directly express his feelings for Gertrude.

THE GHOST

Barnardo's remarks in the first scene make clear that the ghost is identical in appearance to the late King Hamlet. Hamlet's worry over whether it is "an honest ghost" is unusual for the time, an aspect of his intellectually probing nature. Ghosts were common

figures in Elizabethan plays- an inventory of costumes for one theater included a cloak "for to go invisible." Belief in ghosts and omens was prevalent in England, and in the theater it was assumed that they could be trusted. Another long-standing but unverifiable tradition, incidentally, says the role of the ghost was played by Shakespeare himself, and was his greatest performance.

POLONIUS

The father of Laertes and Ophelia is clearly a knowledgeable man. He holds an influential position at court, though the text never specifies what title he holds- or whether he is a holdover from King Hamlet's reign or newly appointed by Claudius, who appears to hold him in very high esteem. We know from Gertrude's reaction to his death that she is fond of him ("the good old man"), and that she has considered a marriage between her son and his daughter. In the context of the Fortinbras subplot, Polonius' name, which means "from Poland," is worth noting. Though a comic figure at whose bureaucratic doubletalk we are meant to laugh, he has a visibly sinister side as well, a penchant for political intrigue and spying. While his tactics are shady, his intentions are usually good, making him, like Claudius, a mixture of good and evil.

LAERTES

Polonius' son is one of several young men whose behavior is explicitly contrasted with Hamlet's. A courtier in training, he is not a politician like his father, but proud, hasty, sincere, and utterly devoted to fulfilling the demands of honor- traits that will sadly prove his undoing when he falls in with Claudius' plot. Apart from the implied running comparison with Hamlet, the chief interest of his character is the genuine intensity of his passion for the outward forms of honor. To get his sister a decent burial, for instance, he will openly quarrel with the priest; to avenge his father, he will violate the code of honor and even the dictates of his conscience with the poisoned weapon. In his own way he is an innocent like his sister, comparing himself at the end, as Polonius compared Ophelia at the start, to a game bird caught in a trap.

OPHELIA

Ophelia is Polonius' daughter. Her name is generally thought to be derived from the Greek word apheleia, meaning "innocence." This is certainly a good description of her outlook on

life, every bit as ingenuous as her brother's. It may not, however, apply to her sexual activity: The intensity of her feeling for Hamlet suggests that something more than a flirtation has gone on between them, and the bawdy "St. Valentine's Day" song that she sings in her madness must have been learned somewhere, though its words should not be taken as literally describing the state of their relations. Some commentators have expressed shock at the coarse language Hamlet jokingly uses toward her in the Play Scene, but aristocratic manners were looser then, and it is really no worse than some of the interchanges between courtly lovers in Shakespeare's romantic comedies. Ophelia's meek reactions to Hamlet's language presumably come not from shock, but from confusion over his abrupt change of mood and attitude toward her since the Nunnery Scene. She of course has no idea of the state he is in, and it is possible that she thinks his condition has indeed been caused by her following her father's instructions and refusing to see him. Note that in the conflict between her love for Hamlet and her duty of obedience to her father's orders, she bows to Polonius' wishes. Hamlet is less obedient to the orders of the ghost, his father.

HORATIO

Hamlet's trusted friend Horatio is a gentleman and a scholar, but he is not of the nobility, since he appears to have no position at court except in relation to the prince. Hamlet's much-quoted tribute to him before the Play Scene ("Give me that man / That is not passion's slave") points up the balanced nature of Horatio's personality, precisely the quality Hamlet himself lacks. Of course, Horatio is also not forced to undergo any experience as intense as those that Hamlet suffers through. In his moderation of temperament, as in his intermediate rank, he represents the Renaissance version of the ancient classical ideal, the man fortunate enough to live without either excessive joy or suffering in his life. His vaguely Roman name and his Roman-style attempt to join Hamlet in death at the end confirm this.

ROSENCRANTZ AND GUILDENSTERN

Hamlet's two fellow students from Wittenberg are unmistakably members of the Danish nobility, and noticeably frivolous students compared to the serious Horatio. (The life Polonius fears Laertes may be leading in Paris probably has some similarity to theirs in Wittenberg.) Their names, which mean

"wreath of roses" and "golden star," are authentic touches of local color, since both belong to aristocratic Danish families still in existence today. (Tradition, as usual unverifiable, says that two Danish nobles so named actually were sent on a mission to England in the late sixteenth century.) They are certainly courtiers skilled at politicking, and we learn enough from their evasion at their first meeting with Hamlet to justify his being suspicious of them. Whether they deserve to be put to death, however, is debatable, since they can have no idea of the king's true motives in employing them. On the other hand, the fact that they meddle in the business of kings and princes without questioning motives is a comment on their lack of principle, and Hamlet, in telling Horatio of their impending deaths, does not hesitate to draw the moral (Act V, Scene ii, lines 62-68).

FORTINBRAS

The prince of Norway is a conventional, correct, ambitious military man, yet he is more an image in the play's structure than an individual personality. Fortinbras' chief role is to remind you, in the sphere of politics and kingship, of what Hamlet is not, just as Laertes does in the realm of family honor. Fortinbras figures in the play three times: at the beginning, when Horatio and, later, Claudius discuss his actions; in the middle, when Hamlet meets his troops; and at the very end. Like Hamlet, Fortinbras is the nephew of a reigning king, who is physically weak as Hamlet's uncle is morally weak. The throne of Norway being occupied, he seeks conquests elsewhere, never questioning their value. When he assumes the throne, he reverses the military victory that was the great triumph of King Hamlet's life. Fortinbras displays his inability to understand Hamlet when he orders a military funeral for him and declares that Hamlet would have made an excellent king. (He couldn't possibly know this; in any case, it's not likely to be true, at least not by Fortinbras' own standards.) In short, Fortinbras' soldierlike ability to ignore the moral complexity of life is a sort of saving grace for him. He is aptly summed up in his name, French for "strong-of-arm."

MARCELLUS, BARNARDO, AND FRANCISCO

The three soldiers of the Danish King's Guard are all ordinary, honest men, all suffering in their own way from the sight of the ghost, and from the mysterious air of gloom that has settled on Denmark with King Hamlet's death. Marcellus is apparently of

slightly higher rank than Francisco and Barnardo (also spelled Bernardo); he is on sociable terms with Hamlet and up to date on his whereabouts. Both he and Barnardo are articulate officers of an elite guard rather than common soldiers. Barnardo is more bluntly straightforward but not less intelligent. Marcellus' belief in ghosts, like his religious faith, is balanced against his honest practicality. His assumption that there is a logical reason for every phenomenon makes him similar in character to the captain of Fortinbras' army, who speaks bluntly to Hamlet about the valuelessness of the land they are marching to conquer; possibly the same actor played both parts.

CLOWNS

The two characters usually- and mistakenly- designated, as "First and Second Gravedigger" are a comedy act, the company's resident low comedian and his straight man, identified in early editions of the play as "Clown" and "Other." Although in many Elizabethan plays the material performed by clowns is irrelevant to and detachable from the story (since they traditionally "worked up" their own material), Shakespeare always took unusual pains to make them an organic part of the larger work. The role he creates here for the clown is a comic contradiction in terms- a cheerful gravedigger. His robust good spirits, talkativeness, and a love of argument are all amusingly inappropriate to the cemetery where he works, and are balanced by his democratically stoic sense that everyone is equal because we all come to the same end. Isn't that exactly how you might expect human life to look from a gravedigger's point of view? This simple workingman's philosophy is elegantly balanced, at exactly the right point in the action, against the complexity of Hamlet's soul-searching. The gravedigger's companion, though often erroneously played as an apprentice or younger work partner, is a warden or church official in charge of the placement of graves in the churchyard. He does not argue with the clown for the simple reason that, as he is finally forced to admit, he agrees with him.

THE PLAYERS

Typically for professionals at work, these actors say virtually nothing that is not connected with their job, and are resolutely uninvolved with the events at court. What you learn from them is chiefly how Hamlet feels about them. As you might expect from a prince who is himself the hero of a play (at a time when the

growth of Puritanism was causing constant protest against the dangerous influence of theaters in London), Hamlet is an enthusiast and a friend, one who believes deeply in the theater's importance to society and who has many objections to performers who don't live up to his high ideals for the art. From Hamlet's friendly greeting, especially as contrasted with his reserve toward Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, you can see that Hamlet is extremely fond of this particular company of actors; he is an aficionado of their less successful plays and twice addresses the player king as "old friend."

OSRIC, REYNALDO, VOLTEMAND, AND CORNELIUS

Being a noble in attendance at a Renaissance court meant a variety of things. It meant a formal skill at elegant conversation, bearing, and dress; training in such gentlemanly activities as riding and swordsmanship on the one hand, music and writing poetry on the other. It meant the ability to use these skills in the service of the king, on matters ranging from international diplomacy to minor errands about the court such as the errand on which Osric is sent to Hamlet. And it meant the cunning to use the same skills for one's own advancement in the royal favor, which could mean titles, decorations, and large grants of land or sums of money if one were successful. Osric is a courtier who is preoccupied with formal behavior. It is clear from Hamlet's comments, and from Osric's failure to perceive that he is being mocked, that he is little more than a foppish, gesticulating fool. (Compare his manner to the dignified bearing of the anonymous lord who comes to Hamlet immediately after Osric has left; the lord carries out his mission with a minimum of fuss in barely a quarter of the time it takes Osric to deliver a simple challenge to a fencing match.) Some critics have tried to read into Osric's presence the notion that Claudius' court is pretentious and decadent, but this is an exaggeration of both his foppishness and his importance. Courtiers were under no obligation to behave elegantly; they were members of a hereditary aristocracy and largely did as they pleased, which is precisely why displays of elegant manners and fine speaking were so valued by monarchs. Consequently, every court had its Osrics, and they turn up regularly in Elizabethan plays. It could more likely be considered a measure of Claudius' good sense that he confined the trivial Osric to domestic errands and sent a reliable, well-spoken man like Voltemand on ambassadorial missions. From Voltemand's brief report on his meeting with the king of Norway you can infer that he (and presumably the silent Cornelius as well) is an efficient,

intelligent person of dignified bearing, just the sort a king can trust to get the business done. You get a glimpse of how such a man is molded, and of the kinds of backstairs business he might have to meddle in, from the little scene between Polonius and Reynaldo (presumably a young courtier in training). While sending him on a simple errand to bring money and letters to Laertes in Paris, Polonius teaches the boy to find out how Laertes is behaving by spreading mild slanders about him. Reynaldo is an alert and eager student.

PRIEST

Stage tradition has made this "churlish priest" an unpleasant character. What his two brief speeches portray is a somewhat snobbish professional, compelled under political pressure to perform a task he regards as distasteful and improper. The only surprising part is that he is so outspoken in the presence of the king and queen, possibly from a wish to underline the extent to which he is protected by the church from their taking action against him.

OTHER ELEMENTS

SETTING

Because the Elizabethan theater used little or no scenery, the sense of place in a Shakespeare play changes as the characters enter and leave the stage. Where it is important, Shakespeare always indicates the time and place of the scene through a line of dialogue (as in the first scene, "'Tis now struck twelve.") or through a formal device like the fanfares that announce the entrance of the king and his court. The fact that the story takes place in Denmark in the twelfth century mattered very little to Shakespeare and his audience; the tradition of reproducing a historical period with realistic accuracy on the stage did not come into being till nearly two hundred years later. Elizabethan costumes were as lavish and expensive as could be, but they were the costumes of Shakespeare's own time, whether the play was set in ancient Rome or medieval England. The image of Denmark is mainly communicated to the audience by Shakespeare's using the cliche that the Danes were heavy drinkers, which is one reason he so strongly emphasizes Hamlet's dislike for Claudius' drinking habits. The world was just beginning to be mapped at this time, and a London audience probably had only the vaguest notion where Denmark was located: Shakespeare himself was so uninformed he

confused Dansk, the Danish word for Denmark, with the Baltic seaport of Gdansk or Danzig, at that time a free city-state, which is how he came to the mistaken idea that Denmark shared a common border with Poland. All this proves that Shakespeare's plays are set "in the mind's eye," in an imaginary world of their own, which is yours to conceive as you choose, within the limits of the play.

THEMES

JUSTICE AND REVENGE

All the action of Hamlet is based on the one task the ghost sets the prince: to avenge his father's murder. This powerful demand is countered in Hamlet's mind by three questions: Is revenge a good or an evil act? Is Claudius truly guilty and so to be punished? Is it Hamlet's responsibility to punish him? Throughout the play Shakespeare raises questions about whether justice is to be left to the state or taken into one's own hands, and about whether it is possible, in a cunning and deceitful world, to tell the good man from the criminal. These questions are focused on Hamlet, who must decide whether to avenge his father or not, and if so, how. They are reflected in the parallel stories of Fortinbras and Laertes, who also have obligations of revenge to fulfill.

DESTINY AND THE PURPOSE OF LIFE

Linked to the theme of revenge is the great question of Hamlet's inner meditations: Is there a point to life at all? Do we suffer in this harsh world for a purpose, or simply because we are afraid to find out what may lie beyond it? And if there is a higher, universal force guiding each of us in a certain direction, how do we learn what it is so that we can accept its guidance? Much of Hamlet's anguish is caused by his effort to link even the most trivial event to the order of the universe. Is he right in doing so? And does he succeed- does life finally reveal its meaning to him?

MADNESS AND SANITY

The question of Hamlet's sanity is openly discussed in the play and has been a subject of debate for centuries. Is Hamlet really mad? If so, what causes Hamlet's madness? Is it his reluctance to take revenge? Is it his confused feelings about his mother? Is he in fact sane and the world mad for failing to understand the things he says? Is he sometimes pretending to be mad and at other times genuinely unbalanced? Remember, the play

gives another example of madness in Ophelia, and you should ask some of the same questions about her.

APPEARANCE AND REALITY

Allied to the question of Hamlet's madness is a variety of references to the idea of acting a part or of presenting a false image to the world. Hamlet demands honesty, but is he himself always honest? Many other characters, at various times, seem to be playing parts, and the troupe of players is in the play as an active reminder that in real life a person can play many roles, and it is not always easy to tell what is true from what only appears to be true. At the very center of the play is Hamlet's view of acting on the stage, expressed in his advice to the players. You can compare it with the picture Shakespeare gives of Hamlet, and the other characters, acting in their "real" lives.

WOMEN

Hamlet's views on women are complex and intensely emotional. The only two women characters in the play are the two who are most deeply attached to him- his mother and Ophelia, the young girl he loves. Why is his bitterness toward his mother so strong? What are the various feelings that go into his changing attitude toward Ophelia? As you study the play scene by scene, you'll see to what extent the two women's responses bear out the truth of his accusations, and to what extent they do not.

RIGHTS AND DUTIES OF KINGSHIP

Shakespearean tragedy often turns on the question of who is to be king- on who is best qualified to accept both the privileges and the responsibilities of rule. As you read Hamlet, keep in mind these questions: What are the obligations of a king to his people? Who in Hamlet has the most right to be king? Who is most qualified to be king? Is an honest king necessarily the best king? Is a peaceful king better than a warlike one? How much say should the public have in choosing a king, and how much the nobility? In the scene-by-scene discussion we'll also take a look at what being king means to each of the four characters who claim the Danish throne- Claudius, Hamlet, Laertes, and Fortinbras- and how well each one would rule.

POISON AND CORRUPTION

Corruption, rot, disease, and poison are among the chief sources of poetic imagery in Hamlet. The poison with which Claudius kills King Hamlet spreads in a sense through the entire country till "something is rotten in Denmark." Look for examples of this imagery as you go through the play. Is the arrival of Fortinbras at the end meant to be a cure? If so, what sort of cure will it be?

STYLE

The language of Shakespeare's plays tends to frighten many students and put them off. This comes from being told Shakespeare's plays are great poetry. To get around this, always remember that for Shakespeare's audience poetry was a kind of game, a way of marking in words the difference between a play and real life.

For Elizabethans, the poetic imagery and feeling of the great speeches in Hamlet had the excitement that a big song number in a musical comedy or a rock concert has for us. Like music, poetry is a way of heightening the power of what is being said in a play. It does this with sound and rhythm, with images, and, in Elizabethan verse, with what we call rhetoric. Rhetoric was taught to educated people in Shakespeare's time through the study of the Latin poets and orators. An Elizabethan gentleman was expected to be able toindulge in this elegant form of showing-off, and a gift for it was a way of gaining recognition at court or in the theater. Courtiers took for granted that flights of rhetoric would be part of any play they went to see, and ordinary people enjoyed it as something special and outside their daily experience. Shakespeare first became famous for his great rhetorical gift: You can see it in Hamlet when he makes Hamlet say he loved Ophelia more than forty thousand brothers could, or when he makes his mother compare the pictures of his father and Claudius.

Closely tied up with rhetoric, as a field of study for the Elizabethans was logic, or the art of thinking in sequence. It is especially important in Hamlet because the hero is a student of philosophy, which means he has been learning how to express ideas in logical form. Sometimes Shakespeare uses logic to show Hamlet's sense of humor, as when he "proves" that Claudius is his mother. At other times he builds, out of the textbook ideas of logic, the great soliloquies in which Hamlet meditates on the purpose of life and death. In fact, the line "To be or not to be: that is the question," though the most famous in the play, is not original with

Shakespeare; he is making Hamlet quote the opening of the standard philosophic debate on whether life is worth living. What is important, of course, is that these elements are always used in a human and individual way. Hamlet is a story about people and their lives, not a textbook discussion of abstract ideas.

At the time it was written, Shakespeare was just beginning to develop the innovative approach of what we think of as his late style, in which the smooth and conventional rhetoric of his earlier plays is chopped up and fragmented to reflect the inner rhythms of a human mind, and not the polish of a system of writing in which all the characters think alike. When Hamlet bandies words with Osric or Polonius, or makes fun of Claudius' proclamations, Shakespeare is ridiculing the conventions of rhetoric; and in the soliloquies, with their jumps from one thought to the next, he develops a lean and disturbing poetry that has made the play seem alive to every century.

POINT OF VIEW

The main thing to remember about Hamlet, as about any play, is that it is not a novel, in which the story is seen through the eyes of the author or the character who narrates. A play is told by having the characters present their opposing points of view in conflict with each other. We call the sum total of what these represent, when the action is completed, the author's vision. The great challenge of writing a play, which Shakespeare met more brilliantly than any writer who ever lived, is to make each character seem to take on an independent existence, with his own motives and his own approach to life, and yet have all these independent entities add up to one thing.

Because Shakespeare's sense of life was so broad and inclusive, many people have complained over the centuries that he does not tell his readers how to view the characters: Is Hamlet mad or sane, good or evil? Is it right for him to keep postponing his revenge? Are Claudius' tactics justified? Do Rosencrantz and Guildenstern deserve to be put to death? In a general sense, Shakespeare answers all these questions for the audience of his own time by never directly theatergoer. Because his artistry is so great, however, his characters are so strongly individualized that their actions can be interpreted many different ways, like the actions of real people, whose motives we can never fully understand. As a result, there is no one interpretation, no permanently fixed point of view to a play like Hamlet; its beauty is

bound up with the fact that it can mean so many different things to people and be understood in so many different ways.

FORM AND STRUCTURE

Elizabethan plays in general were loosely structured. They adapted the basic five-act form of ancient Roman tragedy, which had been revived by Italian scholars of the early Renaissance and brought back to London by English aristocrats traveling in Italy, to the needs of a commercial and popular theater.

The basic elements of a revenge tragedy were very simple. There had to be a hero, who had been violently wronged and was justified in seeking revenge. His revenge had to be aimed at an opponent, or antagonist, equal to him in power and in cunning, or the play would degenerate into a mindless series of victories for the superhero, and so become monotonous. The action had to be carried on in an atmosphere of gloom and terror, preferably with supernatural elements. A woman the hero loved had to be involved in the action, if possible as an innocent obstacle to his achieving his goal of revenge. And there had to be a counterplot (or subplot), started by the antagonist to defend himself, which would engulf the hero just as his vengeance was accomplished. In that way the hero would achieve what has come to be called "poetic justice" on earth, and at the same time be punished by Heaven for his sin of committing murder.

You can see that this simple structure is still very much with us in the violence of movies, television, and comic books. One reason we consider Hamlet better than these popular entertainments is that Shakespeare made his own variation on the form, fulfilling all its demands and at the same time rising above it through his brilliant use of language and his creation of complex characters. By making his hero a philosopher who doubts and mocks himself every step of the way, Shakespeare is able to prolong the suspense and devote the first three acts to the question of whether Hamlet will or will not take revenge. When Hamlet finally takes a decisive action, at the end of Act III (where the structure is expected to rise to a climax), it turns out to be a fatal misstep. Instead of killing Claudius, Hamlet kills Polonius. This act engulfs him in the counterplot of Claudius and Laertes, which holds our attention until the play's violent end. Hamlet's hesitation allows Shakespeare to explore the meaning of revenge on both the philosophic and the psychological level, and to connect that act with the much larger question of the meaning of life.

To make sure we never forget that Hamlet's story is that of a father, mother, and son, Shakespeare contrasts it with the subplot of Polonius and his children. Both the plot and the subplot are fused together at the climactic moment when Hamlet kills Polonius. This act ultimately results in Hamlet's death at the hands of Laertes, another son avenging his father. And both stories are framed in the story of Fortinbras, who avenges his father's defeat at the hands of King Hamlet by taking over the Danish throne when Hamlet dies.

Shakespeare's superiority in such matters as moral and psychological subtlety is pointed up by his ability to contrast the way two characters respond to the same event or carry out the same action. Hamlet is so structured, for example, that we are forced to compare Hamlet's use of the play to entrap Claudius with Laertes's invasion of the palace with an angry mob; or Hamlet's confiding in Horatio with Claudius' efforts to manipulate Polonius. Shakespeare also uses the play's structure to contrast a character's behavior with what we know of his thoughts and feelings, or to show him behaving differently in different situations. For instance, compare Hamlet's speeches to the ghost with his conversation immediately afterward when Horatio and Marcellus find him; or compare Claudius' public behavior in Act IV, Scene iii, with his "Do it, England" soliloquy right after. Because Hamlet himself is a wit and a maker of ironies, Shakespeare often uses him to point up these contrasts verbally and so intensify them, just as his mordant jokes heighten the atmosphere of gloom rather than dispelling it. As you explore Hamlet in more and more detail, the way Shakespeare balances and arranges the elements of its story will become more visible to you- and more exciting as well, since very new facet of the structure you find will reveal another nuance of Shakespeare's vision, another aspect of the seemingly infinite range of his poetic mind.

THE FIVE-ACT STRUCTURE

The main plot and subplot stories are both framed by the story of Fortinbras' avenging his father.

ACT I: EXPOSITION. The rotten state of Denmark is disclosed, and the ghost appears with his call for vengeance.
ACT II: RISING ACTION. Hamlet tries to discover the truth about the ghost's accusations.

ACT III: CLIMAX. Hamlet springs his "mousetrap" and catches his proof- Claudius is guilty.
ACT IV: FALLING ACTION. Claudius, not Hamlet, takes charge of events.
ACT V: CATASTROPHE. The consummation of everyone's vengeance is achieved in a bloody ending that leaves only Horatio alive to tell the tale.

THE CRITICS

Probably more criticism has been written about 'Hamlet 'than about any other work of literature in the English language. The changing views of Hamlet as a character are summarized in the Characters section of this guide. The following quotes are a sampling of major views of the play over the past three centuries. They are intended to open the discussion for you, not end it.

Hamlet is the most notoriously problematic of Shakespeare's plays, and questions about it still bedevil commentators after almost 400 years. Tremendous amounts of energy have gone into considering its possible interpretations, and the range of opinions on them is immense. As Oscar Wilde wittily put it, perhaps the greatest question raised by 'Hamlet' is, *'Are the critics mad or only pretending to be so?'*

'Hamlet' was classed with the PROBLEM PLAYS when that term was first applied to Shakespeare's works of the early 17th century. Like those dark comedies, this TRAGEDY deals with death and sex and with the psychological and social tensions arising from these basic facts of life. And like the problem plays, 'Hamlet' treats these issues without providing clear-cut resolutions, thereby leaving us with complicated, highly emotional responses that causes both satisfaction - at seeing basic elements of our own lives treated dramatically – and pain – at the nagging persistence of these difficulties, as in real life.

It is precisely through such ambiguity, however, that 'Hamlet' offers a robust and vital assertion of human worth, for the paly is essentially moral drama whose theme is the existence of both good and evil in human nature, a central concern in Shakespeare's work as a whole. Although it anticipates modern psychological dramas in some respects, 'Hamlet' is not itself such a work; the extraordinary presentation of Prince Hamlet's troubled mind is simply the vehicle – albeit a vivid one – for the development of his acceptance of humanity's flawed nature. Shakespeare's great

accomplishment in 'Hamlet' was to express the philosophy that underlies this realization.

Some of the play'smany puzzles are interesting but superficial, such as Horatio's status at the Danish court, the identification of Hamlet's inserted lines in *The Murder of Gonzago*, or the determination of the prince's age. These matters chiefly reflect the playwright's lack of concern for minor inconsistencies, a trait seen throughout the plays. Others are deeper matters of plotting and psychology: Is Hamlet's emotional disturbance real or feigned? What is the nature of his relationship to Ophelia? Is King Claudius an unalloyed villain? The 'problem of problems', as it has been called, is Hamlet's unnecessary delay in executing the revenge he plainly accepts as his duty.

The basic story – a young man grieves for his father while faced with the duty to avenge his death – came from Shakespeare's source, the UR-HAMLET, and its genre, the REVENGE PLAY, but Shakespeare's attitude towards vengeance is not the traditionally approving one. Hamlet's regret when he says, 'The time is out of joint. O cursed spite, / That ever I was born to set it right' (1.5.196-197), testifies to this, as does the existence of a parallel revenge plot, that of Leartes' revenge of his father's murder by Hamlet. The hero of one plot, Hamlet is in effect the villain of the other, casting an inescapable doubt upon his heroic role. Hamlet recognizes the ambivalence of his position when he says of Polonius' death,' ... heaven hath pleas'd it so, / To punish me with this and this with me' (3.4.175-176).

This paradox suggests the essential duality of human nature, which is both noble and wicked, and numerous comparisons throughout the drama stress this point. Several times Hamlet contrasts his murdered father and his uncle – the former an ideal ruler, just and magmnanimous; the latter an unscrupulous killer and lustful adultrer. Similarly, Hamlet juxtaposes his father's virtues with his mother's sin in accepting her husband's murderer and having sex with him. Other polarities abound: the chaste Ophelia versus the incestuous Queen; the faithful Horatio versus the treacherous Rosencrantz and Guildenstern; the devious duelist Laertes versus the manly soldier Fortinbras. Each of these contrasts recalls and reinforces the play's basic opposition between good and evil.

Faced with awareness of evil, Hamlet longs for death and is disgusted with life, especially as it is manifested in sex, which he not only sees as the drive behind his mother's sin but which he

abhors as the force that inexorably produces more life and thus more evil. 'Why wouldst thou be a breeder of sinner?' (3.1.121-122), he cries to Ophelia, and his rejection of her stems from his rejection of sex. Shakespeare did not intend their relationship as a love story; instead, it is an allegory of the condemnation of life, a point of view whose ultimate rejection is central to the play.

Hamlet's notorious procrastination of his revenge has a similar functon. Though he accepts the Ghost's orders, he senses the evil in this duty, sent from 'heaven and hell' (2.2.580), and he resists its fulfillment. Though psychologically true to life, Hamlet's delay serves primarily to offer opportunities to stress the duality of human nature: *as revenger, Hamlet is both opposed to and involved in evil.* His repeated insistance on postponing his highly ambiguous duty emphasizes his ambivalence and stimulates our own. Emotionally, Hamlet's procrastination produces in him a growing rage that leads to his killing of Polonius in 3.4, an act that provokes the King and Laertes to set in motion the incidents that lead to the bloody climax and that hastens Hamlet's exile and his escape from the King's execution plot. This event, in turn, jars and prepares him to find the 'divinity that shapes our ends' (5.2.10).

Both Hamlet and the play undergo a sweeping change before the climax, and this change is well prepared for by the establishement of a dominant tone in the play's language that is later varied to quite dramatic effect.

-Charles Boyce, From *Hamlet* Commentary,
Dictionary of Shakespeare, 1996

EIGHTEENTH CENTURY

...We must allow to the tragedy of Hamlet the praise of variety. The incidents are so numerous, that the argument [summary] of the play would make a long tale.... The action is indeed for the most part in continual progression, but there are some scenes, which neither forward nor retard it. Of the feigned madness of Hamlet there appears no adequate cause, for he does nothing, which he might not have done with the reputation of sanity. He plays the madman most, when he treats Ophelia with so much rudeness, which seems to be useless and wanton cruelty.

-Samuel Johnson, from the notes to his
Edition of Shakespeare's Dramatic Works, 1765

Tender and nobly descended, this royal flower [Hamlet] grew up under the direct influences of majesty; the idea of the right

and of princely dignity, the feeling for the good and the graceful, with the consciousness of his high birth, were unfolded in him together. He was a prince, a born prince. Pleasing in figure, polished by nature, courteous from the heart, he was to be the model of youth and the delight of the world.... A beautiful, pure, noble and most moral nature, without the strength of nerve that makes a hero, sinks beneath a burden, which it can neither bear nor throw off....

-Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, from
Wilhelm Meister, Book V, 1795

NINETEENTH CENTURY

One of Shakespeare's modes of creating characters is to conceive any one intellectual or moral faculty in morbid excess, and then to place himself, Shakespeare, thus mutilated or diseased, under given circumstances. In Hamlet he seems to have wished to exemplify the moral necessity of a due balance- between our attention to the objects of our sense and our meditation on the working of our minds- equilibrium between the real and the imaginary worlds. In Hamlet this balance is disturbed; his thoughts and the images of his fancy are far more vivid than his actual perceptions.... Hence we see a great, an almost enormous, intellectual activity, and a proportionate aversion to real action consequent upon it.... This character Shakespeare places in circumstances under which he is obliged to act on the spur of the moment: Hamlet is brave and careless of death; but he vacillates from sensibility, and procrastinates from thought, and loses the power of action in the energy of resolve.... He mistakes the seeing of his chains for the breaking of them, delays action till action is of no use, and dies the victim of mere circumstance and accident.

-Samuel Taylor Coleridge, from
Notes and Lectures on Shakespeare, 1808

Hamlet is single in its kind: A tragedy of thought inspired by continual and never-satisfied meditation on human destiny and the dark perplexity of the events of this world, calculated to call forth the very same meditation in the minds of the spectators.... Respecting Hamlet's character, I cannot pronounce altogether so favorable a judgment as Goethe's.... The weakness of his volition is evident: He does himself only justice when he says there is no greater dissimilarity than between himself and Hercules. He is not solely impelled by necessity to artifice and dissimulation; he has a

natural inclination to go crooked ways; he is a hypocrite towards himself, his far-fetched scruples are often mere pretexts to cover his lack of resolution... he is too much overwhelmed with his own sorrow to have any compassion to spare for others.... On the other hand we evidently perceive in him a malicious joy when he has succeeded in getting rid of his enemies more through necessity, and accident, which are alone able to impel him to quick and decisive measures, than from the merit of his courage.... Hamlet has no firm belief in himself or anything else.... The destiny of humanity is here exhibited as a gigantic Sphinx, which threatens to precipitate into the abyss of skepticism whoever is unable to solve her dreadful enigma.

-August Wilhelm Schlegel, from
Lectures on Art and Dramatic Literature, 1809

Hamlet is a name: His speeches and sayings but the idle coinage of the poet's brain. What, then are they not real? They are as real as our own thoughts. Their reality is in the reader's mind. It is we who are Hamlet.... We have been so used to this tragedy, that we hardly know how to criticize it, any more than we should know how to describe our own faces.... It is the one of Shakespeare's plays that we think of oftenest, because it abounds most in striking reflections on human life, and because the distresses of Hamlet are transferred by the turn of his mind, to the general account of humanity. Whatever happens to him we apply to ourselves, because he applies it to himself as a means of general reasoning.... [He] is not a character marked by strength of will, or even of passion, but by refinement of thought and sentiment.... He is the prince of philosophical speculators, and because he cannot have his revenge perfect, according to the most refined idea his wish can form, he misses it altogether.... His ruling passion is to think, not to act; and any vague pretense that flatters this propensity instantly diverts him from his previous purposes.... The character of Hamlet is made up of undulating lines; it has the yielding flexibility of 'a wave o' th' sea.'

-William Hazlitt, from
Characters of Shakespeare's Plays, 1812

[Hamlet] is not master of his acts; occasion dictates them; he cannot plan a murder, but must improvise it. A too-lively imagination exhausts energy by the accumulation of images, and by the fury of intentness, which absorbs it. You recognize in him a

poet's soul, made not to act but to dream, which is lost in contemplating the phantoms of its own creation, which sees the imaginary world too clearly to play a part in the real world; an artist whom evil chance has made a prince, whom worse chance has made an avenger of crime, and who, destined by nature for genius, is condemned by fortune to madness and unhappiness.

-Hippolyte-Adolphe Taine, from
History of English Literature, 1866

Much discussion has turned on the question of Hamlet's madness, whether it be real or assumed. It is not possible to settle this question.... Shakespeare meant Hamlet to be in a state of intense cerebral excitement, seeming like madness. His sorrowing nature has suddenly been ploughed to its depths by a horror so great as to make him recoil every moment from a belief in its reality. The shock, if it has not destroyed his sanity, has certainly unsettled him.

-George Henry Lewes, from
On Actors and the Art of Acting, 1875

[Hamlet] is a man in whom the common personal passions are so superseded by wider and rarer interests, and so discouraged by a degree of critical self-consciousness, which makes the practical efficiency of the instinctive man on the lower plane impossible to him, that he finds the duties dictated by conventional revenge and ambition as disagreeable a burden as commerce is to a poet. Even his instinctive sexual impulses offend his intellect; so that when he meets the woman who excites them he invites her to join him in a bitter and scornful criticism of their joint absurdity... all of which is so completely beyond the poor girl that she naturally thinks him mad. And, indeed, there is a sense in which Hamlet is insane; for he trips over the mistake which lies on the threshold of intellectual self-consciousness: That of bringing life to utilitarian or Hedonistic tests, thus treating it as a means instead of an end.

-George Bernard Shaw, from his review of
Johnston Forbes-Robertson's production of the play,
in Our Theatres in the Nineties, Vol. 3, 1897

TWENTIETH CENTURY

One would judge that by temperament [Hamlet] was inclined to nervous instability, to rapid and perhaps extreme changes of feeling or mood.... This temperament the Elizabethans would have called melancholic.... Next, we cannot be mistaken in attributing to [him] an exquisite sensibility to which we may give the name "moral."... To the very end, his soul, however sick and tortured it may be, answers instantaneously when good and evil are presented to it, loving the one and hating the other.... Now, in Hamlet's moral sensibility there undoubtedly lay a danger. Any great shock that life might inflict on it would be felt with extreme intensity. Such a shock might even produce tragic results....

-A. C. Bradley, from
Shakespearean Tragedy, Lecture 3, 1904

So far from being Shakespeare's masterpiece, the play is most certainly an artistic failure. In several ways [it] is puzzling and disquieting as is none of the others.... Probably more people have thought Hamlet a work of art because they found it interesting, than have found it interesting because it is a work of art. It is the "Mona Lisa" of literature.... The only way of expressing emotion in the form of art is by finding an "objective correlative"; in other words, a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events, which shall be the formula of that particular emotion..., and this is precisely what is deficient in Hamlet. Hamlet (the man) is dominated by an emotion, which is inexpressible, because it is in excess of the facts as they appear.... Hamlet is up against the difficulty that his disgust is occasioned by his mother, but his mother is not an adequate equivalent for it; his disgust envelops and exceeds her. It is thus a feeling that he cannot understand; he cannot objectify it, and it therefore remains to poison life and obstruct action. None of the possible actions can satisfy it; and nothing that Shakespeare can do with the plot can express Hamlet for him.... We must simply admit that here Shakespeare tackled a problem that proved too much for him. Why he attempted it at all is an insoluble puzzle; under compulsion of what experience he attempted to express the inexpressibly horrible; we cannot ever know.

-T. S. Eliot, from "Hamlet and His Problems,"
in Selected Essays, 1920

Whenever a person cannot bring himself to do something that every conscious consideration tells him he should do- and which he may have the strongest conscious desire to do- it is always because there is some hidden reason why a part of him doesn't want to do it; this reason he will not own to himself and is only dimly, if at all, aware of. That is exactly the case with

Hamlet.... The more intense and the more obscure is a case of deep mental conflict, the more certainly will it be found on adequate analysis to center about a sexual problem.... [Hamlet's] long "repressed" desire to take his father's place in his mother's affection is stimulated to unconscious activity by the sight of someone usurping this place exactly as he himself had once longed to do. More, this someone was a member of the same family, so that the actual usurpation further resembled the imaginary one in being incestuous. Without his being in the least aware of it, the ancient desires are ringing in his mind, are once more struggling to find conscious expression, and need such an expenditure of energy again to "repress" them that he is reduced to the deplorable mental state he himself so vividly depicts.

-Ernest Jones, from Hamlet and Oedipus, 1949

Yet his soul's adventure, which seemed but to lead him to defeat, was heroic too. For if men shirk such perils, how are these high matters to be brought home to spiritual freedom? Nor will mere intellectual venturing suffice, if lively faith, in its health and strength, is to be found and enjoyed again. Hamlet, being called upon, flings his whole being- mind and affections both, the best and the worst of him, weakness no less than strength- into the trial. And he widens the issue till he sees eternal life and death, his own and his enemy's, at stake. He will reconcile himself, as he is and in all he is, with these now unveiled verities of this world and the next, if that may be. In which Promethean struggle towards the light he is beaten- as who has not been?- with havoc wrought, not in him only, but by him, even to his own despite. It is nonetheless a heroic struggle.

Here, for me, is the master-clue to Hamlet's "mystery." The "sane" world around him has naturally no sense of it, nor the too sane spectator of the play. He does not pluck out the heart of it himself. Neither are we meant to. For his trouble is rooted in the fact that it is a mystery.

-Harley Granville-Barker, in
Prefaces to Shakespeare, Vol. I, 1946

What is "Oedipal Complex"?

Sigmund Freud's theory as related to *the Oedipal complex* is basically saying that we humans are ruled "deep down" by animalistic sexual drives. The key here is to understand that he was saying that these drives are derived from our primitive ancestry and

are hidden deep within our sub-conscience. He believed that we all have an ID, which is where our instincts and desires are dominant, then as we evolved, we developed a conscience, which is represented, in our Superego, and we all have an Ego which acts as a regulator between the ID and the Superego. Freud divided his theory of human development into stages, based on self-gratification. The stages are oral, anal, phallic, latency, and genital.

Freudian *Oedipal Complex* claims that the son as he grows up, wants to posses the mother. Every child after he gains consciousness wants to kill the father and have the mother.

Sigmund Freud believes that the parents' affection for their child may awaken his sexual instinct prematurely to such a degree that the mental excitation breaks through in an unmistakable fashion to the genital system. If, on the other hand, they are fortunate enough to avoid this, then their affection can perform its task of directing the child in his choice of a sexual object when he reaches maturity. No doubt the simplest course for the child would be to choose as his sexual objects the same persons whom, since his childhood, he has loved with what may be described as damped-down libido. But, by the postponing of sexual maturation, time has been gained in which the child can erect, among other restraints on sexuality, the barrier against incest, and can thus take up into himself the moral precepts that expressly exclude from his object-choice, as being blood relations, the persons whom he has cultural demand made by society. Society must defend itself against the danger that the interests which it needs for the establishment of higher social units may be swallowed up by the family, and for this reason, in the case of every individual, but in particular of a adolescent boys, it seeks by all possible means to loosen their connection with their family - a connection which, in their childhood, is the only important one.

As Freud explains in his *Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis* (91; 148-150), it is in the world of ideas, however, that the choice of an object is accomplished at first; and the sexual life of maturing youth is almost entirely restricted to indulging in fantasies, that is, in ideas that are not destined to be carried into effect. In these fantasies the infantile tendencies invariably emerge once more, but this time with intensified pressure from somatic sources. Among these tendencies the first place is taken with uniform frequency by the child's sexual impulses towards his parents, which are as a rule already differentiated owing to the

attraction of the opposite sex - *the son being drawn towards his mother and the daughter towards her father.*

A man, especially, looks for someone who can represent his picture of his mother, as it has dominated his mind from his earliest childhood; and accordingly, if his mother is still alive, she may well resent these new versions of herself and meet her with hostility. In view of the importance of a child's relations to his parents in determining his later choice of a sexual object, it can easily be understood that any disturbance of those relations will produce the gravest effects upon his adult sexual life (Freud, 91; 150).

In a boy *the Oedipal Complex*, in which he desires his mother and would like to get rid of his father as being a rival, develops naturally from the phase of his phallic sexuality (Freud, 89; 160).

HAMLET

The psychology Shakespeare examines in the play is excitingly deep and complete, for it is not extraordinary but "humanly complex" (Boyce, 90; 232). As a reader or audience we find a bit of us in Hamlet's dilemma and his struggle for human truth and survival. From the very moment we see Hamlet alone and deceived after his father's death and his mother's incestuous remarriage with Hamlet's Uncle Claudius. We inevitably feel sympathy on him, and we are on his side in the play. That is great of Shakespeare to draw us directly into the play through Hamlet's dilemma, in other words through his troubled mind. The more Hamlet's mind is troubled with the events and the idea of revenge, the more we find ourselves closer to Hamlet in his search for human nature, sharing the same psychology.

Shakespeare uses soliloquies to follow 'Hamlet's footsteps in his reconciliation of humanity with its own over flown nature' (Boyce, 90; 232). Being taken through a severe but vital journey, the journey of recognition, the audience breathes the same dilemma and struggle for the same revenge. Soliloquies were really successfully used, because these stream of consciousness moments are supposed to be his most sincere ones and by this he reveals his thought to us. In other words he voices his thoughts, and we can understand what psychology he is in at that moment. It helps Shakespeare to keep the audience the track of Hamlet's dilemma. Throughout the play we see seven of these soliloquies, and most probably these are the turning movements audiences feel closer to Hamlet's troubled mind. To understand the dilemma of Hamlet it is

necessary to examine these soliloquies. The first of these (1.2.120-59) occurs before he has seen the Ghost, the second (I.5.92-112) immediately after it has told its story of incest and adultery. Both speeches are concerned with memory (in the second, Hamlet actually dramatizes the act of recording the Ghost's command in his brain) and the remembrance of his dead father. The next two soliloquies are concerned with thought or 'conscience'. The third (II.2.557-616) is spoken after the Player's recitation and is concerned with the power of thought, which makes the actor pause for pity. It ends with the decision to catch the King's conscience. The fourth is 'To be or not to be...' III.I.56-90 where thought faces the fact of death and conscience is said to make us cowards by restraining us from suicide. The fifth and sixth soliloquies are concerned with blood and will; one (III.2.395-406) is spoken on his way to his mother's private apartments, the other (III.3.73-96), the 'damnation soliloquy', behind the back of the apparently praying King. St. Augustine had described the three powers of the soul as Memory, Understanding and Will. These six soliloquies dramatize exactly these powers in Hamlet's soul and show how his memory and understanding are irrevocably opposite to his will. One third of Hamlet desires to play the part of Lucianus and kill the King but he is prevented by the stronger, though unconscious, forces of his memory and conscience (Macmillan, 85;).

The seventh soliloquy (IV.4.32-66) is concerned with all three powers of the soul but the battle in Hamlet's mind is never decided at the conscious level. He never steps forward to tell us exactly what he is thinking and why he is acting in his fashion. If he did we should not believe him. A man who describes himself as a villain is probably telling the truth. A man who calls himself virtuous is certainly a liar, since he is already suffering from the unconscious sin of pride. In drama, therefore, as in life, it is easier or a villain to describe himself than an honest man. Shakespeare's resource is to make Hamlet call himself a coward and villain so often that the audience is bound to compare what he says with what he does. If his words stress his conscious doubts and desires, his actions show how much he is shaped by forces whose power he hardly acknowledges.

It is the battle within Hamlet's own mind, which causes him to set the play as a trap for the King. His intention is to follow it with a brief but bloody revenge. In fact, since the play is also an instrument of memory and conscience, it has placed that revenge forever out of Hamlet's reach. Claudius is no longer a victim but a

determined and deadly opponent who does succeed in killing Hamlet - though at the cost of his own life, and that of his queen. This dramatization of conscious and unconscious forces at work in Hamlet's mind has caused infinite problems for those who prefer simple explanations (Macmillan, 85).

Though some critics have assumed that Hamlet unconsciously desires his mother sexually, as in *the Oedipal Complex* hypothesized by Freud, such a theory is not reasonable, because the play's atmosphere provides Hamlet with real, not imaginative, parental conflict: his father is murdered by his own uncle, and his mother remarried with him, the murderer of his father; and he is the enemy of his mother's lover, but father's murderer (Boyce, 90; 232).

If we apply the Freudian *Oedipal Complex* to Hamlet and examine it, it will be quite easy to see the sharp differences between the play and Freud's hypothesis:

Firstly, the hypothesis supports the idea that *the son as he grows up wants to posses the mother. Every child after he gains consciousness, he wants to kill the father and have the mother.* As we summarized the dilemma of Hamlet, the plot itself demolishes the existence of the Freudian *Oedipal Complex*, for the actual father is dead and the mother remarried with the murderer. The idea here is not killing the father to have the mother but it is killing the murderer of the father in revenge.

Secondly, the father, according to *the Freudian Complex*, is supposed to be murdered by the son and the mother is to be possessed by the son. The son, as he gains consciousness, wants to kill the father, because he unconsciously desires the mother. Reasonably, if the son desires the mother sexually, then the son is supposed to hate the father. If he does not, how come he is to kill the father? Interestingly, in the play there is neither a sign of that desire nor any hatred that Hamlet feels against his father. On the contrary, he sees his father as an ideal man and a great king. He is thus appalled by his mother's willingness to accept an inferior man; a libertine and-as is soon revealed-a murderer. Hamlet comes to see his mother as evil and is devastated by the idea. Although he is the son of *godlike father*, he is also the son of a mother who readily beds with 'a satyr' (Boyce, 90; 232). These sentences from the play, Hamlet shows us what he feels for his murdered father:

Hamlet.
O, that is too too sullied flesh would melt,
Thaw and resolve itself into a dew,

Or that the everlasting had not fixed
His canon 'gainst self-slaughter. O God, God,
How weary, stale, flat, and unprofitable
Seem to me all the uses of this wond!
Fie on't, ah fie, 'tis an unweeded garden
That grows to seed, things rank and gross in nature
Posses it merely. That it should come to this,
But two months dead, nay not so much, not two,
So excellent a king, that was to this
(Hamlet, I.2.130-140)

Hamlet. ...
God, a beast that wants discourse of reason
Would have mourned longer - married with my uncle,
My father's brother, but no more like my father...
(Hamlet, I.2.150)

Although there are some attempts to do so, Hamlet's perdition cannot be explained via *Oedipal Complex* theory, Jones claims (Keppler, 72; 196) that Hamlet loves his mother and is jealous of his father; he has no sound textual evidence as to Hamlet's Oedipal Complex. Every one in his plays caught in his mousetrap, would, similarly be hamletized. First of all, Hamlet has not hostility towards his father; on the contrary, he loves him, bemoans his death, and condemns his mother, soliloquizing (Boşnak, 94; 7):

Frailty, thy name is woman!
A little month or are those shoes were old,
Which she followed my poor Father's body. Like
Niobe, all tears. Why she, even she
(O heaven! A beast that wants discourse of reason,
Would have mourned longer) married with uncle.
(Hamlet, I. 1.8)

Finally, it is clearly understandable that *the Freudian Oedipal Complex* cannot be applied to prince Hamlet.

OEDIPUS

To compare the dilemmas of Oedipus and Hamlet, Oedipus' dilemma looks bitter and unbearable. Though the fathers are dead in both plays, the murders and the murderers are quite different; in both plays, the father is murdered by Hamlet's uncle not by the son and Hamlet, the mother is possessed after the King's death by the murderer,

whereas in Oedipus the murderer is, accidentally, the son and the son possesses the mother as his wife.

Everything starts with an oracle saying that his own son's hands should perish Laius, the King of Thebes. Laius, being under the influence of that oracle gave his new born son to his chief shepherd ordering him to leave this baby on a mountain unprotected hopping to get rid of him. Surprisingly that poor son is given to Polybus, the king of Corinth, by the tenderhearted chief shepherd (Seneca, 07; 64).

As the son of Polybus, Oedipus learns the oracle that he is doomed to slay his own father and marry his own mother. He fled from Corinth fearing this oracle, thinking that he would escape this 'dreadful fate' (Seneca, 07; 64).

On the way to north he met an old man who 'imperiously disputed the narrow way with him' (Seneca, 07; 65). After an argument he kills that old man, without knowing that the man he kills was, in fact, his real father, Laius.

The oracle goes forward and he arrives at Theban land. Reading the riddle of the Sphinx he 'destroys the monster which Juno has sent to harass the land she hated' (Seneca, 07; 65). As a result of this service, 'Oedipus was made the husband of Jacosta, the widowed queen of Laius (who had recently been slain upon the road), and set upon the vacant throne' (Seneca, 07; 65).

Though Oedipus tried to escape his dreadful faith, fled from Corinth, the oracle came true and he realized that the old man he had slain was his father and the woman he married was his real mother who gave birth to his children in years. And here similar to *Aeschylus'* Orestia "The hero escapes from fate but as he escapes he comes closer to it".

Sending Creon 'to consult the oracle and learn the cause and seek the means of deliverance from scourge'. *'And while he waits his messenger's return, the murky dawn still finds his kingdom's wretched plight'* (Seneca, 07; 65).

As we examined the dilemma of Oedipus, the bitter result of accidental father killing and unknowingly done marriage with his own mother comes forward as a matter of accident. It is quite different from the death of Hamlet's father, because Hamlet but his uncle does not do it. After Oedipus learns the truth, he brings out his eyes with his fingers, and Jocasta, the unfortunate mother, learning the oracle came true and her husband Oedipus was, in fact, his own son, she hangs herself.

It is different from Zeus' beating his father Cronos, because force and conscience do it. Though with the exception of Zeus, *Hesiod* has allowed his world of primitive gods and chaotic forces to remain primitive and chaotic. The general pattern *Oedipal Struggle* between generations, with father attempting to destroy son and mother assisting son to supplant father. Although *Laius had given his son, Oedipus, to his chief shepherd 'to expose on Mount Cithaeron'* (Seneca, 07; 64), and it is quite the same in oedipal struggle as it is in *Hesiod's* the Theogony, Oedipus story is, apparently a different story, for Oedipus kills his father without knowing that he was his father.

From this point, if we discuss whether the Freudian *Oedipal Complex* applies to Oedipus:

Firstly, let us remember the complex; 'the son as he grows up wants to posses the mother. Every child after he gains consciousness, he wants to kill the father and have the mother.' In Oedipus story there is a father killing, but it is rather different from the given description of the Freudian Oedipal Complex. The father killing in the play is done unknowingly. Another difference is that Oedipus did not want to kill that man to posses his wife, but he killed the old man as a result of a quarrel.

> *Oedipus. ...*
> **... Thus spoke the Delphic god.**
> *And still another, greater sin showed.*
> ***And can there be a blacker crime than this,***
> ***A father slain? Oh, cursed impiety!***
> *'T were shame to tell the hideous oracle;*
> *For Phoebus warned me of my father's couch,*
> *And impious wedlock.* ***'T was the fear of this***
> ***That drove me headlong from my father's realm,***
> ***And for no sin I left my native land.***
> *(Oedipus, ACT I.20-29)*

Secondly, he married the mother not knowing that the actual wife was his mother. There is no sign of any sexual desire for his mother, too. If it had happened to be so, he had to feel it for his adopted mother, for he thought she was his mother. *On the contrary he fled from Corinth 'so he might escape the dreadful fate* (Seneca, 07; 65)'. If he had desired his mother he would not have fled but he would have got rid of his father Polybus, and had the queen as his wife. It did not happen so.

Thirdly, we see him blind himself after he learns the truth. Is not it strange that he brought out his eyes with his hands, if he

desires his mother and wants to kill his father? Certainly it is! For after all, the father is dead and he had the mother, even he had children from that desired mother! We learn what Oedipus did after he learns the truth that Oedipus himself punishes him and brought out his eyes;

So Oedipus advanced with blazing eyes,
And stern, made face, while hollow groans bust forth,
And from his limbs there dripped a chilling sweat.
He foams and vents a stream of threat'ning words,
And from his heart is mighty grief o'erflows.
He in his madness seeks against himself
Some heavy penalty and like his fate.
"Why do I wait for punishment?" he cries;
"Let me guilty heart with hostile sword be pierced,
Or overwhelmed with flames or crushing rocks!
(Oedipus, ACT V.1119-1128)

To sum up, Oedipus kills his father and gets his mother as **a matter of accident**. That is, he does everything unknowingly, without a conscious desire to do so. That proves us a similar conclusion with Hamlet's story that The Freudian *Oedipal Complex* does not apply to Oedipus.

CONCLUSION

Both Hamlet and Oedipus experience a long recognition journey through their troubled but questioning minds. Though Hamlet's dilemma looks bitter at a glance, Oedipus' dilemma is no doubt, much bitter and hard to bear. Their search for truth and reasoning minds on the way to reality make both Hamlet and Oedipus noble and renaissance men, but still at the end of the plays neither Hamlet nor Oedipus can escape from their fate.

As for the Freudian *Oedipal Complex*; that is, with the textual evidences, proved that the Freudian *Oedipal Complex* does not apply to Hamlet or Oedipus.

-Murat Kaplan, From "*Freudian Oedipal Complex* Applied to "Hamlet" and "Oedipus the King", 1997

OTHELLO

1604

INTRODUCTION

The life of William Shakespeare has been studied, questioned, and debated since his death in 1616. Because he is considered the greatest playwright in the English language- and one of the world's greatest writers- people have been eager to find out every possible detail of his life, his work, and his thought.

Shakespeare himself offered little help to scholars and critics. Men of his time, no matter how famous, rarely wrote autobiographies, and Shakespeare was no exception.

Those who look to the plays to discover the man behind them are faced with an impossible question: which of Shakespeare's hundreds of characters represents the author: Hamlet? Romeo? Cleopatra? Macbeth? Shakespeare created so many different personalities- from the roughest peasant to the noblest king- that looking for clues to Shakespeare's personal feeling in his characters is frustrating.

Yet because he was a public figure, there is a great deal that's known about Shakespeare's career. Though his private life remains mysterious, his life as an artist is well documented, particularly compared to those of his contemporaries in the theatre.

Shakespeare was born in Stratford-on-Avon, England (about 100 miles from London) on April 23, 1564. The exact date is open to question, but the 23rd is when his birthday is celebrated. His father, John Shakespeare, was a prosperous landowner. He was also a glover (a glove-maker) and owned what we would call a general store. He was active in civic affairs, and served for a while as mayor of Stratford. Mary Arden, Shakespeare's mother, was from one of the oldest families in the area, and of a higher social class than her husband. In addition to William, John and Mary had two other sons and four daughters.

Legends abound regarding Shakespeare's early life. According to one, Shakespeare had almost no schooling, was an uneducated "country bumpkin." In fact, Shakespeare's education was as good as that of any young man of his class and age. In grammar school, he studied Latin and Greek, but little English, as that language was considered too young for serious study.

Shakespeare's formal education was cut short when his father suffered financial losses. But he never stopped studying, and, as his plays reveal, he was quite learned in geography, history, the natural sciences, and cosmology.

When Shakespeare was 18, he married Anne Hathaway, a woman seven or eight years his senior. The birth of their daughter Susanna a few months after the wedding suggests that the marriage might have been a "necessity." Though there aren't documents that prove theirs was a happy marriage, they remained together throughout Shakespeare's life. In 1585, Anne gave birth to twins, Judith and Hamnet.

Since we don't know what Shakespeare did professionally before moving to London, it's difficult to say just why he left Stratford. Perhaps a traveling troupe of actors took him on as an apprentice; at least two of these companies came to Shakespeare's town every year. Perhaps he begun writing and felt that London would hold more opportunities than Stratford. Or perhaps he simply needed more money to raise his family. Whatever Shakespeare's reasons, it was one of the most successful moves in literary history.

We don't know exactly when he left Stratford. But by the time he was 28 (1592), Shakespeare was an established actor. Scholars speculate that he began writing full-time in 1592, when theaters closed on account of the plague. He published a narrative poem, Venus and Adonis, in 1593, and when the theaters reopened in 1594, his play The Comedy of Errors, was ready for presentation.

Shakespeare's London was both a noisy, rough place and the leading cultural capital of the world. The age took its name (Elizabethan) from Queen Elizabeth I, who ruled from 1558-1603. Under her rule, England rose to new economic, military, and cultural heights. The English defeat of the Spanish Armada in 1588 virtually assured England's political control of the sea. England's power and prosperity attracted merchants from all over the world. And writers, poets, and artists were encouraged and rewarded under the queen's intelligent rule.

Elizabethan London was bursting with color and vitality. Standing on the bank of the Thames (the river that flows through London) you could see boat-taxis carrying merchants and craftsmen from one shore to the other; elegant barges of the nobility; farmers selling produce on the riverbank; and on the poles of London Bridge- the severed heads of executed criminals as a warning to those contemplating a life of crime.

The cobblestoned streets were full of noise, smells, and constant activity. Londoners used chamber pots (this was well before plumbing) and often threw the contents out the window. Almost everyone drank ale (a heavy, bitter beer), since water wasn't sanitary and tea had yet to become the national beverage. Many were tipsy all day, tempers ran high, and street fights were frequent. Conversations were loud, as they had to compete with barking dogs, screaming vendors, horses' hooves clattering on the cobblestones, and rattling carriages.

It's not surprising that entertainment in this boisterous city tended to be fast-paced and involving. In one part of town you could see a bear-baiting match, in which a wild bear was tied up and ferocious dogs attacked it until it died. In another you could witness an execution; beheadings and hangings, considered public events, drew enormous crowds. If your tastes were a bit more refined you could go to the outskirts of town, to one of the many theaters- the Rose, the Swan, the Red Bull, the Globe. Because plays were considered "godless" by the Lord Mayor, theaters had to be located outside the city limits, but this did nothing to hamper their popularity.

Elizabethan theaters were owned and operated by "companies"-groups of producers, actors, and writers who stayed together from play to play, as in a modern repertory company, and shared in the profits. These companies were sponsored by a wealthy merchant or nobleman. Shakespeare stayed with one company throughout his career, the Lord Chamberlain's Men, which became the King's Men in 1603 when Elizabeth died and James I took the throne. At one point in his life, Shakespeare enjoyed a triple income- as actor, playwright, and producer.

There is evidence Shakespeare was a good actor. He played small parts in some of his own plays (such as the Ghost in Hamlet) and roles in those of other writers. As the years passed, he began to devote more and more time to his writing, where he enjoyed even greater success.

By the time he'd written Othello (around 1604), Shakespeare was considered the greatest playwright of his day. Among his successful plays before Othello were A Midsummer Night's Dream, The Taming of the Shrew, Romeo and Juliet, As You Like It, Julius Caesar, Richard II, Henry V, and Hamlet. Still to come were King Lear, Macbeth, Antony and Cleopatra, and The Tempest, among others.

Many feel that Shakespeare's later plays show a darker, more pessimistic view of the world than his early plays. Under James I (his rule is referred to as the Jacobean period), England lost some of its power and prosperity. Too, conflicts between Catholics and Protestants led to civil strife. Shakespeare's earlier plays reflected Elizabeth's golden reign. By 1604, when Othello was first produced, the headiness of the Elizabethan period was recent history.

In 1612, Shakespeare left the theater and retired to Stratford. His investments enabled him to live comfortably with his family until he died on April 23, 1616.

THE ELIZABETHAN THEATER

The theaters in which Shakespeare's plays were first performed were quite different from those of today. You're probably accustomed to theaters in which the seats face a square stage with a proscenium arch (a "frame" that separates the audience from the actors). Elizabethan theaters were either circular or made of six, seven, or eight sides. The sides enclosed an open court surrounded above by galleries or balconies. Audience members stood or sat in the galleries or (if they couldn't afford gallery seats) sat downstairs on the bare ground- these spectators came to be called "groundlings." Extending into the courtyard was a covered platform, where the action of the play took place. There were no curtains and little painted scenery. In order to let audiences know where and when certain scenes were taking place, Shakespeare often made references to specific cities, rooms, times of day, or weather conditions. There was no lighting other than that provided by the sun. Performances in these theaters were held during the day.

The action of the plays was quick and continuous; only rarely were there intermissions. In fact, the divisions into acts and scenes that are used on stage and in print today were added to his plays after Shakespeare's death.

Theater audiences had to use their imaginations more fully than we do today. Elizabethans focussed more on character and language than on "special effects" (although costumes were often colorful and elaborate). Shakespeare captivated (and does to this day) his audiences with some of the most beautiful and memorable poetry ever written.

Since acting was considered immoral for women, young boys played all of the female roles. This may be why Shakespeare's plays have more male than female characters. It's interesting to think that some of the greatest roles for women ever written- Juliet, Cleopatra, Desdemona, Rosalind- were first performed by boys whose voices hadn't changed!

Shakespeare had an uncanny knack for knowing what audiences enjoyed (and still enjoy!). He offers not only bawdy humor and exciting action, but also exquisite poetry and penetrating psychological and political insight. Shakespeare's still a box-office sellout, over 300 years after his death. Perhaps we miss the special communication he enjoyed with Elizabethans and Jacobeans who were his contemporaries. But we can share their appreciation for the elements that have kept Shakespeare alive for centuries: his splendid language, his understanding of human problems, and his steadfast compassion for all of us struggling to cope on this wonderful and dangerous planet.

PUBLICATION OF SHAKESPEARE'S PLAYS

Shakespeare's plays were never published under his guidance. In his day, plays were considered entertainment, not literature; they were part of the popular culture as television is today. When Ben Jonson, another Elizabethan playwright, published his collected Works, he was considered a hopeless egotist!

There was another reason that plays were not printed for general distribution. Plays were the property of the theater company that produced them. A published play was fair game for a rival company. (It was a long time before plagiarism laws and copyrights made play piracy illegal.)

Nonetheless, 18 of Shakespeare's did appear in print while he was alive, proof that he was a very popular writer for the stage. The plays were printed in single editions, known as quartos. Shakespeare didn't supervise the publication of these editions, so it's hard to gauge their accuracy. There were often many versions of a single play, as Shakespeare rewrote during rehearsals and during the run.

After Shakespeare's death, two of his colleagues printed the plays (18) not included in the quarto editions. This collection became known as the First Folio, and although they're considered closer to Shakespeare's original versions, no one knows how closely they resemble Shakespeare's own manuscript. No version of any play in Shakespeare's handwriting exists today.

It's not crucial to know every detail in Shakespeare's plays, nor what scholars surmise he meant by every obscure word (to us,

anyway) of difficult passage. You can enjoy the plays anyway. But it's good to keep in mind that there are contradictions and inconsistencies in the plays because no single printed version of any play had Shakespeare's approval. The problems in the texts have puzzled readers for hundreds of years. But the problems are minor compared to the pleasure and enlightenment to be had from Shakespeare's plays.

THE PLOT

ACT I

Shakespeare's story of jealousy, betrayal, and murder begins on a street in Venice in the middle of the night. Roderigo has just learned that Desdemona, the woman he loves, has eloped with Othello, a Moorish general hired to lead the Venetian army against the Turks. Roderigo is angry with Iago, the young Venetian he's been paying to play "matchmaker-" for him and Desdemona.

But Iago has other problems. He's furious with Othello for having chosen Michael Cassio as his Lieutenant instead of himself, who has served loyally as Othello's ensign. Iago hides an evil nature under a mask of honesty, and he delights in the suffering of others. With his jealousy as a partial excuse, he sets out to arrange Othello's downfall.

Roderigo and Iago awaken Brabantio, a Venetian Senator and Desdemona's father, to tell him that his daughter has run off with Othello. Despite the respect Brabantio has for Othello as a soldier, he is suspicious of him personally because he is a foreigner. Iago convinces Brabantio that Othello seduced Desdemona using charms and spells.

Iago finds Othello at the inn where he and Desdemona are spending their honeymoon. Iago warns him that Brabantio's angry, but Othello feels he has done no wrong. A group of men, led by Cassio, arrives to summon Othello to the Senate for an emergency war council. Immediately following, Brabantio arrives with his supporters to put Othello in prison. Othello calmly suggests that they all go to the Senate and let the Duke decide who is in the right.

In the Senate chambers, Othello explains how he and Desdemona fell in love: as he told her of his adventures throughout the world, she listened with awe and sympathy. Their mutual attraction was undeniable, and it happened without charms or potions.

Desdemona is sent for, and she not only confirms Othello's story but also pledges her love for him. Brabantio, seeing that he's defeated, is devastated.

Othello is sent to Cyprus to fight the Turks. Desdemona will join him there, accompanied by Iago and his wife, Emilia.

Meanwhile, Iago formulates a plan capitalizing on Othello's open and trusting nature and Cassio's good looks. The details of the plan are still tentative, but Iago's objectives are firm: to see Othello ruined and to win Cassio's job as lieutenant.

ACT II

The war ends suddenly and unexpectedly when the Turkish fleet retreats, overpowered by a storm. Othello arrives and is joyfully reunited with Desdemona. The Moor calls for a celebration in honor of his marriage and the end of the war.

That night, Iago urges Roderigo (who has come to Cyprus in the hopes of winning Desdemona after all) to pick a fight with Cassio and get the young lieutenant in so much trouble that he will lose his job. Iago gets Cassio drunk, Roderigo starts an argument that leads to a sword fight, and Montano, the retiring governor of Cyprus, is injured trying to stop the brawl. Othello is awakened by the ruckus and promptly fires Cassio. The humiliated lieutenant is encouraged by Iago's advice to approach Desdemona and beg for his job. Cassio doesn't realize that this is all part of Iago's plan.

ACT III

Cassio goes to Desdemona, who promises to help. Seeing them together, Othello- prompted by Iago- feels the stirrings of jealousy. When Desdemona asks her husband to give back Cassio's job, Iago quickly points out to Othello that her behavior is indeed suspicious.

Othello demands that Iago prove his insinuations regarding Cassio and Desdemona. Unfortunately for her, Desdemona has dropped the handkerchief given to her by Othello. Iago "plants" the handkerchief in Cassio's room and cites it as the "proof" Othello demands. Cassio, suspecting nothing, gives the handkerchief to Bianca, his mistress.

Meanwhile, Iago tells Othello that he has seen the handkerchief in Cassio's hands. When Othello asks Desdemona to show him the handkerchief, she lies and says she still has it, but can't show it to him. Othello, convinced of her guilt, resolves that she and Cassio will die.

ACT IV

Though a lot has happened, Iago has just begun. He arranges for Othello to eavesdrop as he maneuvers Cassio into talking about Bianca's love for him. Othello thinks he's referring to Desdemona. In a fury, Othello vows to strangle Desdemona that very night. He asks Iago to kill Cassio.

Lodovico, a relative of Desdemona, arrives from Venice. He brings a letter from the Venetian Senate asking Othello to return to Venice, and giving Cassio control of Cyprus. Desdemona is delighted by the news, and Othello, thinking her joy is for Cassio, hits her in front of their guests.

That night, Othello tries to pressure Emilia into admitting that Desdemona has cheated on him, but Emilia swears that her mistress is pure and innocent. Othello refuses to believe her.

Iago persuades Roderigo that killing Cassio is the best way for him to win Desdemona. With premonitions of death on her mind, Desdemona prepares for bed.

ACT V

Roderigo attacks Cassio, but only wounds him. Cassio, in turn, manages to wound Roderigo, and Iago, hidden in the dark, stabs Cassio in the leg. Cassio's cries bring Lodovico and others running from their rooms. Cassio identifies Roderigo as his attacker, and Iago, pretending to avenge the lieutenant, kills Roderigo to prevent him from confessing their plot.

In Desdemona's bedroom, Othello looks at her sleeping figure with a combination of love and hate. She awakens, and he announces his intention to kill her for her acts of adultery. Desdemona protests that she is innocent, but Othello smothers her, certain that the murder is an act of justice.

Emilia comes in with news of Roderigo's death. Othello admits to having killed Desdemona, but says he had to because she was unfaithful. The grief-stricken Emilia protests, until Othello tells her Iago told him of Desdemona's affair with Cassio. Emilia cries out, and Lodovico, Iago, and others come running.

When Othello cites the handkerchief as proof of his wife's infidelity, Emilia finally realizes that her husband's evil. Iago kills her to protect himself, then makes a run for it.

Montano and Gratiano rush out to chase Iago, and when they return with the unrepentant villain, Othello tries to stab him.

He only wounds him, though, and Lodovico orders Othello's sword be taken from him.

Lodovico tells of letters found in Roderigo's pocket linking Iago with the conspiracy to kill Cassio. With his last words, Roderigo also accuses Iago.

After bidding those around him to remember him as "one that loved not wisely, but too well," Othello stabs himself with a dagger he had hidden in his cloak. Kissing Desdemona, he dies.

Lodovico takes charge, ordering Cassio to govern Cyprus and sentencing Iago to death.

THE CHARACTERS

OTHELLO

Shakespeare's tragic hero is a strong, powerful, dignified Moor. He has come to Venice as a soldier-of-fortune, hired by the state to help Venice win their war against the Turks. He spends nine months in Venice, where his leadership and kindness have made him a popular general. Although born a pagan (a non-Christian) he has converted to Christianity.

While in Venice, he spends many evenings in the home of Brabantio, a Venetian Senator. He entertains Brabantio and his guests with stories of his travels around the world. He tells marvelous and exotic tales of strange people with fantastic customs and unusual appearances.

His stories attract the attention of Brabantio's beautiful daughter, Desdemona, who listens to his words with such eagerness and sympathy that he falls in love with her. She returns his love, and they elope, knowing that Brabantio would disapprove of his daughter marrying an older man of another race, class, and country.

To hear Othello's story up until the elopement with Desdemona is almost to hear a fairy tale- the story of a handsome warrior sweeping a beautiful young princess off her feet, away from the clutches of her possessive father, and on to happiness. One reader has said that it's almost as if Othello has appeared from wonderland; his stories of his past are that rich and magical. Shakespeare, however, has made Othello a human being, not a character from a fairy tale.

Unlike other Shakespearean tragic heroes, Othello is not a prince or a king, although he is descended from "men of royal siege" (rank). In Venice he is seen as a professional soldier, a fine

and courageous one, but still a hired general. By placing him closer to the common man, Shakespeare makes Othello easier to identify with, more sympathetic. His story could be our story, and his faults our faults.

Othello's good qualities easily outweigh the bad. We know he's powerful, brave, and authoritative; the respect given to him by the Venetian Senate tells us that. He's also gentle and romantic. The story he tells of courting Desdemona is rich and poetic, and his early scenes with his wife show him full of love and devotion. Cassio's loyalty to him shows that Othello is well liked by his soldiers. When Cassio feels he has lost Othello's respect, he is broken-hearted.

There are also qualities about Othello that have a good side and a bad side. One of these is his open and trusting nature. Othello believes that others are honest and sincere until he has proof that they're not. This openhearted love of his fellow man makes Othello an attractive and generous friend. But it also leaves him susceptible to Iago's scheming; Iago knows his plan will work because Othello trusts him and has no reason to suspect that his loyal ensign would scheme against him.

Othello is also naive, particularly about women. He says:

> *For since these arms of mine had seven years' pith*
> *Till now some nine moons wasted, they have used*
> *Their dearest action in the tented field;*
> *Act I, Scene iii, lines 83-86*

Having spent most of his life in army camps, Othello knows little of women and love. This naivete has charm in the first act, where the strong and powerful general admits to being a shy and cautious lover. In the third act, however, Othello's inexperience allows Iago to convince him that he doesn't understand Venetian women, that they are known for cheating on their husbands.

As a professional soldier, Othello has gained a strong reputation. The discipline he has learned has earned him the respect of the Venetians, who badly need his help. When he fires Cassio, it's to make an example of him to the rest of the soldiers. And he refuses to reinstate him as a matter of principle. Sadly, it is this strict code of honor- both military and private- that forces Othello to kill Desdemona. When a man's honor is lost, according to this code, he must win it back. For Othello, this means Desdemona's death, which he sees as an act of justice, not of

revenge. As painful as it is for him, he doesn't see that he has a choice. He is a soldier, trained to live by the rules.

The last of these "double-edged" virtues is Othello's powerful poetic imagination. The stories he weaves for Desdemona are rich and impressive. As Othello retells the story of his courtship in the Senate office, the Duke is so struck that he understands how his daughter was won by such stories. Othello can weave magic with his tales and transform the truth into poetry. Yet this rich imagination has a handicap: it makes Othello vulnerable to Iago's stories of Desdemona's infidelities. Othello's imagination runs wild with Iago's invented details and "proofs."

The most common view of Othello's "tragic flaw" is that he's a jealous person who allows jealousy to prevail over good sense. But is jealousy Othello's problem? Or is he, as he says, a man who is not easily made jealous? Is this the tragedy of a man not jealous by nature, who is made jealous by the cruel manipulations of Iago? Read Act III, Scene iii carefully, and judge for yourself whether Othello is by nature jealous.

Othello is also a passionate man, and this makes him exciting. But he admits that he has a fiery temper (Act II, Scene iii, lines 207-212). Iago capitalizes on Othello's excitability. Once Iago has convinced the Moor that Desdemona's having an affair with Cassio, Othello moves to his deadly revenge quickly and single-mindedly.

Always remember that Othello is a stranger. Despite his strength and pride, he is never completely at home, and is constantly aware that others consider him a foreigner.

IAGO

What is Iago's motivation in ruining Othello's life? This question has puzzled readers and scholars for centuries. Iago is a fascinating, complex character who can't be analyzed in simple terms. Like many people you meet, Iago can be mysterious and baffling. Just when you think you understand him, he does or says something completely mystifying. Shakespeare was obviously fascinated by the man- he gave Iago more lines than any other character in his work- more than Hamlet, King Lear, or Othello.

Here are some of the facts we know about Iago: He is a 28-year-old Venetian who is Othello's "ancient" or "ensign," a comparatively low-ranked commissioned officer. He seems to have no history of dirty deeds; in fact, almost every character in the play calls him "honest." (The word is applied to Iago 15 times in the

play.) He's married to Emilia, a salty outspoken woman; they seem to tolerate each other. If theirs was a love match, we're never told, and it's difficult to guess.

Let's look at some possibilities that might explain Iago's behavior.

1. He loves evil for evil's sake. Some characters in Elizabethan drama are just thoroughly bad; they were born that way. From this point of view, Iago needs no motive. He simply loves to see people suffer.

2. He is motivated by jealousy. In the play he expresses openly his jealousy of Cassio and Othello. He is jealous of Cassio's job and of Othello's success as a soldier and with Desdemona.

3. He is seeking revenge. The rumors that Othello has slept with Emilia and the possibility that Cassio has also slept with her hurt Iago's pride and make him want to see both men ruined.

4. He is motivated by a force he simply doesn't understand. The reasons he offers throughout the play are often contradictory. Iago snatches at whatever excuse he can to justify his horrible behavior.

As you look over the text, try to decide which of these (or other) reasons explain Iago. Remember that his motives may overlap. If there were a simple way to explain Iago, he wouldn't be the intriguing character that has appalled and thrilled audiences for hundreds of years.

Iago does have qualities on which everyone can agree. Here are some of them:

1. He is a wonderful actor. For years, he has fooled everyone into thinking he's honest. Even if Emilia suspects him of being a rascal, she has no idea that he's truly evil. You've seen newspaper reports about the mild-mannered person who suddenly is discovered to be a mass murderer; neighbors who are interviewed often say, "He was the nicest person, so polite and friendly! I can't believe he was capable of such a crime!" Friends of Iago would have said the same thing about him.

2. He is amoral. An amoral person has no moral standards at all. Iago never thinks twice about his behavior. He plunges ahead without a twinge of guilt or regret. Even when the innocent

Desdemona becomes a victim of the plot, Iago has no pangs of conscience. He moves to satisfy himself, no matter who suffers. And he goes to his death without a word of regret!

3. He is highly intelligent. Iago plots his actions knowing how everyone will respond. His insight into the behavior of others is practically perfect; he can adapt himself to the personality of whomever he is with- from Roderigo to Desdemona to Cassio to Othello, knowing just how to "play" him or her. Ironically, the one person he misreads is Emilia; he doesn't suspect her loyalty to Desdemona outweighs her feelings for him.

4. He is an egotist. His opinion of everyone except himself is very low. He laughs at Othello's trusting nature, thinks Roderigo is a gullible fool, treats Emilia as a shrew, and scorns Cassio's honest virtues. The only person he respects is himself, and everything he does in the play is for the satisfaction of his own ego.

5. He is a cynic. He shows contempt for all conventional standards of decency. He is loyal only when it serves his own needs. He delights in dishonesty. He doesn't believe in romantic love, attributing it to a sexual itch. His opinion of the human race is so low that he allows innocent people to die without a word of regret.

6. He is extremely proud. Suspicions that Othello has slept with Emilia eat away at him. Othello's appointment of Cassio makes him furious. Iago sees anything that threatens his self-esteem as a personal insult, which must be avenged. He isn't angered by the thought of Othello in bed with Emilia because he loves her, but because another man has gotten the best of him!

Villains in literature are always a source of scary fun. Shakespeare, fortunately, has created in Iago more than just a villain. Iago is a complex character who combines enormous intelligence with an impulse to see others suffer. We may get a vicarious thrill as we watch him operate, but feel a great sense of relief when justice is finally served.

DESDEMONA

As a young Venetian woman, Desdemona has lived a sheltered life in her father's home. She falls in love, probably for the first time, with a man several years older than herself, from a faraway land, and of a different race. She's captivated by the man's stories and wishes she were a man so that she might also have an exciting life. Knowing that her father would disapprove of her marriage to such a man, she elopes with Othello and goes with him to the war zone.

Desdemona's portrait is that of a lovely, courageous, gentle woman, deeply in love with her husband. Is she a perfect character, free from flaws?

Most Elizabethans wouldn't have thought so. They would have seen her as disobedient and disrespectful. A nice young lady simply didn't marry behind her father's back. They would have shared Brabantio's disapproval of her marriage to a man of a different class, age, and race. And when Desdemona pleads with Othello to reinstate Cassio, Elizabethans would have considered her a pushy, interfering wife.

This is not to say that Shakespeare's audiences weren't moved by Desdemona's death. It's just that their opinion of her was influenced by social customs no longer current. Today, her behavior toward Brabantio, though perhaps insensitive, is forgivable; her begging Othello, even if it comes close to nagging, is hardly a major flaw.

If Iago represents evil in the world, Desdemona may represent the good that evil often destroys. She is guilty only of loving her husband too much. She has no defense against his terrible accusations because she is young and inexperienced. There's been no room in her cloistered world for the kind of thoughts Othello thinks she is hiding. She doesn't even believe that there are women who are unfaithful to their husbands!

If you look at what other characters say about Desdemona, you'll find that everyone praises her innocence, her goodness, her generosity. She risks her husband's anger because she promised Cassio she would help him. Desdemona inspires such devotion in Emilia that she is prepared to die for her. Even on her deathbed, she won't betray her husband. Rather than have him accused of the murder, she takes responsibility for it.

Is Desdemona a believable character? Is there anyone who can be so self-sacrificing? Shakespeare is careful to give her a few minor flaws- her treatment of Brabantio, her stubborn persistence about Cassio, her lie about the handkerchief- to make her realistic. But our overall impression of her is highly favorable; it's her very innocence that makes her a victim of circumstance. How could such a person know about or prepare herself for the likes of Iago?

CASSIO

Cassio is an attractive, likeable young man who seems to be a good choice for Othello's lieutenant. He's loyal to Othello, and is crushed when he errs and Othello fires him. It is partly Cassio's determination to make things right with Othello that allows Iago to succeed: Cassio tries to win Othello's favor by going through Desdemona: it's this friendship Iago misrepresents to Othello.

Cassio has many youthful faults: he's rash, impatient, and not very serious about his relationship with Bianca. He also can't handle his liquor. Yet the offenses Iago suspects him of- sleeping with Emilia, having an affair with Desdemona- are all in Iago's mind.

The innocent Cassio almost becomes a victim of Iago's treachery. Roderigo and Iago almost succeed in killing him. At the end of the play, however, Cassio is awarded control of Cyprus, and we believe that the island is in good hands. His survival tells us that order and decency will survive, despite the price that has been paid.

EMILIA

It's astonishing how quickly our opinion of Emilia changes. When she first appears, she seems little more than coarse, hard-edged, and world-weary. Her opinion of men is very low- after all, she says, it's owing to men's faults that women cheat on them as much as they do.

We're also distressed when Emilia finds Desdemona's handkerchief and doesn't return it to her. She's merely following Iago's instructions, and can't know what he has in mind, but still, she's being dishonest.

However, she redeems herself when she discovers Desdemona near death. Emilia's grief and her willingness to die for the truth tell you that her rough exterior has hidden a good and generous heart (at least where Desdemona is concerned). As one critic said about Emilia's last moments: "If she lived forever she never could soar a higher pitch, and nothing in her life became her like the losing it."

RODERIGO

Does Roderigo fall into Othello's clutches because he's foolish or because he's unlucky?

This is a difficult question to answer. All we know of Roderigo's past is that Desdemona rejected him when he tried to court her.

There's no question that Roderigo makes some stupid assumptions: 1) that he can "buy" Desdemona; 2) that she is having an affair with Cassio just because Iago tells him it is true; 3) that killing Cassio will make Desdemona turn to him for love. We

watch Roderigo with amazement. We wonder when he's going to realize that Desdemona doesn't love him and never will.

But, in his defense, Roderigo may be just unlucky to have fallen into Iago's clutches. As we know, Iago is a master manipulator. He is able to deceive people who are stronger and smarter than Roderigo. And remember that Roderigo is a man in love and particularly susceptible to being fooled. If you've ever had a crush on someone, you know that people in love don't always think clearly. As Iago convinces him there is hope with Desdemona, Roderigo will do anything he asks. He's that fixated on her.

Do you have sympathy for Roderigo when he's killed? On one hand, he's played a role in Iago's wicked plot. On the other hand, he dies because he was fooled by someone he trusted. Is Roderigo punished too harshly for his failure to see that Iago is wicked?

BRABANTIO

Brabantio, Desdemona's father, is a Venetian Senator. When we first meet him, he's terrified that his only child has been kidnapped by Othello and seduced with drugs and potions. When he learns that Desdemona's in love with the Moor, he's bitter and resentful. He accepts defeat, but not graciously: he won't allow Desdemona to stay in his house while Othello is in Cyprus, and he warns the Moor that Desdemona could betray her husband if she betrayed her father.

Yet Brabantio is not a villain. He's disappointed when his daughter marries a man so different from herself, and hurt when she does so behind his back. So wounded is he by Desdemona, that when he dies in Act V it's probably of a broken heart.

OTHER ELEMENTS

SETTING

It's not surprising that Shakespeare chose Venice as the setting of a story filled with passion, jealousy, and sexual tension. For the Elizabethans, the Italians were a wicked people, living lives of treachery, murder, and loose morals. When playwrights of the day wanted to portray wickedness, they often created Italian characters causing problems in England, or set the plays in Italy.

Venice was particularly exciting to the English. The women there were rumored to be very beautiful, and very interested in making love. Venetian men were considered hot-tempered,

aggressive, and easily jealous. An Elizabethan audience watching Othello would have been highly suspicious of Desdemona and her behavior. Running off to get married behind your father's back was simply not done. Because Desdemona was Venetian, however, audiences wouldn't have been too surprised. As for Iago, he probably represented the kind of villain Elizabethans thought ran rampant throughout Italy!

One interesting note is that the name Iago is Spanish. (The Italian form is Giacomo.) Shakespeare gave his most evil character a Spanish name, probably because Spain was England's worst enemy. Italy may have been the home of romantic, exotic sin, but true evil, according to the Elizabethans, came from Spain!

THEMES

The major themes of Othello are 1) appearance and reality, 2) society's treatment of the outsider; and 3) jealousy.

APPEARANCE AND REALITY

Can we ever know the truth about a person? Is it possible to know if someone is lying to us? How can we discover what lies behind the words someone tells us?

Shakespeare was fascinated with these questions. Many of his most evil characters were thought by others in the play to be sincere and truthful. In Othello, this theme has its most potent and dramatic realization in the character of Iago.

Iago fools everyone in the play into believing he's honest. No one even suspects him of treachery, until the final act when Roderigo first realizes how badly he's been fooled. In short, Iago proves that evil intentions can be masked behind a facade of honesty.

The theme emerges in other characters: Brabantio is deceived by Desdemona's reaction to Othello, assuming she fears him when she truly loves the Moor. Othello suspects that Desdemona is unfaithful, despite her innocent looks. Othello also feels he's being deceived by Cassio, whom he trusts and who appears loyal. Emilia's exterior suggests salty indifference, but she turns against her husband and dies in defence of Desdemona. Even Bianca, who is suspected of dishonesty, is ultimately seen as a sincere and caring woman. And Othello, considered a barbarian by many in the play, is gentle and noble until driven to near-madness by the cruel manipulations of his most trusted "friend."

The inability to judge true from false is a human dilemma that we have all faced. In Othello's case, the dilemma proves fatal. Shakespeare dramatizes the problem by showing the consequences of trusting someone whose mask of honesty is perfect, almost to the very last.

SOCIETY'S TREATMENT OF THE OUTSIDER

Everyone has known the feeling of being alienated from a group, whether it's as the new kid at school, as a member of an ethnic or religious minority, or as someone who holds an unpopular opinion.

Shakespeare presents that problem in Othello by making his hero an outsider, one who doesn't quite belong in the society in which he lives. From the very beginning, when he's held in suspicion by a man who accuses him of seducing his daughter with mysterious charms, Othello stands apart from everyone else. As a man of another race and from another country, much of the conflict he faces is due to the reigning opinion that he doesn't quite belong.

Othello's sensitivity to the issue becomes clear when Iago uses it as proof that Desdemona couldn't be faithful to a man so foreign- such a match is "unnatural," he says. Othello's self-confidence, once so strong, is easily eroded by Iago's ability to convince him that he's inferior to the men of Venice. Shakespeare dramatizes through Othello the tragedy of a man whose insecurities about his background, fed by public opinion, weaken his defenses and allow his worst instincts to take over.

JEALOUSY

Othello represents how jealousy, particularly sexual jealousy, is one of the most corrupting and destructive of emotions. It is jealousy (fed by his innate sense of evil) that prompts Iago to plot Othello's downfall; jealousy, too, is the tool that Iago uses to arouse Othello's passions. Roderigo and Bianca demonstrate jealousy at various times in the play, and Emilia demonstrates that she too knows the emotion well. Only Desdemona and Cassio, the true innocents of the story, seem beyond its clutches.

Shakespeare used the theme in other plays, but nowhere else is it portrayed as quite the "green-eyed" monster it is in this play. Since it is an emotion that everyone shares, we watch its destructive influence on the characters with sympathy and horror.

STYLE

Not only was Shakespeare one of the greatest dramatists who ever lived, he was one of the greatest poets as well. His language is so extraordinary that his verse has helped define standards for English poetry for the past three centuries.

In Othello, poetry not only defines character, but it also represents Othello's decline from nobility to corruption and his reascent to nobility.

Many readers point to Othello's speeches before the Venetian Senate (Act 1, Scene iii) as proof that he is worthy of our respect. His defense of his love for Desdemona is spoken with such heartfelt simplicity that we know the language represents a gentle and generous soul:

My story being done,
She gave me for my pains a world of sighs.
She swore, in faith, 'twas strange, 'twas passing strange;
'Twas pitiful, 'twas wondrous pitiful.
Act I, Scene iii, lines 174-177

She loved me for the dangers I had passed,
And I loved her that she did pity them.
Act I, Scene iii, lines 184-185

Compare Othello's speeches to those of Iago in Act I. In comparison to the Moor, Iago is coarse and foul-mouthed as he tries to turn Brabantio against Othello:

Even now, now, very now, an old black ram
Is tupping your white ewe. Arise, arise!
Awake the snorting citizens with the bell,
Or else the devil will make a grandsire of you.
Act I, Scene i, lines 96-99

It's been suggested that Iago needn't look any further than his own dirty mind and nasty mouth to discover why Othello chose someone else as his lieutenant.

As the play progresses, and as Othello becomes more and more Iago's victim, he begins to lose the poetic gift that blessed him earlier. As evidence that Iago is ruining him, Othello begins to use the animal images that are typical of Iago's speech. These are generally images of common or repulsive animals- flies, baboons, goats, monkeys, wolves, wildcats, etc.

Othello also begins to take on Iago's fondness for references to the demonic- hell, the devil, damnation. Iago admits allegiance to Hell in Act I, scene iii, line 421, and by Act V, Scene ii, Othello realizes that he, too, is damned. He looks on Desdemona's corpse and says:

This look of thine will hurl my soul from heaven
And fiends will snatch at it.
Act V, Scene ii, lines 321-322

There are other patterns of imagery that recur throughout the play. In addition to animal and demonic imagery, look for these images as you read: black and white, light and dark, witchcraft, the sea (especially as used by Iago and Othello), drugs and poisons, and sex.

The richness of Shakespeare's poetry is only partly represented by its imagery. The sounds of the words themselves and the metrical rhythms (the patterns created by the contrast of stressed and unstressed syllables) create their own music. Remember that Shakespeare wrote his plays to be heard, not read. The greatest enjoyment of his incomparable poetry comes with reading it aloud or hearing it performed, on stage or on a recording.

POINT OF VIEW

When you read a novel or short story, you're generally guided by a narrator who tells the story. As the story unfolds, the narrator might offer opinions or judgments on the characters and their behavior, letting the reader know how to respond. This is not always the case: some narrators are so unobtrusive that they're almost invisible. But there is always a narrator (or group of them) in prose fiction, and even if they are not readily identifiable, they give the story shape and tone.

In drama, narrators are only used in special instances (such as Thornton Wilder's Our Town, in which one of the characters acts as a narrator). Usually, everything we learn about the people and events in a play comes from the characters' words and deeds. Rather than furnish one point of view, a play offers us several as the characters live their lives onstage.

In Othello, Shakespeare stands back and lets us make up our minds about the characters' words and behavior. We watch and listen and decide for ourselves if Iago is evil or justifiably angry at

Othello, if Othello himself is worthy of our admiration. No narrative voice tells us how to judge the characters in Othello.

Shakespeare's special genius was his ability to embrace so many points of view in his plays, from those of tailors and peasants to those of soldiers and queens. There can be no final word on his great characters because they are as complex and mysterious as real people. In a great play like Othello, there will always be controversies surrounding the characters' motivations and behavior. A play that gives you all the answers is one you're likely to forget soon after you've seen or read it once. We return to Shakespeare's plays again and again because his point of view on the human condition was so large, so inclusive.

FORM AND STRUCTURE

Othello is often considered Shakespeare's most perfectly constructed play. It is tightly organized, fast-paced, and exciting, and never distracts the audience with sub-plots or superfluous characters.

Shakespeare created his plays according to a classic structure based on exposition, rising action, climax, falling action, and resolution or denouement. In a well-structured play, the elements are not independent of one another; they blend logically and inevitably.

Here are the classic structure elements as they apply to Othello:

EXPOSITION

Expository scenes introduce the characters and their relationships to one another. Much of Othello's first act is devoted to exposition of Iago's hatred of Othello, Othello and Desdemona's courtship and elopement, Brabantio's mistrust of Othello, and the impending war with the Turks. Exposition sets the scene.

RISING ACTION

As the characters make moves and countermoves, the plot is propelled forward and conflicts intensify. In Act II, Iago is responsible for most of the rising action. He plans to work revenge against Othello through Cassio. To this end, he gets Cassio drunk, for which Othello fires him. Iago then convinces Cassio to seek Desdemona's help in winning back Othello's respect. Everything, as controlled by Iago's actions, leads inevitably to the climax.

CLIMAX

This is the point of greatest excitement and suspense in the play. In Shakespeare, the climax always occurs in Act III. The climax represents the point when the conflicts have gone as far as possible. Some readers refer to this point as a knotting up of the conflicts. How will the knots be untangled?

The climax of Othello comes in Act III, scene iii when Iago succeeds in convincing Othello that Desdemona is guilty of adultery. By the end of the scene, Othello has vowed to kill his wife. The tension is nearly unbearable. What will happen? How will it end?

FALLING ACTION

In Act IV of Othello, we see what happens as a result of the knotting in the climax. Although there is a period in which we think- and hope- that Othello will learn the truth, the death of Desdemona is inevitable. Iago's hold on Othello is so strong that Othello can't be moved from his mission of murder.

CONCLUSION OR DENOUEMENT

This is the unknotting of the plot threads that got tangled in the first four acts. After Desdemona's death, there is a great deal that has to be resolved: Emilia's discovery of Iago's treachery, her death, Othello's realization of his horrible deception, his suicide, Iago's punishment, and the restoration of order by Lodovico. Evil has been conquered and goodness regained, but the price was terribly high.

TRAGEDY AND TRAGIC FLAW

The principles of tragedy were set down in the 4th century B.C. by the Greek philosopher Aristotle in his seminal work on literature, The Poetics. For Aristotle, a tragedy is the story of a noble hero whose downfall is brought about by a specific defect in his character, a tragic flaw. The hero may face opposition from an outside force (such as Othello faces from Iago), but his ruin is really the result of his own mistakes. By the end of the play the tragic hero comes to some understanding of his error and accepts responsibility for his doom. The realization and acceptance of his fate brings him back to the state of spiritual nobility he had at the beginning of the play.

Shakespeare's heros are usually men of royalty: Lear and Macbeth are kings, Hamlet a prince. Othello, although of royal birth,

is a general. Some readers have felt that his lower social position disqualifies him from being a true tragic hero. Others feel that Othello earns the title through his character traits: strength, courage, patience, gentleness, and romanticism. He is admired by everyone in the play (even Iago admits that Othello is a good man). Othello is considered by many to be a more human hero than other Shakespearean tragic heroes. Some readers find it easier to identify with someone closer to the common man and empathize more readily with his problems.

Aristotle felt that identification with the tragic hero was essential. As we watch a great man ruined by his own flaw- ambition, greed, or pride, for example- we understand that he is human, as we are, and that we could suffer the same fate under similar circumstances. According to Aristotle, our responses should be pity and fear: pity for the man who has met such a horrible fate, and fear that the same could happen to us. Yet because these men recognize their own part in their ruin and because their better qualities eventually overcome their limitations, we feel uplifted and moved by their experience rather than defeated and depressed.

OTHELLO'S TRAGIC FLAW

What is it that causes Othello's downfall? Some have said that he's simply a jealous person whose jealousy of his wife gets out of hand, Others insist that jealousy is not part of his natural make-up, that the emotion takes over only when Iago pushes him to the brink of insanity.

Most of the evidence in the play tends to support the latter interpretation. Othello doesn't show himself to be jealous early in the play. Manipulated by Iago's skillful lies, Othello must confront emotions he can't handle. His jealousy literally drives him mad. His wisdom and judgment are replaced by anger and hate, and the power of these destructive emotions leads to Desdemona's death and Othello's suicide.

CRITICS

The most striking difference between 'Othello' and Shakespeare's other tragedies is its more intimate scale. The terror of the supernatural is not invoked, as it is in 'Hamlet' and 'Macbeth'; extremes of psychological derangement, as 'King Lear', are not presented. Kingdoms are not as stake, and the political consequences of the action are not emphasized as they are in

varying degrees in all of the other tragedies. Here, Shakespeare focuses on personal rather than public life; Othello's plunge into obsession occurs mostly in private – only he and Iago know it is happening – and he murders Desdamona in the seclusion of their bedroom. The play has been described as a domestic comedy gone wrong. Its tragedy lies in the destruction of the happy personal lives of the general and his bride by the preserve malice of a single unsatisfied man. Yet Othello is profoundly social, for the human quality that Iago lacks and that he destroys in Othello is trust, the cement that holds people together. Jealousy, the play's central motif, is simply a particularly virulent form of interpersonal distrust. The tragedy of 'Othello' is that a noble man loses faith and is reduced to a bestial frenzy. As a result, a love and a life are destroyed, and this loss inspires horror in the audience, which, combined with our pity for Desdemona, gives the play tremendous power. Significantly, 'Othello' stands out as one of Shakespeare's plays that has been altered very little over the centuries by its producers, for its capacity to overwhelm audiences has always been recognized.

The central dynamic in 'Othello' is the hero's change in attitude towards Desdamona. At first the couple are happily matched; when they defend their elopement, in 1.3, they establish themselves as mature lovers whose passions is both spiritual and sexual, mutually satisfying and based on self-knowledge. But Othello's weakness destroys his happiness, as his trust in his wife turns to jealousy and then murderous hatred under the influence of Iago. On the other hand, his trust in his aide never flags until he is finally exposed. Othello comes to see love through Iago's eyes rather than Desdamona's. In a sense, Iago and Desdamona represent internalised features of the hero: he rejects his loving and generous self – that aspect of humanity that makes society possible – in favour of the dark passions of his self-centered ego. In the end, the forces of trust and love regain their strength as Othello finally recognizes the goodness of Desdamona, and Iago is formally condemned, but in the meantime the action of the play has demonstrated the power of evil.

The motif of trust destroyed dominates the interactions of Iago and Othello on one hand and Othello and Desdamona on the other. Othello is placed between Iago – who cannot rust or love – and Desdamona – who offers an ideal, unconditional love. This situation closely resembles the traditional MORALITY PLAY, whose central character, usually symbolic of the human soul, is placed

between an angel and a devil who each demand his loyalty. This dramatic form was still familiar to Shakespeare and his audfience, and 'Othello' reflects it in its distinctly allegorical quality. Iago is associated with the devil several times, and Desdamona – in her martylike acceptance of her entirely undeserved end – may be seen as a symbol of Christian love and resignation to the will of God.

-Charles Boyce, From *Othello* Commentary,
Dictionary of Shakespeare, 1996

THE CRITICS ON OTHELLO'S RACE

Shakespeare was not trying in Othello to emphasize any racial differences between the hero and the heroine, though the differences in their background provide Iago with plausible suggestions for Desdemona's alleged disaffection.... When enemies of Othello want to abuse him, they speak opprobriously of his alien looks and wonder that Desdemona could love so strange a man, but that is part of the reality of the characterization, not a hint on Shakespeare's part of "racism." The unhappy times when men would read some suggestion of racial prejudice into every piece of literature concerned with alien characters lay some centuries ahead.

-Louis B. Wright and Virginia A. LaMar
"The Significance of Othello," 1957

The most important feature of Othello is the colour of the hero's skin. This is superficially obvious enough, but most critics have avoided treating Othello's colour as the essence of the play for two good reasons: first that it is unhistorical to suppose that 'colour', as we understand the term, had much meaning for the Elizabethans or early Jacobeans; and second, that to interpret Othello as a play about race would be like saying that Henry VI is a play about fatness.... [With Elizabethan audiences] the unfamiliarity of the colour-problem would even tend to increase its impact: marriage between Othello and Desdemona must have been very startling to an audience that had never seen a coloured boy walking out with a white girl. Professor Dover Wilson goes further and says: "If anyone imagines that England at that date was unconscious of the 'colour-bar,' they cannot have read Othello with any care."

-G. M. Matthews, "Othello and the Dignity of Man" 1971

ON OTHELLO

...Shakespeare has shown us that his hero is not as strong or as good a man as he thinks he is, that the hero's flaw is his

refusal to face the reality of his own nature. This Othello, who (I think) is the Othello Shakespeare intended to convey, is rather different from the modern Othello, who is always thoroughly noble- before, during, and after his downfall... It is not the hero's nobility in Shakespeare's tragedies, but the flaw, the sin or error that all flesh is heir to, that destroys him. It is the close interweaving of great man, mere man, and base man that makes of Othello the peculiarly powerful and mysterious figure he is. In him Shakespeare shows the possible greatness, the possible baseness not only closely allied in what is after all mere man but also so casually connected that one must perforce wonder and weep.

-Leo Kirschbaum, "The Modern Othello"
From Shakespeare and His Critics, 1961

ON THE WOMEN IN OTHELLO

[The male characters'] vanity, their preoccupation with rank and reputation, and their cowardice render them as incapable of friendship as they are in love.... The women, in contrast, are indifferent to reputation and partially free of vanity, jealousy, and competitiveness. Desdemona's unwillingness 'to incur a general mock' is evident in her elopement and her defense of it, and her request to go to Cyprus. Emilia braves scorn to defend her mistress.... If Cassio's description of Bianca corresponds at all to fact, she too ignores reputation, comically, to pursue him.

-Carol Thomas Neely, "Women and Men in Othello," 1980

ON THE USE OF THE "DOUBLE CLOCK"

Shakespeare... is not essentially concerned with time and the calendar at all. These, as with the actor and his behavior... must be given plausibility. But the play's essential action lies in the processes of thought and feeling by which the characters are moved and the story is forwarded. And the deeper the springs of these the less do time, place and circumstance affect them. His imagination is now concerned with fundamental passions, and its swift working demands unencumbered expression. He may falsify the calendar for his convenience, but we shall find neither trickery nor anomaly in the fighting of the intellectual battle for Othello's soul. And in the light of the truth of this the rest will pass unnoticed.

-Harley Granville-Barker,
Prefaces to Shakespeare, 1946

ON IAGO

Iago stands supreme among Shakespeare's evil characters because the greatest intensity and subtlety of imagination have gone to his making, and because he illustrates in the most perfect combination the two facts concerning evil which seem to have impressed Shakespeare most. The first of these is the fact that perfectly sane people exist in whom fellow-feeling of any kind is so weak that an almost absolute egoism becomes possible to them, and with it those hard vices- such as ingratitude and cruelty- which to Shakespeare were far the worst. The second is that such evil is compatible, and even appears to ally itself easily, with exceptional powers of will and intellect.

-A. C. Bradley, Shakespearean Tragedy, 1905

ROMEO AND JULIET

1596

INTRODUCTION

There have always been lovers, and we've always loved hearing stories about them. Although it's about 400 years old, Romeo and Juliet is one of the most popular stories ever told. It's got all the right ingredients: teenagers sharing forbidden love, their witty friends and troublesome parents, fights, parties, murders, and nights of love.

Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet tells us a lot about human nature. It also tells us about the society and times in which it was written; and about the passionate, spirited, witty young man who wrote it.

The story was popular in England before Shakespeare made it into a play in 1596. The central problem in Romeo and Juliet is a deadly feud between two powerful families. The English had been involved in a deadly feud for years. This one wasn't between powerful families, but within England's royal family.

Elizabeth I was Queen when Shakespeare wrote this play. Her father, Henry VIII, had left the Roman Catholic Church to found the Church of England, usually considered to be a Protestant denomination. When he died, his oldest daughter Mary, who was a Catholic, eventually became Queen. She persecuted and killed members of the Church of England with the same zeal that Henry had used against Catholics. When Mary died, her Protestant sister Elizabeth became Queen. This violent tug of war left its mark on the country. The English had seen how feuding in one family had divided a country and caused thousands of deaths. Even though Elizabeth tried to be nonviolent and tolerant of Catholics, her Catholic cousin Mary, Queen of Scots, tried to start a civil war and take the throne. Elizabeth had Mary beheaded only nine years before Shakespeare wrote Romeo and Juliet.

Even today in Ireland, Juliet and Romeo could be Catholic and Protestant rather than Capulet and Montague. For the English of Shakespeare's day, the play was that immediate.

Both the Protestants and Catholics of that time had a very strong feeling that God ordered the universe in a specific way. When something evil, like the feud among the Capulets and Montagues, broke the laws of this order, that evil had to be

checked. In Romeo and Juliet, two innocent lives must be sacrificed to restore order.

London, like Verona in the story, was a thriving, busy city. Because it was crowded and walled in, violence could spread quickly. Public fights were considered a serious offense. Londoners would have judged the Capulets' and Montagues' street fights very harshly.

Politics aside, London was a good place to live in the 1590s. Europe was in the middle of the Renaissance, which refers to the "rebirth" of learning. Some of this exciting spirit had reached London, England's capital and cultural center. Here, Elizabeth had her royal court; here, musicians, actors, poets, and painters came to learn and work. Many young artists left their small towns for the cultural Mecca of London, and William Shakespeare was one of them.

Who was this country boy who turned the moral fable of Romeo and Juliet into a hot-blooded story of passion, love, hate, comedy, revenge, and murder?

No biographies of Shakespeare were written during his lifetime. But what we can't learn about him from public records in his hometown of Stratford-on-Avon, we can fill in by reading his plays and poems.

There are many reasons the story of Romeo and Juliet could have appealed to the 32-year-old Shakespeare. He was apparently familiar with feelings of passion and forbidden love. When he was only 19, he quickly married Anne Hathaway, who was three months pregnant. Anne was eight years older than he, uneducated, and the daughter of a poor farmer who lived outside Stratford. She was probably not the match that John Shakespeare would have chosen for William, who was his oldest son.

In Romeo and Juliet, Lord Capulet is quite a social climber, and so was Shakespeare's father. John Shakespeare was born to a family of tenant farmers, but he wanted to be rich. He married the daughter of his family's wealthy landlord, and moved into the small city of Stratford to start a business. In the play, Lord Capulet is determined that Juliet will marry Paris, a wealthy young man from a higher social class.

William went to school in Stratford, where he studied literature and learned Latin. But he probably learned how to speak like someone from the upper class from his mother, Mary. The main characters in Romeo and Juliet (and many of his other plays) have the proper speech of the gentry. Mary Shakespeare came from a

Catholic family of landowners. Although it was illegal to be Catholic, it seems she taught William to respect her religion. Shakespeare was the only playwright of his day to treat Catholic characters, like Friar Lawrence, with respect.

After William and Anne's marriage, the young couple probably moved in with his parents and five younger brothers and sisters. Their daughter Susanna was born six months later, and two years later they had twins named Hamnet and Judith.

Soon after this, William left Stratford under mysterious circumstances. There is a legend that he was forced to flee Stratford (much as Romeo fled Verona) because he was caught poaching on a private estate.

Whatever the case, he left his family and went to live in London. He became a well-known actor and playwright. By the time he wrote Romeo and Juliet, he had already written six very successful plays- and he was only at the beginning of his career!

In those days, poets were more respected than playwrights, and so Shakespeare decided to take time out and make a name for himself as a poet. He was a success. His two long Romantic poems, The Rape of Lucrece and Venus and Adonis, became bestsellers. He then experimented with other popular poetic forms, such as sonnets. Soon after this, he wrote Romeo and Juliet. The storyline is similar to the stories of the Romantic poems he had just written. And he wrote sonnets and other kinds of poems right into the dialogue of the play!

We don't know if William and Anne had a happy marriage, but we do know that Shakespeare loved his children. It's interesting to note that he made Juliet 13 years old- the same age at the time as his daughter Susanna. Shakespeare could also understand the Capulets' and Montagues' grief over their childrens' deaths. Shakespeare's only son, Hamnet, died the year he wrote the play.

Romeo and Juliet was a hit from the beginning. That very year, Shakespeare was rich enough to buy his money-conscious father a family coat of arms. His father, who once thought William, was a rebellious young man, now called him "the best of the family." Legend has it that he told his customers that William got from him the earthy humor that he put into Mercutio and the Nurse. Wherever Shakespeare's talent came from, it makes Romeo and Juliet moving and unforgettable.

THE PLOT

It's a hot July Sunday in Verona, and we find the servants of the Capulets out looking for trouble. What better way to start something, they figure, than to insult the servants of their masters' old enemies the Montagues? The plan works, and before long servants, friends, relatives- and, finally, Lord Capulet and Lord Montague themselves- are at each other's throats. Verona's Prince Escalus has to personally break up the fight, and he isn't happy about it. He heavily fines both families and warns them that if they fight in the streets again, they'll face the death penalty.

Lord and Lady Montague are glad their son Romeo wasn't involved in the brawl, but they're worried about him anyway. They ask Benvolio, Romeo's cousin and best friend, why Romeo has been off by himself so much lately, and Benvolio soon finds out: Romeo is in love. But the object of Romeo's affections, a gorgeous girl named Rosaline, couldn't care less, and Romeo is nursing his grief. To cheer him up, Benvolio suggests that they disguise themselves and secretly attend the Capulets' ball that night. Rosaline will be there, and Benvolio promises to find Romeo a girl who will make Rosaline seem like a crow in comparison. Romeo has a sudden, mysterious feeling of danger, but agrees to go along with Benvolio and their witty friend Mercutio.

Meanwhile, excitement is high at the Capulets' house. Not only are they preparing for a big party, but Count Paris- a relative to the Prince, and Verona's most eligible bachelor- has come to ask Lord Capulet if he can marry his only daughter, Juliet. Capulet claims that Juliet is too young to be married yet, but he's obviously thrilled. Thirteen-year-old Juliet is beautiful and full of life. She's never been in love, and she promises to do her best to like Paris when she meets him at the dance.

But that night, Juliet meets Romeo, and suddenly Paris and Rosaline are forgotten. The two see each other across the room, meet, and by the time they kiss, they are madly in love. But all is not well. Tybalt, Juliet's quick-tempered cousin, recognizes Romeo. Tybalt thinks this Montague's gatecrashing is a terrible insult, and he vows revenge.

Only after the evening is over do Romeo and Juliet separately discover the identity of their new loves.

After the party, Romeo hides from his noisy friends and unexpectedly finds himself in an orchard beneath Juliet's window. In

the romantic and sexy balcony scene, Romeo and Juliet joyfully swear their love for each other, and decide to marry in secret.

Friar Lawrence, a Franciscan monk and father figure to Romeo, is very worried about the suddenness of their passion. He finally agrees to marry them, hoping that their wedding will eventually end the bloody fighting between their families.

The couples' secret world of love is soon shattered. Fresh from the wedding, Romeo finds Mercutio and Benvolio with Tybalt, who has come looking for revenge. Tybalt calls Romeo a villain and dares him to fight, but Romeo refuses. He calls Tybalt "cousin" and swears he loves the name Capulet as much as his own. Everyone is amazed at Romeo's refusal, and the hot-blooded Mercutio takes Tybalt's challenge instead. When Romeo rushes between them to stop the fight, Tybalt kills Mercutio.

Romeo is filled with guilt and outrage at his friend's death, and he runs, furious, to catch Tybalt. It's a battle of life and death, and Romeo wins. But as soon as Tybalt is dead, Romeo realizes the rashness of his act. "I am fortune's fool!" he cries as his friends hurry him off the streets into hiding.

Juliet is excitedly getting ready for her wedding night when her nurse brings her the bad news: her cousin Tybalt is dead, and Prince Escalus has banished Romeo from Verona. The girl is overcome by grief-for Tybalt, but mostly for her new husband. The Nurse finally tells her that Romeo is hiding in the Friar's cell. Some of Juliet's joy returns as they arrange for one stolen night of love before Romeo has to flee Verona.

Unfortunately, things go from bad to worse. Lord Capulet feels terrible about his family's grief over Tybalt- and Juliet seems to be more upset than anyone else. He quickly arranges something he thinks will make everyone feel better- Juliet's marriage, that very week, to Paris. Even as Lady Capulet comes to bring that news to Juliet on Tuesday morning, Juliet and Romeo are saying their heartbroken farewells.

What can Juliet do? Her desperate refusals to marry Parisinfuriate her parents. Her father threatens to disown her if she doesn't obey. Even her nurse, who knows the situation, suggests it might be best to marry the Count. With nowhere else to turn, Juliet runs to Friar Lawrence.

Their only hope is a risky plan. The friar gives Juliet a drug that will stop her breath and make her seem dead for 42 hours. During this time he will send for Romeo in Mantua, and Romeo and the Friar will be in the tomb when she wakes up. Romeo will take

her away with him, and the friar will try to calm everyone down, and announce their marriage so they can come back to live in Verona. Juliet eagerly takes the drink.

The next morning, when the Nurse comes to prepare Juliet for her wedding, she finds the seemingly lifeless girl. The Capulets' day of joy turns to sorrow, as their only daughter's wedding turns into her funeral instead.

Friar Lawrence has sent a message to Romeo, but unfortunately, the message-bearer is quarantined by the plague. Romeo's servant, Balthasar, is the first to reach Romeo, and he tells him the sad news that Juliet is dead. Romeo, beside himself with grief, buys poison and rides full-speed toward the Capulets' tomb. He arrives to find Paris mourning for Juliet, and when Paris refuses to let Romeo pass, the two men fight, and Romeo kills Paris. The Count's last request is to be buried with Juliet, and Romeo grants his wish. Inside the tomb, Romeo begs forgiveness of the newly dead Tybalt, but his attention is at once arrested by Juliet. He can't believe how beautiful she still is, and he vows to stay with his new bride eternally. He swallows the poison, and quickly dies.

Friar Lawrence hurries to the tomb to be there when Juliet wakes up. When he arrives, he finds Paris and Romeo dead. Juliet awakens just as Paris' servant is bringing the watchmen. She sees her dead lover, and refuses to leave the tomb, although Friar Lawrence panics and runs away. Juliet hears people coming, so she acts quickly: she grabs Romeo's dagger and stabs herself.

The tragic deaths of their two children unite the Capulets and Montagues in grief. The prince admonishes, "Heaven finds means to kill your joys with love." In death, rather than in life, the two lovers have brought peace to their families.

THE CHARACTERS

Romeo and Juliet is more than a story about love and tragic fate; it's a story about people. Shakespeare's characters are like all of us: they have strengths and weaknesses, a temper and a sense of humor. The plot doesn't just happen to them, it happens because of them. How each character thinks, and how he or she chooses to act determines what happens.

In Romeo and Juliet, there are two kinds of characters, maturing characters and static characters.

1. MATURING CHARACTERS

These characters cause events to happen because they grow and change through the course of the play. Instead of being set in their ways, they think things through and react differently to different situations.

Characters in this category understand the seriousness of Romeo and Juliet's situation, and are affected by it.

2. STATIC CHARACTERS

They don't change. These people force the play to end the way it does, simply by being themselves and acting the way we expect them to act.

MATURING CHARACTERS

JULIET

In Juliet, we watch something fascinating: a girl blossoming into a woman in the space of five days.

Before we watch this progression, let's look at some aspects of Juliet's character that stay the same.

1. SHE IS YOUNG

In the Italian version of this story, Juliet was 18; in Brooke's poem (the first English version) she was 16. Why does Shakespeare make her so young- "not yet fourteen"? In Shakespeare's day, it was legal for girls to marry at 12, but such early marriages were very rare.

Two possible reasons are: Shakespeare's daughter Susanna was about 13 when he wrote the play; and the English thought that Italian girls matured early. It is also possible that Shakespeare simply changed her age for dramatic reasons.

In any case, Juliet's age is a key to her character. She's innocent and full of hope. (This is not to say that she is naive. She couldn't live around her nurse without understanding sex, or live with her parents without seeing some of the realities and problems of marriage.) Because she's so young, we feel intense sympathy for her.

2. SHE IS BEAUTIFUL

Both Romeo and Paris fall in love with Juliet on sight alone. Before they're even introduced, Paris asks to marry her, and Romeo

is "bewitched by the charm of looks." Her beauty inspires some of Romeo's most famous poetry:

> *O, she doth teach the torches to burn bright!*
> *It seems she hangs upon the cheek of night*
> *As a rich jewel in an Ethiop's ear*
> *Beauty too rich for use, for earth too dear!*
> *(I, v, 46-49)*

Even in the tomb, he is amazed that "Death, that hath sucked the honey of thy breath / Hath had no power yet upon thy beauty." (V, iii, 92-95)

3. SHE IS PRACTICAL

In this couple, Romeo is the romantic one, and Juliet is the practical one. We can see this contrast in the balcony scene. Romeo is content to speak poetic words of love, while Juliet sets up the marriage and the time and means of communication. She prefers short statements to flowery promises, and her practical nature leads her to worry about the suddenness of their passion:

> *Although I joy in thee,*
> *I have no joy in this contract tonight.*
> *It is too rash, too unadvised, too sudden.*
> *(II, ii, 116-18)*

JULIET'S GROWTH

We first see Juliet like a child, surrounded by her nurse and her mother. She doesn't say much, and obediently, she says she'll try to like the man her parents wish her to marry. She hasn't seriously thought about her life as an adult: she says marriage is "an honor I dream not of."

But that night, she meets Romeo and falls in love, and everything changes. She begins to think and act for herself. By the end of the evening, she has taken her future into her own hands, and has become engaged.

We see at this point that she is practical but idealistic. She knows there are problems in the world, but she is confident that love can overcome them.

For Juliet, marriage and sexual awakening are the bridge between childhood and adulthood. Before her wedding night she sees herself standing between the experienced matron (married woman) she is to become and the impatient child she still feels like.

Juliet takes her adult role as a wife seriously. Even though she's still living at home, she gives her loyalty to Romeo over her family, even after he's killed her cousin.

At the beginning of the play, Juliet still minds her nurse, but by the end of the play she's outgrown her. Her nurse can't understand the seriousness of Juliet's predicament, and the young woman must make adult decisions by herself.

The best mark of Juliet's maturity is that she's strong enough to be true to herself and to Romeo, even though everyone is against it, and the cost is very high. She is no longer an obedient little girl, but a young woman who has taken charge of her own life. She feels she even holds the final card: "if all else fail, myself have power to die." (III, v, 343-45)

By the end of the play, she has come full circle from innocence to experience. Before she drinks the friar's potion, we see she understands that the evil in the world can hurt her. She realizes that the friar could have given her poison so that no one will find out he's married them; she realizes she could wake up in the tomb and suffocate, or she could go crazy.

Still, she chooses to have faith. She believes that the friar means her no harm, and she ultimately believes that her love for Romeo is strong enough to withstand death.

ROMEO

The same way that Juliet grows up, Romeo finds himself. Before we look at how he changes, let's look at the parts of his personality that remain constant.

1. HE IS LIKABLE

Everyone likes Romeo. Mercutio and Benvolio both want his attention, the Nurse thinks he's honest, courteous, kind, and handsome. His mother loves him so much that she dies of grief when he's banished; and even Lord Capulet calls him "a virtuous and well-governed youth" and refuses to let Tybalt bother him. Friar Lawrence loves Romeo so much that he'll do almost anything to secure his happiness. (The obvious exception to Romeo's admirers is Tybalt, and Romeo himself tells Tybalt, "Villain I am none... see thou knowest me not." [III, i, 65-66])

2. HE IS PASSIONATE

Romeo has the blessing and the curse of feeling things deeply. At the beginning of the play, he is despairing over his

unrequited love for Rosaline. He is able to give himself completely to his love for Juliet, and his only trouble comes when he gives in to "fire-eyed fury" after Mercutio is killed.

3. HE IS A GENTLEMAN

He's virtuous, honest, charming, and well mannered. He charms Juliet by reverently kissing her hand and calling her a saint; his manners win over the Nurse when she's upset by Mercutio. He is a gentleman to the end; he grants his rival's request to be buried with Juliet.

ROMEO'S GROWTH

Language is very important to Romeo. He talks while he thinks, verbally exploring the world. Because of this, we can use Romeo's growing skill with words to chart his progress throughout the play.

When we first see Romeo, he's in love with love. He has chosen a girl who'll never return his affection, and he spends more time groaning about how depressed he is than he does praising Rosaline. When he talks, he uses lots of cliches, and repeats himself. Of Rosaline, he says, "She is too fair, too wise, wisely too fair / To merit bliss by making me despair."

His mooning leaves him unable to act. Instead, he spends time wandering through trees or locked up in his room. This isn't like him, and his family is worried. He even says, rather proudly,

> *Tut! I have lost myself, I am not here;*
> *This is not Romeo, he's some other where.*
> *(I, i, 200-1)*

Then he meets Juliet and discovers his true self. Their love is so right that Romeo's speech is transformed to poetry. The first time they talk together, their conversation effortlessly forms a sonnet.

This new love makes him sure of himself straight through his wedding, and makes him strong enough to fight with Tybalt. Was it mature and honorable for him to avenge Tybalt's death, or was it rash and foolish? It can be argued both ways, and you'll need to look at the evidence to see which view you agree with.

In either case, by the time Romeo gets to Friar Lawrence's cell, he has lost himself, his maturity, and his ability to act. He thinks he has also lost Juliet by killing her cousin. Again, his speech

becomes repetitive. He's beyond comfort. This is much the way he was at the beginning of the play.

But when he hears that Juliet still loves him and wants him to come to her that night, he springs back to action. After his wedding night, he is more mature and more himself than before. We see that he's accepted his banishment and is willing to act on it; his words of love to Juliet as he leaves are breathtakingly beautiful. He's become a man of action, and he doesn't hesitate to act for the rest of the play.

It's a sad irony that Romeo is most himself in the tomb. At the time of his death, his words and his actions fit together perfectly. He tells us what has brought him to this point; he tells us what he's going to do and why his love for Juliet has transformed him from a boy who talks in cliches, to a man with a powerful command of speech. It's tragic that when his love is deepest, there will be no earthly use for it; when his speech is most mature, he will soon be silenced. He has found himself, only to kill himself. In his death, we watch the world lose a noble man.

FRIAR LAWRENCE (LAURENCE)

Some readers would call Friar Lawrence a maturing character, others would not.

There are several ways to look at Friar Lawrence, some more flattering than others. We'll look at three of these, but first let's look at the basic facts about him.

1. HE IS CATHOLIC

Remember that when Shakespeare wrote Romeo and Juliet, England was a Protestant country. Many other writers of the time made fun of Catholics in their plays, but Friar Lawrence is treated respectfully, and has virtues and faults like everyone else. He's a member of the Franciscan order, which was started by St. Francis of Assisi.

2. HE MEANS WELL

Throughout the play, many people come to him for advice, and he does his best to help them. He often reminds Romeo of the Church's teachings, and he tries to use his position to end the feud.

3. HE IS AN OUTDOORSMAN

St. Francis loved nature, and so does Friar Lawrence. He gives an eloquent description of the dawn, and he knows the plants and flowers well enough to make medicines.

Now let's look at three different views of Friar Lawrence's actions in the play.

One view holds that he is a foolish old man who sends the lovers to their deaths. Some readers feel that he lives shut away in an abbey and doesn't understand other people's passions. Romeo accuses him of this in Act III: "Thou canst not speak of what thou dost not feel!" (III, iii, 64)

Since he can't understand their passions, the best he can do is offer shallow words and philosophy instead of wisdom. Some feel his words of caution before Romeo and Juliet's wedding are empty, as is his comfort to Romeo after Tybalt's death.

He isn't wise, but bumbling, and his allowing the marriage, and giving Juliet the risky potion are partly what kills the lovers.

Worse, he's a coward. If he hadn't been afraid to tell someone (like the Prince) about the marriage, the story could have ended differently. And if he hadn't panicked and run away from the tomb, he could have saved Juliet's life.

A second view holds that he is a good and wise man who is foiled by fate. The Friar's first speech about the paradoxes of life seems to prove that he has a deep understanding of life. He gives Romeo wise counsel every step of the way; he tells him to take the relationship slowly and to try to moderate his passion. As long as Romeo has Friar Lawrence to guide him, he can overcome any circumstances; it's only when Romeo has no one to quiet his passions that he kills himself.

A third view holds that he is a good man, but has failings. Some readers feel that he really tries to do his best, and most of the time it works. He tries to settle the feud, to keep Romeo and Juliet living holy lives, and to solve the difficult problems that come up.

His love for Romeo can be seen as strength or as a fault. You can interpret his actions as trying to keep Romeo happy: he marries him to Juliet, he hides him (illegally) in his cell, he puts his career on the line to try and have the marriage recognized; he gives Juliet a risky drug in the hope that he can get her back to Romeo. In this case, it's no wonder the Friar panics at the tomb: very few of us could think straight if we'd just found the body of the person we loved most.

Although the Friar marries Romeo, he advises him to be careful; although he uses empty philosophy to comfort him, he's able to form a plan to rouse Romeo to action. He only gives Juliet the potion because she's desperate and threatens suicide; and although he flees from the tomb, he's willing to tell the whole story, even if it condemns him.

In the second and third views, Friar Lawrence understands the lovers' problems and it changes him through the course of the play. If you agree with either of these views, you can call Friar Lawrence a "maturing character."

As you read the play, see what evidence you can find for each of these views.

PRINCE ESCALUS

Some readers call Prince Escalus a maturing character because he understands the seriousness of the feud and tries to do something about it.

Prince Escalus, the ruler of Verona, represents law and order. We see him three times during the play: at the opening, when the fight breaks out; in the middle, after Tybalt and Mercutio are killed; and at the end, after Romeo, Juliet, and Paris are dead. By entering after each climax, he helps define the structure of the play. All through the play, he talks like a prince. He gives orders and expects them to be obeyed.

In his first speech, he shows anger at the senseless fighting that has been threatening Verona's peace. It's happened three times lately. Besides fining both families, he lays down a strict new law: anyone caught fighting in Verona's streets will face death.

The second time he comes in is after Mercutio, one of his relatives, has been killed. This causes the Prince to view the feud in a personal way:

> *"I have an interest in your hate's proceedings*
> *My blood for your rude brawls doth lie a-bleeding."*
> *(III, i, 190-91)*

Again he fines the families and banishes Romeo from Verona. While he is wise and understands the seriousness of the feud, unfortunately, he doesn't know the details of Romeo and Juliet's plight.

By his last entrance, the Capulets, the Montagues, and he have each suffered another death in the family. He contains his grief and unearths the story; he takes his share of the blame for not having been more strict. He acknowledges that his is not the final authority, that heaven has had the final judgment in this case.

STATIC CHARACTERS

JULIET'S NURSE

Who can help laughing at Juliet's Nurse? She says outrageous things, repeats herself constantly, and she loves a dirty joke. When she tries to act high-class and use big words, she winds up using the wrong word. There's no other character like her: the minute she opens her mouth, we know who's talking.

She serves several important functions in the play: she is Juliet's confident; she is a message-carrier for the lovers; and her earthiness is a contrast to Juliet's idealism.

The Nurse is a comic character who becomes tragic because she isn't able to grow. Let's look at her comic characteristics, and how they become tragic.

1. She understands things in physical terms. To her, love means sex. For example, when Lady Capulet tells Juliet that she'll be "no less" if she marries Paris, the Nurse cries that she'll be more: men make women pregnant.

Because she sees things in physical terms, she can't understand the depth of the lovers' emotional and spiritual bond. One partner is as good as another to her: what does it matter if Juliet has Romeo or Paris?

2. She says exactly what she thinks, whether or not it's appropriate. When Romeo, then a stranger, asks her who Juliet is, she tells him, "I tell you, he that can lay hold of her / shall have the chinks (money)." (I, v, 118-19)

Saying what she means without thinking hurts Juliet very much. The last thing she needs to hear at the end of Act IV is that the Nurse thinks Romeo is a "dishcloth."

3. She garbles messages. This is funny when we know the message, and it's good news.

The garbled message about the wedding is funny; the garbled message about who's dead is tragically painful to Juliet.

4. She loves to plot. This is endearing because she goes out of her way to help the lovers meet and get rope ladders.

She enjoyed plotting Juliet's marriage, but she doesn't take responsibility for her actions. If that plot doesn't work out, she thinks, start over and try another one. But actions have

consequences, and Juliet is abandoned by her Nurse when she needs her most.

MERCUTIO

Almost all of us know someone like Mercutio: witty, sarcastic, always the center of attention at parties, always ready with a put-down or a racy joke.

In some ways, he's like Juliet's Nurse: he also sees love as primarily sexual. He's Romeo's friend and confidant, as the Nurse is Juliet's; he, too, underestimates the depth of Romeo's love and passion.

In other ways, he's the opposite of the Nurse. He's upper class, and a relative of the Prince. He's also very intelligent when he meets the Nurse and they match wits, Mercutio makes her look like a fool.

He is clever, intelligent, and well educated. He is a master of words; he can make a pun or weave a spell with ease.

He has an infectious wit. He has an enormous amount of energy, and can make everyone laugh, including Romeo.

He is fiery and excitable. He whips himself into frenzy with the Queen Mab speech, and he's already worked himself into a fighting mood by the time he meets up with Tybalt in Act III.

He's also quick to condemn others for faults he shares. He gives his Queen Mab speech to Romeo to chide him for being "beside himself," and he is beside himself by the end of the speech. He accuses Benvolio of being hot-tempered; and finally curses the Montagues and Capulets for a fight he brought on himself.

On the one hand, he's a loyal friend to Romeo. Even when he thinks Romeo is acting crazy, he's always trying to find him and "cure" him. It's interesting to watch how much cynical Mercutio is attracted by idealistic Romeo.

On the other hand, he doesn't understand Romeo's feelings, and he doesn't try to. He is taunting and sarcastic to Romeo, to the Nurse, and finally to Tybalt.

Still, for all his faults, we can't help liking him as much as Romeo does. We, too, feel a sense of outrage when he's killed and understand why Romeo avenges his death. Mercutio is one of Shakespeare's most talked-about characters.

Some readers feel that Mercutio is the most interesting character in the play, and that Shakespeare had to kill him off so that he wouldn't eclipse Romeo. Others point out that Mercutio acts

as a satellite to Romeo. He's never on stage unless he's with Romeo, or trying to find him.

Also, some readers feel that Mercutio's sense of honor forces him to fight Tybalt in Romeo's place; others feel that his own temper and hot-headedness do him in.

Readers have disagreed over how much he understands about life. Some argue that his Queen Mab speech shows that he's thought a lot and understands other's feelings; others feel that he isn't capable of understanding Romeo's feelings at all.

LORD AND LADY MONTAGUE (ROMEO'S PARENTS)

Romeo and Juliet come from very different families.

The Montagues are close-knit and loving. Romeo's parents, Lord and Lady Montague, care a lot about Romeo, and do everything they can to find out what's bothering him.

Romeo's parents know Romeo's friends. At the beginning of the play, they ask Benvolio to find out why Romeo's depressed; and in Act II, Scene iv, Mercutio and Benvolio are going to have supper at the Montague's house, and they hope Romeo will come along.

Lady Montague's only fault is her obsessive love of Romeo. She dies of grief when he's banished, before news comes that he's dead.

Lord Montague's only fault is his willingness to fight in the feud. The only time that he isn't reasonable and loving is in the first scene when he charges onto the stage, calling, "Thou Villain Capulet!"

Unfortunately, this fault is ultimately responsible for his son's death.

LORD AND LADY CAPULET (JULIET'S PARENTS)

Lord Capulet enjoys playing the role of the gracious patriarch. He's wealthy and he likes to be well thought of. He's on his best behavior in front of company; he jokes with Paris and calls him "son." At the Capulets' feast he flirts and jokes, and goes so far as to protect Romeo from Tybalt.

But like a spoiled child, he wants everything to go his way, and he's furious when someone doesn't obey him. When Tybalt argues with him, he calls him a "saucy boy" and a "princox." When Juliet refuses to marry Paris, he has a tantrum and threatens to throw her out on the street to starve.

He has a strained relationship with his wife. He doesn't say much to her, except to order her around; she responds by making bitter remarks about him.

Lady Capulet is a bitter, guarded woman. She was married early, and the match was obviously arranged. Her husband seems to be much older than she is, and she uses this to make life difficult for him. The first time we see her, her husband is calling for a sword to join a fight, and she follows behind, answering, "A crutch, a crutch! Why call you for a sword?"

Because she's an unhappy woman who guards her feelings, she doesn't know how to relate to Juliet, who has been raised by her Nurse. We can see why she'd think Paris a good match for Juliet. He's not only wealthy, but young and attractive: everything in a husband she might have wished for herself but doesn't have.

Through the play we see her become increasingly sympathetic to Juliet. Could it be that she remembers her own tears before her wedding? She begs her husband not to move the wedding closer, and she protects Juliet from Lord Capulet's fury. Still, when Juliet needs her most, she chooses to withdraw from the situation, telling Juliet, "Do as thou wilt, for I have done with thee." (III, v, 205)

Still, both Capulets are genuinely grieved when they believe that Juliet is dead. Lady Capulet cries that Juliet was the only thing she had to love; and Lord Capulet now has no heir, nothing in which to hope.

TYBALT

Tybalt, a Capulet, is trouble from the beginning. He's so hot-tempered and full of hate that even his family thinks he's a "saucy boy." He can be seen as the embodiment of the feud. During the play, he fights Benvolio, Lord Capulet, Mercutio, and Romeo.

In temperament, he is a contrast to Benvolio. In the first scene, when Benvolio talks of peace, Tybalt leaps in with "I hate the word as I hate hell, all Montagues, and thee."

In nature and personality, he is contrasted to Mercutio. Mercutio is witty, cultured, and educated, and he isn't about to take an insult from someone like Tybalt, whose only means of expression is a sword. Mercutio's extreme dislike of Tybalt is another reason he must take up Tybalt's challenge of Romeo.

BENVOLIO

Benvolio, a Montague, is the kind of person we'd all like to have for a friend. When Romeo wants to be left alone, he leaves him alone; when he wants to talk, Benvolio is there to listen with a sympathetic ear. And when Romeo is in trouble for killing Tybalt, it's Benvolio who gets him off the street and into hiding.

Benvolio is known as a clear-thinking, reliable, and peace-loving young man. He tries to stop fighting whenever it starts; and he's called on twice to explain what's happened. When Romeo's parents want to find out what's bothering their son, they ask Benvolio to find out, and he does.

Still, he's more than a one-dimensional character. At the beginning of the play, he, like Romeo, has "a troubled mind," that leads him to take a walk before sunrise. He, too, teases the Nurse; and he stretches the truth a little when he tells the Prince that Tybalt started the fight, implying that he killed Mercutio without provocation. These faults make us like him even more.

PARIS

Count Paris is the terzo incomodo, the unwelcome third party in the love triangle with Romeo and Juliet.

Shakespeare makes sure that he compares favorably with Romeo. He is young, handsome, wealthy, and, socially, his family is a step above Romeo's- Paris is related to Prince Escalus. Paris, too, is tired of the feud and sincerely in love with Juliet. He never tries to steal Juliet from Romeo; he proposes before Juliet meets Romeo, and he dies without knowing he has a rival.

Unlike Romeo, he goes through the proper channels to get Juliet to marry him. He formally asks Juliet's father for her hand, and he approves. In contrast, Romeo's love for Juliet is forbidden, and he's secretive about his plans. Paris' language, wooden and straight-laced, is also in contrast to Romeo's.

Paris becomes a threat to the lovers only because he doesn't know about their relationship. As an honorable young man, he would never have gone after Juliet if he'd known she were married. If he'd known about the marriage, he never would have challenged Romeo at the Capulets' tomb.

Paris, like Romeo and Juliet, is a victim of "sour misfortune." He, too, is given a place of respect and importance in the tomb with Romeo and Juliet.

OTHER ELEMENTS

SETTING

Romeo and Juliet takes place in Verona, Italy, in the 1500s. Although the setting was already named in other Romeo and Juliet stories, Shakespeare draws lots of parallels between Verona and the London of his time. Both cities were walled, which made them seem hot and crowded during the summer months. Violence could spread quickly in this atmosphere, and so civil disturbances were treated harshly. Elizabethan Londoners would have thought that the Prince was too merciful to the brawlers.

In cities like London and Verona, the plague spread quickly, so quarantines were commonplace. Also, in Shakespeare's London, Queen Elizabeth's word was law; Londoners would expect no less of Prince Escalus.

THEMES

There are many themes in Romeo and Juliet; we'll look at the major ones here. You'll notice that some themes contradict each other-it's up to you to decide which ones are true, and to find evidence to support your position.

1. LOVE

Love is explored in different ways in the play. Here are some of them:

Love vs. Hate

The play contrasts Romeo and Juliet's love against their families' hate as illustrated by the feud. In the Prologue, we're told that their love is stronger than the hatred of the feud, but it's a bitter struggle. Hatred is strong enough to separate the lovers, kill Mercutio, Tybalt, and Paris, banish Romeo, and finally force Romeo and Juliet to commit suicide. But love is even stronger: nothing can kill the love between Romeo and Juliet, and this finally triumphs.

False Love vs. True Love

At the beginning of the play, Romeo's lost in a false love for Rosaline. He doesn't know her or have any relationship with her, so he's created artificial feelings about her. The Nurse and Mercutio also have false or incomplete ideas about true love. They both link it exclusively to sex.

Romeo and Juliet's love is a pure, true love. They love each other emotionally, spiritually, and sexually. They are committed to each other in marriage, and are willing to die rather than be unfaithful to one another.

Romantic Love

This play is a wonderful example of Courtly Love or Romantic Love. Until the end of the 14th century, the idea of marrying for love was almost unheard of. Marriages were arranged for social, economic, and political reasons. Romantic Love came into being in the French courts, and it had very strict rules: the woman with whom the man chose to be in love had to be unobtainable (if she was married to someone else, that was good: if she died, that was even better), and both of the romantic lovers must be chaste. The whole idea was to be pure and pine away for someone.

This is exactly what Romeo is doing for Rosaline at the beginning of the story. Even though Romeo and Juliet share their love and they sleep together once, there are Romantic obstacles in their way. They are from enemy families; Juliet will be forced to marry someone else. Finally, each of them dies pining for a love that is absolutely unobtainable because his or her partner is dead.

Could Romeo and Juliet have become a happy, middle-aged married couple? Nobody in Shakespeare's audience would have wondered. The whole point is that their love is Romantic, and therefore cannot be fulfilled.

2. WHAT CAUSES THE LOVERS TO DIE?

The deaths of Romeo and Juliet can be explained in several ways.

Fate

In the Prologue, we're told that the lovers are "star-crossed," which implies that fate has it in for them. The number of fateful coincidences and accidents in the play are too numerous to miss: Romeo finds out about the Capulets' party from an illiterate servant; he winds up in the Capulets' orchard; Mercutio is killed under his arm-the list goes on and on. Every plan that the lovers make is thwarted. They're destined to die, and nothing can stop it.

Providence

Some readers feel that there's a power beyond fate that has a role in the outcome of the story. Since the play takes place in a Christian context, this power can be thought of as God, or Providence. Romeo, Juliet, and Friar Lawrence all call on this higher power to help them; Friar Lawrence calls the deaths "a work of heaven." We can believe that some benevolent power is working to change the Montagues' and Capulets' hatred to love- and it succeeds.

Passion

The Catholic Church (and to some extent, the Protestant) in Shakespeare's day believed that love of God was pure, selfless, and good. Love that gratified selfish desires was bad. Over and over, Friar Lawrence warns that "these violent delights have violent ends," and he's proven correct.

Character

Some readers feel that Romeo's impetuousness (to passionately love Juliet, and recklessly kill Tybalt, Paris and himself), Tybalt's hate, Capulet's blindness, and Juliet's dishonesty work together to bring the lovers' downfall.

3. A SENSE OF ORDER VS. CIVIL DISTURBANCES

The feuding and public fighting in Verona's streets is such a serious offense that Romeo and Juliet's lives must be sacrificed to restore order and pay for this injustice.

4. ISOLATION

In comedy, characters tend to form bonds; in tragedy, they become isolated. The most obvious example in this play is Juliet: she is abandoned by her parents, her Nurse, the Friar, and finally by Romeo.

5. INNOCENCE AND EXPERIENCE

This theme is followed in two ways: we see the impetuous actions of the innocent lovers contrasted to the helpless wisdom of their parents and advisors; and we see Romeo and Juliet grow from innocence to experience.

6. LANGUAGE

Most of us talk similarly and use the same vocabulary most of the time. But in Romeo and Juliet, each character's language tells us what social class they're in, whom they're talking to, what mood they're in, and if their feelings are genuine. As a character matures, his or her words are more expressive, better chosen.

STYLE

Romeo and Juliet is unique because it merges three distinct styles.

The first two acts are comedy: characters meet, fall in love, have funny friends and bawdy servants. These acts follow an Italian style called a commedia dell'arte, which usually had two virtuous lovers, old fathers who kept them apart, and servants who made racy comments about sex.

But the Prologue sets up a tragedy, and the last three acts bring it about. Suddenly, a feud that seemed silly is deadly, and Mercutio and Tybalt are killed. The lovers become isolated, and come to understand the cruelty of the world and how it preys on them. Human failure and tragic accidents work against them, and they must die.

Romeo and Juliet is also Romantic. Not only does it deal with Romantic Love, as mentioned above under Themes, but it includes many different types of Romantic poetry. Just before he wrote this play, Shakespeare had written two long narrative Romantic poems, as well as some Romantic sonnets, and these poetic styles turn up over and over again in the play.

FORM AND STRUCTURE

OVERALL STRUCTURE

Romeo and Juliet has five acts. As we have seen before, the first two acts follow the rules of a comedy, and the last two follow the conventions of tragedy. Besides this, shape is given to the play by the Prologue and the three appearances of the Prince.

The Prologue, which reminds us somewhat of ancient tragedies, tells us the sorry fate of the characters we're about to meet.

The Prince appears at the beginning of the play when the feud is introduced. He's angry at the disturbance and the threat of violence, but nothing deadly has happened yet. The Prince appears

at the next climax, after the deaths that change the course of the play. He adds to the climactic events by banishing Romeo. The third time he appears is at the end. Prince Escalus sums up the Prologue, says that everyone is punished, and that there's never been a sadder story.

SCENES

Shakespeare is a master storyteller. Scenes happen very quickly in this play, alternating from tragic to comic, hurried to lazy, scenes between the lovers to scenes about those who unwittingly cause their downfall.

Shakespeare also compares characters by having them appear in scenes soon after each other. Often scenes with the Nurse follow scenes with Mercutio; scenes with Paris are frequently next to scenes with Romeo.

PUBLIC PEOPLE AND PRIVATE PEOPLE

Another way Shakespeare makes the play interesting is to show us how characters act in public and then how they act in private. For example, in the first scene, we see the Montagues when they come to fight the Capulets; then we see them talking in private after everyone else has left. The funniest example of this is in Act I, Scene v, when Lord Capulet goes from his public image to his private temper in the same speech.

This makes us ready for Act III, when the public feud crashes in on the private lives of Romeo and Juliet.

CONDENSED TIME

Shakespeare's biggest change was to shrink the timeframe from months to a period of five days. He emphasizes this by showing us all five dawns: On Sunday morning, Romeo walks in a grove of trees at dawn and later meets Benvolio; Monday's dawn finds him reluctantly leaving Juliet in the orchard. The next morning, he leaves his new wife to flee to Mantua; Wednesday morning, Juliet is discovered dead. The play ends on Thursday morning, when the Prince and the families find the dead bodies in the tomb.

This condensed time makes the play highly dramatic. Events are very rushed. Things happen so fast that characters must make snap decisions. There is no time for explanations, and there are no second chances.

THE CRITICS

THE PLAY AS COMEDY AND TRAGEDY

Romeo and Juliet is in essence a comedy that turns out tragically. That is, it begins with the materials for a comedy- the stupid parental generation, the instant attraction of the young lovers, the quick surface life of street fights, masked balls and comic servants. But this material is blighted. Its gaiety and good fortune are drained away by the fact that the lovers are "star-crossed"... Romeo and Juliet are all ardour and constancy, their families are all hatred and pride; no one's motives are mixed, there are no question marks. After the tragedy the survivors are shocked into dropping their vendetta, and Montague and Capulet are united in grief. Once again, there are no question marks. Nothing made them enemies except the clash of their own wills, and nothing is needed to make them brothers except a change of heart.

-John Wain, The Living World of Shakespeare, 1964

ON JULIET

The character is indeed one of perfect truth and sweetness. It has nothing forward, nothing coy, nothing affected or coquettish about it; it is a pure effusion of nature. It is as frank as it is modest, for it has no thought that it wishes to conceal. It reposes in conscious innocence on the strength of its affections. Its delicacy does not consist in coldness and reserve, but in combining warmth of imagination and tenderness of heart with the most voluptuous sensibility. Love is a gentle flame that rarefies and expands her whole being.

-William Hazlitt, Characters of Shakespeare's Plays, 1817

ON ROMEO

Romeo is Hamlet in love. There is the same rich exuberance of passion and sentiment in the one that there is of thought and sentiment in the other. Both are absent and self-involved, both live out of themselves in a world of imagination. Hamlet is abstracted from everything Romeo is abstracted from everything but his love, and lost in it.

-William Hazlitt, Characters of Shakespeare's Plays, 1817

THE LOVERS' PRIVATE WORLD

In their first kiss Romeo and Juliet withdraw into a private world of intimacy, suspending the world's ordinary time and

replacing it with the rival time of the imagination. Yet no sooner do they draw apart than they find themselves bound to take heed of the alien public world and its imperatives, of time calculated in days and hours, of love reduced to appetite, happiness to jesting and farce, vitality to violence.

-Brian Gibbons, Introduction to Romeo and Juliet, 1980

LIGHT AND DARK

The dominating image is light, every form and manifestation of it; the sun, moon, stars, fire, lightning, the flash of gunpowder, and the reflected light of beauty and love; while by contrast we have night, darkness, clouds, rain, mist, and smoke.

-Caroline F. E. Spurgeon, Shakespeare's Imagery and What It Tells Us, 1935

UNAWARENESS

More than any other of Shakespeare's plays,- Romeo and Juliet is a tragedy of unawareness. Fate, or Heaven, as the Prince calls it, or the "greater power" as the Friar calls it, working out its purpose without the use of either a human villain or a supernatural agent sent to intervene in mortal affairs, operates through the common human condition of not knowing. Participants in the action, some of them in parts that are minor and seem insignificant, contribute one by one the indispensable stitches which make the pattern, and contribute them not knowing: that is to say, they act when they do not know the truth of the situation in which they act, this truth being known, however, to us who are spectators.

-Bertrand Evans, "The Brevity of Friar Laurence," 1950

CHARACTER AS FATE

It is, of course, in the end a tragedy of mischance. Shakespeare was bound by his story, was doubtless content to be; and how make it otherwise? Nevertheless, we discern his deeper dramatic sense, which was to shape the maturer tragedies, already in revolt. Accidents make good incidents, but tragedy determined by them has no significance. So he sets out, we see, in the shaping of his character to give all likelihood to the outcome. It is by pure ill-luck that Friar John's speed to Mantua is stayed while Balthasarreaches Romeo with the news of Juliet's death; but it is Romeo's headlong recklessness that leaves Friar Laurence no time to retrieve the mistake... character is also fate; it is, at any rate,

the more dramatic part of it, and the life of Shakespeare's art is to lie in the manifesting of this.

-Harley Granville-Barker, Prefaces to Shakespeare, 1947.

BALANCE OF GOOD AND EVIL

But if we see the ending as purposeful, and as an evocation of the paradoxical good that can spring from a lamented destruction, thesimple view of Fate will not satisfy. Nor can we ignore what Shakespeare characteristically stresses in all his tragic drama: the connection between the character of men and the disaster that may befall them... The personification of a hostile Fate or Fortune was a fashionable convention... however, Shakespeare was moving in another direction. His developing vision of a tragic universe was not to be defined by hostile fatality, but by a paradoxical and all too precarious balance of good and evil.

-Douglas Cole, Modern Criticisms of Romeo and Juliet, 1970

The point of the play- the wonder of the story- is not how such a love can arise out of hatred and then triumph over it in death, but that it does.

-Elmer Edgar Stoll, Shakespeare's Young Lovers, 1937

Chapter five

"THE Sonnets"

BRIEF NOTE ON THE SONNET AND SHAKESPEAREAN *SONNETS*

Verse form, a 14-line poem, usually in *iambic* pentameter and with and of several traditional rhyme schemes. The sonnet has been widely popular ever since its evolution from medieval Italian verse and is still used by poets in most European languages. Skaespeare's SONNETS are among the best known, and he also employed sonnets in several of his plays, most notably in 'Romea and Juliet' and 'Love's Labour's Lost'.

By the 1200's, the sonnet form (from the Italian ***sonneto***, "*little song*") was set well enough to be defined as Italian poets were writing them: 14 lines are divided into an 8-line problem statement that is resolved in the last 6 lines. As in the sample at the right, a shift in tone was typical in lines 8-9 because of this structure. In the 1500's, William Shakespeare and many others adapted the form to include two more rhymes at the ends of lines than the Italian form used. Although there is still an echo of the shift in tone in lines 8-9, the last two lines of the English sonnet rhyme together and cap off the previous 12 lines. Usually about love, sonnets often are written about beauty but also about the effects of time and mortality. Poets of many languages still write sonnets.

You need this background information on counting in Greek to understand *scansion*.[1] It also can help with rhyme scheme and sound effects, such as assonance and alliteration. Designs for poems, like blueprints, include measurements to show length. For example, a sonnet like the sample at left is fourteen lines long, and each line is 10 syllables long. But the unit for counting line length isn't the syllable; it's called a "foot." These units were invented and named by the ancient Greeks to describe how a poem is designed and "built." In the sonnets that you will study the units of measure are two syllables long. The main unit for constructing a line in a sonnet is called the "IAMB" /EYE-am/, which is a quieter syllable followed by a louder syllable. A variation called a "TROCHEE" /TRO-key/ reverses that structure and puts the louder syllable first.

SAMPLE SONNET

[1] ***Scansion**: the metrical analysis of verse. The usual marks for scansion are ˘ for a short or unaccented syllable, ¯ or Æ for a long or accented syllable, ^ for a rest, | for a foot division, and ‖ for a caesura or pause.*

The eyes that drew from me such fervent praise,
The arms and hands and feet and countenance
Which made me a stranger in my own romance
And set me apart from the well-trodden ways;
The gleaming golden curly hair, the rays
Flashing from a smiling angel's glance
Which moved the world in paradisal dance,
Are grains of dust, insensibilities.
And I live on, but in grief and self-contempt,
Left here without the light I loved so much,
In a great tempest and with shrouds unkempt.
No more love songs, then, I have done with such;
My old skill now runs thin at each attempt,
And tears are heard within the harp I touch.

SAMPLE IAMBIC FEET

Iambs can be one word, like the word: **roMANCE** or two words, like the opening phrase: **the EYES** or part of one word plus part of another word, as in the fifth line: ing GOLDbut always two syllables with the second syllable *LOUDER* than the first.

SAMPLE TROCHAIC FOOT

Opposite of an "**iamb**," the "**trochee**" also has two syllables, but the first syllable is *LOUDER*, as in the word **FLASHing**.

SHAKESPEAREAN SONNETS

Body of 154 poems, each a SONNET, written by Shakespeare over an unknown period of time, probably around 1592 to 1598. The Sonnets are love poems. They describe aspects of two different loves experienced by the poet, one for young man and the other for a woman. Some of the Sonnets are great poems (Sonnets 18, 29, 55, 116, and 138 are among the most praised), while a few are poor, but it is as a sonnet sequence – a new genre at the time – that they are particularly fascinating, offering and extraordinary range of love poems. They encompass several distinct points of view on love, unified by a series of delightful observations on the power of poetry to record them.

The Sonnets comprise two groups of poems; the larger group (Sonnets 1-126) is addressed to the young man, the other (127-154) to the woman. (Although the sex of the addressee is unspecified in most of the Sonnets, all those that do address a man precede Sonnet 126, which as the only 12-line variation on sonnet form seems to close the initial group. Similarly, all of the Sonnets that explicitly address a woman fall in the second group.)

In the first group, the poet manifests his love for the young man in a variety of ways. In Sonnets 1-17 he speaks of his friend's beauty and insists that he should marry and have children in order to perpetuate that beauty beyond his eventual death. In the next group of poems (and in many of the others) the poet describes his love in brilliant variations on the traditional love poetry, often referring to the poetry love stimulates. However, as the sequence progresses, the poet speaks of his disappointment that his friend has left him, or at least does not love him in return. In 40-42 it appears that the friend has even stolen the poet's (female) lover. In 78-86 the poet fears that his place in his friend's affections (and perhaps in his literary patronage) has been taken by another, superior poet. In 110-111 the poet worries that his friend resents his public displays (probably a reference to Shakespeare's career as an actor). Gradually, however, over the course of the last several dozen poems of this group, the spirit of love returns, apparently reflecting reconciliation between the friends. Sonnet 126 closes the series with a return to the subject of the young man's beauty and morality.

Sonnets 127-154 address a woman of dark complexion and metaphorically dark morals (often referred to as Shakespeare's *'dark lady'*), who has betrayed the poet's love by loving other men.

She may be married, in which case the love she has given the poet also constituted betrayal. In 133-134 the poet complains that not only has she been unfaithful to him, she has done so with his friend, thereby leavinghim abandoned by both of his loves. Apparently the situation in Sonnets 40-42 is seen here from another angle. The *'dark lady'* Sonnets bemoan the poet's plight as an unrequited lover, and they often rail against the woman and against love in general. These poems are sometimes called the *'vituperative sonnets'*.

In these two sets of poems, a love triangle is compellingly, if only implicitly, portrayed. There is no actual evidence that the situation was not simply a literary creation, but many of the poems are so convincingly delighted or aggrieved with love that most readers find themselves assuming that the Sonnets are authobiographical, or at least based on personal experience, and that the young man, the 'dark lady', and the 'rival poet' are representations of real people. Despite the lack of evedence, the Sonnets have engendered a wide range of suppositions about Shakespeare's life.

The most contentious conclusion that has been drawn from the Sonnets is that Shakespeare was a homosexual. However, the poems offer no unambiguous evidence on the subject. The poet refers to and addresses his friend as his 'lover', but in Shakespeare's day the word has mny non-sexual connotations, and its meaning varied greatly with context. It could mean sexual partner, but it could also be used in the formal close of a letter – 'Thy Lover' was as common andf as sexually neutral as 'Sincerely yours'.

Commentators occasionally doubt the authorship of a few of the Sonnets, especially 145, which is a poor poem and the only Sonnet written in tetrameter, as well as 153 and 154, which seemingly have little to do with the others and are the only ones that derive from a specific source. However, each of these poems bears some relationship to its neighbors, and most scholars accept them as genuine.

Thomas THROPE first published these collected Sonnets in 1609, in a *QUARTO* edition (printed by George ELD) known as Q. They were printed in the order described above, which has subsequently been considered standard (though various editors have altered it), and followed by *A Lover's Complaint*.

A Paraphrase of SONNET 116

1. Let me not to the marriage of true minds
2. Admit impediments. Love is not love
3. Which alters when it alteration finds,
4. Or bends with the remover to remove.
5. Oh no! It is an ever-fixed mark
6. That looks on tempests and is never shaken.
7. It is the star to every wandering bark,
8. Whose worth's unknown, although his height be taken.
9. Love's not Time's fool, though rosy lips and cheeks
10. Within his bending sickle's compass come.
11. Love alters not with his brief hours and weeks,
12. But bears it out even to the edge of doom.
13. If this be error and upon me proved,
14. I never writ, nor no man ever loved.

(***Lines 1-2***) Although legal marriages have barriers to prevent them [like close genes or being currently married], I don't believe in any such barriers to the union between true lovers.
(***2-3***) Love isn't really love if it changes when we notice our beloved has changed.
(***4-5***) Love doesn't vary when someone tries to lure us away from our beloved.
(***5-6***) No way! Love is like a rock, and storms can't undermine it.
(***7-8***) Love is a constant guide to us as we sail through life, but we can't really see its true value even if we can quantify love somehow.
(***9-10***) Love doesn't vary with time, even if the glow of youthfulness passes from our beloved's face.
(***11-12***) Love doesn't vary because of time; it stays constant even until death.
(***13-14***) If I'm wrong about love, then I never wrote anything [worthwhile since almost all my writings are about love somehow] and nobody has been in love.

SELECTIONS FROM *'THE SONNETS'*

"When I do count the clock that tells the time"

When I do count the clock that tells the time,
And see the brave day sunk in hideous night;
When I behold the violet past prime,
And sable curls, all silver'd o'er with white;
When lofty trees I see barren of leaves,
Which erst from heat did canopy the herd,
And summer's green all girded up in sheaves,
Borne on the bier with white and bristly beard;
Then of thy beauty do I question make,
That thou among the wastes of time must go,
Since sweets and beauties do themselves forsake,
And die as fast as they see others grow;
And nothing 'gainst Time's scythe can make defence
Save breed, to brave him when he takes thee hence.

"Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?"

Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?
Thou art more lovely and more temperate:
Rough winds do shake the darling buds of May,
And summer's lease hath all too short a date:
Sometime too hot the eye of heaven shines,
And often is his gold complexion dimm'd;
And every fair from fair sometime declines,
By chance, or nature's changing course, untrimm'd;
But thy eternal summer shall not fade,
Nor lose possession of that fair thou owest;
Nor shall Death brag thou wander'st in his shade,
When in eternal lines to time thou growest;
So long as men can breathe, or eyes can see,
So long lives this, and this gives life to thee.

"When in disgrace with fortune and men's eyes"

When in disgrace with fortune and men's eyes,
I all alone beweep my outcast state,
And trouble deaf Heaven with my bootless cries,
And look upon myself, and curse my fate,
Wishing me like to one more rich in hope,
Featur'd like him, like him with friends possess'd,
Desiring this man's art, and that man's scope,
With what I most enjoy contented least:
Yet in these thoughts myself almost despising,
Haply I think on thee,--and then my state
(Like to the lark at break of day arising
From sullen earth) sings hymns at heaven's gate;
For thy sweet love remember'd such wealth brings
That then I scorn to change my state with kings'.

"When to the sessions of sweet silent thought"

When to the sessions of sweet silent thought
I summon up remembrance of things past,
I sigh the lack of many a thing I sought,
And with old woes new wail my dear time's waste:
Then can I drown an eye, unus'd to flow,
For precious friends hid in death's dateless night,
And weep afresh love's long-since cancell'd woe,
And moan the expense of many a vanish'd sight.
Then can I grieve at grievances foregone,
And heavily from woe to woe tell o'er
The sad account of fore-bemoaned moan,
Which I new pay as if not paid before.
But if the while I think on thee, dear friend,
All losses are restor'd, and sorrows end.

"Not marble nor the gilded monuments"

Not marble, nor the gilded monuments
Of princes, shall outlive this powerful rhyme;
But you shall shine more bright in these contents
Than unswept stone, besmear'd with sluttish time.
When wasteful war shall statues overturn,

And broils root out the work of masonry,
Nor Mars his sword nor war's quick fire shall burn
The living record of your memory.
'Gainst death and all oblivious enmity
Shall you pace forth; your praise shall still find room,
Even in the eyes of all posterity
That wear this world out to the ending doom.
So, till the judgment that yourself arise,
You live in this, and dwell in lovers' eyes.

"That time of year thou mayst in me behold"

That time of year thou mayst in me behold
When yellow leaves, or none, or few, do hang
Upon those boughs which shake against the cold,
Bare ruined choirs, where late the sweet birds sang.
In me thou see'st the twilight of such day
As after sunset fadeth from the west;
Which by and by black night doth take away,
Death's second self, that seals up all in rest.
In me thou see'st the glowing of such fire,
That on the ashes of his youth doth lie,
As the deathbed whereon it must expire,
Consumed by that which it was nourished by.
This thou perceiv'st, which makes thy love more strong,
To love that well which thou must leave ere long.

"They that have power to hurt and will do none"

They that have power to hurt and will do none,
That do not do the thing they most do show,
Who, moving others, are themselves as stone,
Unmoved, cold, and to temptation slow;
They rightly do inherit heaven's graces
And husband nature's riches from expense;
They are the lords and owners of their faces,
Others but stewards of their excellence.
The summer's flower is to the summer sweet,
Though to itself it only live and die,
But if that flower with base infection meet,
The basest weed outbraves his dignity:
For sweetest things turn sourest by their deeds;

Lilies that fester smell far worse than weeds.

"The forward violet thus did I chide"

The forward violet thus did I chide:
Sweet thief, whence didst thou steal thy sweet that smells,
If not from my love's breath? The purple pride
Which on thy soft cheek for complexion dwells
In my love's veins thou hast too grossly dyed.
The lily I condemnèd for thy hand,
And buds of marjoram had stol'n thy hair;
The roses fearfully on thorns did stand,
One blushing shame, another white despair;
A third, nor red nor white, had stol'n of both,
And to his robbery had annex'd thy breath;
But, for his theft, in pride of all his growth
A vengeful canker eat him up to death.
More flowers I noted, yet I none could see
But sweet or colour it had stol'n from thee.

"Let me not to the marriage of true minds"

Let me not to the marriage of true minds Admit impediments. Love is not love Which alters when it alteration finds, Or bends with the remover to remove: O no; it is an ever-fixed mark, That looks on tempests, and is never shaken; It is the star to every wandering bark, Whose worth's unknown, although his height be taken. Love's not Time's fool, though rosy lips and cheeks Within his bending sickle's compass come; Love alters not with his brief hours and weeks, But bears it out even to the edge of doom. If this be error, and upon me prov'd, I never writ, nor no man ever lov'd.

"Th' expense of spirit in a waste of shame"

Th' expense of spirit in a waste of shame
Is lust in action; and till action, lust
Is perjur'd, murderous, bloody, full of blame,
Savage, extreme, rude, cruel, not to trust;
Enjoy'd no sooner, but despised straight;
Past reason hunted; and no sooner had,
Past reason hated, as a swallow'd bait,
On purpose laid to make the taker mad:

Mad in pursuit, and in possession so;
Had, having, and in quest to have, extreme;
A bliss in proof,--and prov'd, a very woe;
Before, a joy propos'd; behind, a dream:
All this the world well knows; yet none knows well
To shun the heaven that leads men to this hell.

"My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun"

My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun;
Coral is far more red than her lips' red:
If snow be white, why then her breasts are dun;
If hairs be wires, black wires grow on her head.
I have seen roses damask'd, red and white,
But no such roses see I in her cheeks;
And in some perfumes is there more delight
Than in the breath that from my mistress reeks.
I love to hear her speak,--yet well I know
That music hath a far more pleasing sound;
I grant I never saw a goddess go,
My mistress when she walks, treads on the ground;
And yet, by heaven, I think my love as rare
As any she belied with false compare.

"Two loves I have of comfort and despair"

Two loves I have of comfort and despair,
Which like two spirits do suggest me still:
The better angel is a man right fair,
The worser spirit a woman colour'd ill.
To win me soon to hell, my female evil
Tempteth my better angel from my side,
And would corrupt my saint to be a devil,
Wooing his purity with her foul pride.
And whether that my angel be turn'd fiend,
Suspect I may, yet not directly tell;
But being both from me, both to each friend,
I guess one angel in another's hell:
Yet this shall I ne'er know, but live in doubt,
Till my bad angel fire my good one out.

"Those lips that love's own hand did make"

Those lips that love's own hand did make
Breathed forth the sound that said "I hate,"
To me that languished for her sake.
But when she saw my woeful state,
Straight in her heart did mercy come,
Chiding that tongue that ever sweet
Was used in giving gentle doom,
And taught it thus anew to greet.
"I hate" she altered with an end
That followed it as gentle day
Doth follow night, who, like a fiend,
From heaven to hell is flown away.
"I hate" from hate away she threw.
And saved my life, saying "not you."

Shakespearean
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WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE
1564-1616

William Shakespeare is an English playwright and poet whose body of works is considered the greatest in English literature. His plays, many of which were performed at the Globe Theatre in London, include historical works, such as Richard II, comedies, including Much Ado about Nothing and As You Like It, and tragedies, such as Hamlet, Othello, and King Lear. He also composed 154 sonnets. The earliest collected edition of his plays, the First Folio, contained 36 plays and was published posthumously (1623).

For more than 350 years, William Shakespeare has been the world's most popular playwright. On the stage, in the movies and on television vast audiences watch his plays. People read his plays again and again for pleasure. Students reading his plays, for the first time are delighted.

Shakespeare's continued popularity is due to many things: His plays are filled with action, his characters are believable, and his language is thrilling to hear or read. Underlying all this is Shakespeare's deep humanity. He was a profound student of people and he understood them. He had a great tolerance, sympathy, and love for all people, good or evil.

While watching a Shakespearean tragedy, the audience is moved and shaken. After the show the spectators are calm, washed clean of pity and terror.

A Shakespearean comedy is full of fun. The characters are lively; the dialogue is witty. In the end young lovers are wed; old babblers are silenced; wise men are content. The comedies are joyous and romantic.