
Shakespeare Plays and Poetry: A Study

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Abstract

Today we remember Shakespeare as the greatest playwright of all time; however, in his own lifetime, he was equally revered as a poet. His first two books of poetry, *Venus and Adonis* and *Rape of Lucrece*, were reprinted many times. In fact, they were more popular in print than any of Shakespeare's plays. Many of the earliest literary critics and anthologists of English-language verse cite these two narrative poems because of their exemplary lines. Like his plays, his poems were probably sold unbound or in flimsy, paper bindings, making their survival unlikely unless an early owner bound them up with other booklets in sturdy bindings. Shakespeare's earliest publication, and by far the best-selling work in his lifetime, was the nearly 1200-line poem *Venus and Adonis* (1593), published in 10 editions between 1594 and 1602. In Shakespeare's re-telling of the classical tale, Venus, the goddess of love, tries to seduce Adonis, a young hunter, but is rebuffed. Adonis is then killed on a hunting expedition by a wild boar. Readers were titillated by the erotic nature of the poem, and lines from it were frequently excerpted in print and manuscript. Because of its popularity, other printed poems soon followed. *Rape of Lucrece* was published in 1594 to great acclaim. His name appeared on the title page of *The Passionate Pilgrim* (1599) despite the fact that only a handful of the poems were by him. "*The Phoenix and the Turtle*" appeared in *Love's Martyr* in 1601, and *Shakespeare's Sonnets* in 1609.

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Introduction

Shakespeare was born and raised in Stratford-upon-Avon, Warwickshire. At the age of 18, he married Anne Hathaway, with whom he had three children: Susanna and twins Hamnet and Judith. Sometime between 1585 and 1592, he began a successful career in London as an actor, writer, and part-owner of a playing company called the Lord Chamberlain's Men, later known as the King's Men. At age 49 (around 1613), he appears to have retired to Stratford, where he died three years later. Few records of Shakespeare's private life survive; this has stimulated considerable speculation about such matters as his physical appearance, his sexuality, his religious beliefs, and whether the works attributed to him were written by others. Shakespeare produced most of his known works between 1589 and 1613. His early plays were primarily comedies and histories and are regarded as some of the best work produced in these genres. He then wrote mainly tragedies until 1608, among them Hamlet, Romeo and Juliet, Othello, King Lear, and Macbeth, all considered to be among the finest works in the English language. In the last phase of his life, he wrote tragicomedies (also known as romances) and collaborated with other playwrights. Many of Shakespeare's plays were published in editions of varying quality and accuracy in his lifetime. However, in 1623,

two fellow actors and friends of Shakespeare's, John Heminges and Henry Condell, published a more definitive text known as the First Folio, a posthumous collected edition of Shakespeare's dramatic works that included all but two of his plays. The volume was prefaced with a poem by Ben Jonson, in which Jonson presciently hailed Shakespeare in a now-famous quote as "not of an age, but for all time"

Shakespeare's Plays and Poems

The early plays

Shakespeare arrived in London probably sometime in the late 1580s. He was in his mid-20s. It is not known how he got started in the theatre or for what acting companies he wrote his early plays, which are not easy to date. Indicating a time of apprenticeship, these plays show a more direct debt to London dramatists of the 1580s and to Classical examples than do his later works. He learned a great deal about writing plays by imitating the successes of the London theatre, as any young poet and budding dramatist might do.

Titus Andronicus

Titus Andronicus (c. 1589–92) is a case in point. As Shakespeare's first full-length tragedy, it owes much of its theme, structure, and language to Thomas Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy*, which was a huge success in the late 1580s. Kyd had hit on the formula of adopting the dramaturgy of Seneca (the younger), the great Stoic philosopher and statesman, to the needs of a burgeoning new London theatre. The result was the revenge tragedy, an astonishingly successful genre that was to be refigured in *Hamlet* and many other revenge plays. Shakespeare also borrowed a leaf from his great contemporary Christopher Marlowe. The Vice-like protagonist of Marlowe's *The Jew of Malta*, Barabas, may have inspired Shakespeare in his depiction of the villainous Aaron the Moor in *Titus Andronicus*, though other Vice figures were available to him as well.

The Senecan model offered Kyd, and then Shakespeare, a story of bloody revenge, occasioned originally by the murder or rape of a person whose near relatives (fathers, sons, brothers) are bound by sacred oath to revenge the atrocity. The avenger must proceed with caution, since his opponent is canny, secretive, and ruthless. The avenger becomes mad or feigns madness to cover his intent. He becomes more and more ruthless himself as he moves toward his goal of vengeance. At the same time he is hesitant, being deeply distressed by ethical considerations. An ethos of revenge is opposed to one of Christian forbearance. The avenger may see the spirit of the person whose wrongful death he must avenge. He employs the device of a play within the play in order to accomplish his aims. The play ends in a bloodbath and a vindication of the avenger. Evident in this model is the story of Titus Andronicus, whose sons are butchered and whose daughter is raped and mutilated, as well as the story of Hamlet and still others.

The Early Romantic Comedies

Other than *Titus Andronicus*, Shakespeare did not experiment with formal tragedy in his early years. (Though his English history plays from this period portrayed tragic events, their theme was focused elsewhere.) The young playwright was drawn more quickly into comedy, and with more immediate success. For this his models include the dramatists Robert Greene and John Lyly, along with Thomas Nashe. The result is a genre recognizably and distinctively Shakespearean, even if he learned a lot from Greene and Lyly: the romantic comedy. As in the work of his models, Shakespeare's early comedies revel in stories of amorous courtship in which a plucky and admirable young woman (played by a boy actor) is paired off against her male wooer. Julia, one of two young heroines in *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* (c. 1590–94), disguises herself as a man in order to follow her lover, Proteus, when he is sent from Verona to Milan. Proteus (appropriately named for the changeable Proteus of Greek myth), she discovers, is paying far too much attention to Sylvia, the beloved of Proteus's best friend, Valentine. Love and friendship thus do battle for the divided loyalties of the erring male until the generosity of his friend and, most of all, the enduring chaste loyalty of the two women bring Proteus to his senses. The motif of the young woman disguised as a male was to prove invaluable to Shakespeare in subsequent romantic comedies, including *The Merchant of Venice*, *As You Like It*, and *Twelfth Night*. As is generally true of Shakespeare, he derived the essentials of his plot from a narrative source, in this case a long Spanish prose romance, the *Diana* of Jorge de Montemayor.

Shakespeare's most classically inspired early comedy is *The Comedy of Errors* (c. 1589–94). Here he turned particularly to Plautus's farcical play called the *Menaechmi* (*Twins*). The story of one twin (Antipholus) looking for his lost brother, accompanied by a clever servant (Dromio) whose twin has also disappeared, results in a farce of mistaken identities that also thoughtfully explores issues of identity and self-knowing. The young women of the play, one the wife of Antipholus of Ephesus (Adriana) and the other her sister (Luciana), engage in meaningful dialogue on issues of wifely obedience and autonomy. Marriage resolves these difficulties at the end, as is routinely the case in Shakespearean romantic comedy, but not before the plot complications have tested the characters' needs to know who they are and what men and women ought to expect from one another.

Shakespeare's early romantic comedy most indebted to John Lyly is *Love's Labour's Lost* (c. 1588–97), a confection set in the never-never land of Navarre where the King and his companions are visited by the Princess of France and her ladies-in-waiting on a diplomatic mission that soon devolves into a game of courtship. As is often the case in Shakespearean romantic comedy, the young women are sure of who they are and whom they intend to marry; one cannot be certain that they ever really fall in love, since they begin by knowing what they want. The young men, conversely, fall all over themselves in their comically futile attempts to eschew romantic love in favour of more serious pursuits. They perjure themselves, are shamed and put down, and are finally forgiven their follies by the women. Shakespeare brilliantly portrays male discomfiture and female self-assurance as he explores the treacherous but desirable world of sexual attraction, while the verbal gymnastics of the play emphasize the wonder and the delicious foolishness of falling in love.

In *The Taming of the Shrew* (c. 1590–94), Shakespeare employs a device of multiple plotting that is to become a standard feature of his romantic comedies. In one plot, derived from Ludovico Ariosto's *I suppositi* (*Supposes*, as it had been translated into English by George Gascoigne), a young woman (Bianca) carries on a risky courtship with a young man who appears to be a tutor, much to the dismay of her father, who hopes to marry her to a wealthy suitor of his own choosing. Eventually the mistaken identities are straightened out, establishing the presumed tutor as Lucentio, wealthy and suitable enough. Simultaneously, Bianca's shrewish sister Kate denounces (and terrorizes) all men. Bianca's suitors commission the self-assured Petruchio to pursue Kate so that Bianca, the younger sister, will be free to wed. The wife-taming plot is itself based on folktale and ballad tradition in which men assure their ascendancy in the marriage relationship by beating their wives into submission. Shakespeare transforms this raw, antifeminist material into a study of the struggle for dominance in the marriage relationship. And, whereas he does opt in this play for male triumph over the female, he gives to Kate a sense of humour that enables her to see how she is to play the game to her own advantage as well. She is, arguably, happy at the end with a relationship based on wit and companionship, whereas her sister Bianca turns out to be simply spoiled.

The early histories

In Shakespeare's explorations of English history, as in romantic comedy, he put his distinctive mark on a genre and made it his. The genre was, moreover, an unusual one. There was as yet no definition of an English history play, and there were no aesthetic rules regarding its shaping. The ancient Classical world had recognized two broad categories of genre, comedy and tragedy. (This account leaves out more specialized genres like the satyr play.) Aristotle and other critics, including Horace, had evolved, over centuries, Classical definitions. Tragedy dealt with the disaster-struck lives of great persons, was written in elevated verse, and took as its setting a mythological and ancient world of gods and heroes: Agamemnon, Theseus, Oedipus, Medea, and the rest. Pity and terror were the prevailing emotional responses in plays that sought to understand, however imperfectly, the will of the supreme gods. Classical comedy, conversely, dramatized the everyday. Its chief figures were citizens of Athens and Rome—householders, courtesans, slaves, scoundrels, and so forth. The humour was immediate, contemporary, topical; the lampooning was satirical, even savage. Members of the audience were invited to look at mimetic representations of their own daily lives and to laugh at greed and folly.

The English history play had no such ideal theoretical structure. It was an existential invention: the dramatic treatment of recent English history. It might be tragic or comic or, more commonly, a hybrid. Polonius's list of generic possibilities captures the ludicrous potential for endless hybridizations: "tragedy, comedy, history, pastoral, pastoral-comical, historical-pastoral, tragical-historical, tragical-comical-historical-pastoral," and so on (*Hamlet*, Act II, scene 2, lines 397–399). (By "pastoral," Polonius presumably means a play based on romances telling of shepherds and rural life, as contrasted with the corruptions of city and court.) Shakespeare's history plays were so successful in the 1590s' London theatre that the editors of Shakespeare's complete works, in 1623, chose to group his dramatic output

under three headings: comedies, histories, and tragedies. The genre established itself by sheer force of its compelling popularity.

Shakespeare in 1590 or thereabouts had really only one viable model for the English history play, an anonymous and sprawling drama called *The Famous Victories of Henry the Fifth* (1583–88) that told the saga of Henry IV’s son, Prince Hal, from the days of his adolescent rebellion down through his victory over the French at the Battle of Agincourt in 1415—in other words, the material that Shakespeare would later use in writing three major plays, *Henry IV, Part 1*; *Henry IV, Part 2*; and *Henry V*. Shakespeare chose to start not with Prince Hal but with more recent history in the reign of Henry V’s son Henry VI and with the civil wars that saw the overthrow of Henry VI by Edward IV and then the accession to power in 1483 of Richard III. This material proved to be so rich in themes and dramatic conflicts that he wrote four plays on it, a “tetralogy” extending from *Henry VI* in three parts (c. 1589–93) to *Richard III* (c. 1592–94).

These plays were immediately successful. Contemporary references indicate that audiences of the early 1590s thrilled to the story (in *Henry VI, Part 1*) of the brave Lord Talbot doing battle in France against the witch Joan of Arc and her lover, the French Dauphin, but being undermined in his heroic effort by effeminacy and corruption at home. Henry VI himself is, as Shakespeare portrays him, a weak king, raised to the kingship by the early death of his father, incapable of controlling factionalism in his court, and enervated personally by his infatuation with a dangerous Frenchwoman, Margaret of Anjou. Henry VI is cuckolded by his wife and her lover, the Duke of Suffolk, and (in *Henry VI, Part 2*) proves unable to defend his virtuous uncle, the Duke of Gloucester, against opportunistic enemies. The result is civil unrest, lower-class rebellion (led by Jack Cade), and eventually all-out civil war between the Lancastrian faction, nominally headed by Henry VI, and the Yorkist claimants under the leadership of Edward IV and his brothers. *Richard III* completes the saga with its account of the baleful rise of Richard of Gloucester through the murdering of his brother the Duke of Clarence and of Edward IV’s two sons, who were also Richard’s nephews. Richard’s tyrannical reign yields eventually and inevitably to the newest and most successful claimant of the throne, Henry Tudor, earl of Richmond. This is the man who becomes Henry VII, scion of the Tudor dynasty and grandfather of Queen Elizabeth I, who reigned from 1558 to 1603 and hence during the entire first decade and more of Shakespeare’s productive career.

The Shakespearean English history play told of the country’s history at a time when the English nation was struggling with its own sense of national identity and experiencing a new sense of power. Queen Elizabeth had brought stability and a relative freedom from war to her decades of rule. She had held at bay the Roman Catholic powers of the Continent, notably Philip II of Spain, and, with the help of a storm at sea, had fought off Philip’s attempts to invade her kingdom with the great Spanish Armada of 1588. In England the triumph of the nation was viewed universally as a divine deliverance. The second edition of Holinshed’s *Chronicles* was at hand as a vast source for Shakespeare’s historical playwriting. It, too, celebrated the emergence of England as a major Protestant power, led by a popular and astute monarch.

From the perspective of the 1590s, the history of the 15th century also seemed newly pertinent. England had emerged from a terrible civil war in 1485, with Henry Tudor's victory over Richard III at the Battle of Bosworth Field. The chief personages of these wars, known as the Wars of the Roses—Henry Tudor, Richard III, the duke of Buckingham, Hastings, Rivers, Gray, and many more—were very familiar to contemporary English readers.

Because these historical plays of Shakespeare in the early 1590s were so intent on telling the saga of emergent nationhood, they exhibit a strong tendency to identify villains and heroes. Shakespeare is writing dramas, not schoolbook texts, and he freely alters dates and facts and emphases. Lord Talbot in *Henry VI, Part 1* is a hero because he dies defending English interests against the corrupt French. In *Henry VI, Part 2* Humphrey, duke of Gloucester, is cut down by opportunists because he represents the best interests of the commoners and the nation as a whole. Most of all, Richard of Gloucester is made out to be a villain epitomizing the very worst features of a chaotic century of civil strife. He foments strife, lies, and murders and makes outrageous promises he has no intention of keeping. He is a brilliantly theatrical figure because he is so inventive and clever, but he is also deeply threatening. Shakespeare gives him every defect that popular tradition imagined: a hunchback, a baleful glittering eye, a conspiratorial genius. The real Richard was no such villain, it seems; at least, his politically inspired murders were no worse than the systematic elimination of all opposition by his successor, the historical Henry VII. The difference is that Henry VII lived to commission historians to tell the story his way, whereas Richard lost everything through defeat. As founder of the Tudor dynasty and grandfather of Queen Elizabeth, Henry VII could command a respect that even Shakespeare was bound to honour, and accordingly the Henry Tudor that he portrays at the end of *Richard III* is a God-fearing patriot and loving husband of the Yorkist princess who is to give birth to the next generation of Tudor monarchs.

Richard III is a tremendous play, both in length and in the bravura depiction of its titular protagonist. It is called a tragedy on its original title page, as are other of these early English history plays. Certainly they present us with brutal deaths and with instructive falls of great men from positions of high authority to degradation and misery. Yet these plays are not tragedies in the Classical sense of the term. They contain so much else, and notably they end on a major key: the accession to power of the Tudor dynasty that will give England its great years under Elizabeth. The story line is one of suffering and of eventual salvation, of deliverance by mighty forces of history and of divine oversight that will not allow England to continue to suffer once she has returned to the true path of duty and decency. In this important sense, the early history plays are like tragicomedies or romances.

The poems

Shakespeare seems to have wanted to be a poet as much as he sought to succeed in the theatre. His plays are wonderfully and poetically written, often in blank verse. And when he experienced a pause in his theatrical career about 1592–94, the plague having closed down much theatrical activity, he wrote poems. *Venus and Adonis* (1593) and *The Rape of Lucrece* (1594) are the only works that Shakespeare seems to have shepherded through the printing process. Both owe a good deal to Ovid, the Classical poet whose writings Shakespeare encountered repeatedly in school. These two poems are the only works for which he wrote

dedicatory prefaces. Both are to Henry Wriothesley, earl of Southampton. This young man, a favourite at court, seems to have encouraged Shakespeare and to have served for a brief time at least as his sponsor. The dedication to the second poem is measurably warmer than the first. An unreliable tradition supposes that Southampton gave Shakespeare the stake he needed to buy into the newly formed Lord Chamberlain's acting company in 1594. Shakespeare became an actor-sharer, one of the owners in a capitalist enterprise that shared the risks and the gains among them. This company succeeded brilliantly; Shakespeare and his colleagues, including Richard Burbage, John Heminge, Henry Condell, and Will Sly, became wealthy through their dramatic presentations.

Shakespeare may also have written at least some of his sonnets to Southampton, beginning in these same years of 1593–94 and continuing on through the decade and later. The question of autobiographical basis in the sonnets is much debated, but Southampton at least fits the portrait of a young gentleman who is being urged to marry and produce a family. (Southampton's family was eager that he do just this.) Whether the account of a strong, loving relationship between the poet and his gentleman friend is autobiographical is more difficult still to determine. As a narrative, the sonnet sequence tells of strong attachment, of jealousy, of grief at separation, of joy at being together and sharing beautiful experiences. The emphasis on the importance of poetry as a way of eternizing human achievement and of creating a lasting memory for the poet himself is appropriate to a friendship between a poet of modest social station and a friend who is better-born. When the sonnet sequence introduces the so-called "Dark Lady," the narrative becomes one of painful and destructive jealousy. Scholars do not know the order in which the sonnets were composed—Shakespeare seems to have had no part in publishing them—but no order other than the order of publication has been proposed, and, as the sonnets stand, they tell a coherent and disturbing tale. The poet experiences sex as something that fills him with revulsion and remorse, at least in the lustful circumstances in which he encounters it. His attachment to the young man is a love relationship that sustains him at times more than the love of the Dark Lady can do, and yet this loving friendship also dooms the poet to disappointment and self-hatred. Whether the sequence reflects any circumstances in Shakespeare's personal life, it certainly is told with an immediacy and dramatic power that bespeak an extraordinary gift for seeing into the human heart and its sorrows.

Plays of the middle and late years

Romantic comedies

In the second half of the 1590s, Shakespeare brought to perfection the genre of romantic comedy that he had helped to invent. *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (c. 1595–96), one of the most successful of all his plays, displays the kind of multiple plotting he had practiced in *The Taming of the Shrew* and other earlier comedies. The overarching plot is of Duke Theseus of Athens and his impending marriage to an Amazonian warrior, Hippolyta, whom Theseus has recently conquered and brought back to Athens to be his bride. Their marriage ends the play. They share this concluding ceremony with the four young lovers Hermia and Lysander, Helena and Demetrius, who have fled into the forest nearby to escape the Athenian law and to pursue one another, whereupon they are subjected to a complicated series of mix-ups. Eventually all is righted by fairy magic, though the fairies are no less at

strife. Oberon, king of the fairies, quarrels with his Queen Titania over a changeling boy and punishes her by causing her to fall in love with an Athenian artisan who wears an ass's head. The artisans are in the forest to rehearse a play for the forthcoming marriage of Theseus and Hippolyta. Thus four separate strands or plots interact with one another. Despite the play's brevity, it is a masterpiece of artful construction.

The use of multiple plots encourages a varied treatment of the experiencing of love. For the two young human couples, falling in love is quite hazardous; the long-standing friendship between the two young women is threatened and almost destroyed by the rivalries of heterosexual encounter. The eventual transition to heterosexual marriage seems to them to have been a process of dreaming, indeed of nightmare, from which they emerge miraculously restored to their best selves. Meantime the marital strife of Oberon and Titania is, more disturbingly, one in which the female is humiliated until she submits to the will of her husband. Similarly, Hippolyta is an Amazon warrior queen who has had to submit to the authority of a husband. Fathers and daughters are no less at strife until, as in a dream, all is resolved by the magic of Puck and Oberon. Love is ambivalently both an enduring ideal relationship and a struggle for mastery in which the male has the upper hand.

The Merchant of Venice (c. 1596–97) uses a double plot structure to contrast a tale of romantic wooing with one that comes close to tragedy. Portia is a fine example of a romantic heroine in Shakespeare's mature comedies: she is witty, rich, exacting in what she expects of men, and adept at putting herself in a male disguise to make her presence felt. She is loyally obedient to her father's will and yet determined that she shall have Bassanio. She triumphantly resolves the murky legal affairs of Venice when the men have all failed. Shylock, the Jewish moneylender, is at the point of exacting a pound of flesh from Bassanio's friend Antonio as payment for a forfeited loan. Portia foils him in his attempt in a way that is both clever and shystering. Sympathy is uneasily balanced in Shakespeare's portrayal of Shylock, who is both persecuted by his Christian opponents and all too ready to demand an eye for an eye according to ancient law. Ultimately Portia triumphs, not only with Shylock in the court of law but in her marriage with Bassanio.

Much Ado About Nothing (c. 1598–99) revisits the issue of power struggles in courtship, again in a revealingly double plot. The young heroine of the more conventional story, derived from Italianate fiction, is wooed by a respectable young aristocrat named Claudio who has won his spurs and now considers it his pleasant duty to take a wife. He knows so little about Hero (as she is named) that he gullibly credits the contrived evidence of the play's villain, Don John, that she has had many lovers, including one on the evening before the intended wedding. Other men as well, including Claudio's senior officer, Don Pedro, and Hero's father, Leonato, are all too ready to believe the slanderous accusation. Only comic circumstances rescue Hero from her accusers and reveal to the men that they have been fools. Meantime, Hero's cousin, Beatrice, finds it hard to overcome her skepticism about men, even when she is wooed by Benedick, who is also a skeptic about marriage. Here the barriers to romantic understanding are inner and psychological and must be defeated by the good-natured plotting of their friends, who see that Beatrice and Benedick are truly made for one another in their wit and candour if they can only overcome their fear of being outwitted by each other. In what could be regarded as a brilliant rewriting of *The Taming of the Shrew*, the

witty battle of the sexes is no less amusing and complicated, but the eventual accommodation finds something much closer to mutual respect and equality between men and women.

Rosalind, in *As You Like It* (c. 1598–1600), makes use of the by-now familiar device of disguise as a young man in order to pursue the ends of promoting a rich and substantial relationship between the sexes. As in other of these plays, Rosalind is more emotionally stable and mature than her young man, Orlando. He lacks formal education and is all rough edges, though fundamentally decent and attractive. She is the daughter of the banished Duke who finds herself obliged, in turn, to go into banishment with her dear cousin Celia and the court fool, Touchstone. Although Rosalind’s male disguise is at first a means of survival in a seemingly inhospitable forest, it soon serves a more interesting function. As “Ganymede,” Rosalind befriends Orlando, offering him counseling in the affairs of love. Orlando, much in need of such advice, readily accepts and proceeds to woo his “Rosalind” (“Ganymede” playing her own self) as though she were indeed a woman. Her wryly amusing perspectives on the follies of young love helpfully puncture Orlando’s inflated and unrealistic “Petrarchan” stance as the young lover who writes poems to his mistress and sticks them up on trees. Once he has learned that love is not a fantasy of invented attitudes, Orlando is ready to be the husband of the real young woman (actually a boy actor, of course) who is presented to him as the transformed Ganymede-Rosalind. Other figures in the play further an understanding of love’s glorious foolishness by their various attitudes: Silvius, the pale-faced wooer out of pastoral romance; Phoebe, the disdainful mistress whom he worships; William, the country bumpkin, and Audrey, the country wench; and, surveying and commenting on every imaginable kind of human folly, the clown Touchstone and the malcontent traveler Jaques.

Twelfth Night (c. 1600–02) pursues a similar motif of female disguise. Viola, cast ashore in Illyria by a shipwreck and obliged to disguise herself as a young man in order to gain a place in the court of Duke Orsino, falls in love with the duke and uses her disguise as a cover for an educational process not unlike that given by Rosalind to Orlando. Orsino is as unrealistic a lover as one could hope to imagine; he pays fruitless court to the Countess Olivia and seems content with the unproductive love melancholy in which he wallows. Only Viola, as “Cesario,” is able to awaken in him a genuine feeling for friendship and love. They become inseparable companions and then seeming rivals for the hand of Olivia until the presto change of Shakespeare’s stage magic is able to restore “Cesario” to her woman’s garments and thus present to Orsino the flesh-and-blood woman whom he has only distantly imagined. The transition from same-sex friendship to heterosexual union is a constant in Shakespearean comedy. The woman is the self-knowing, constant, loyal one; the man needs to learn a lot from the woman. As in the other plays as well, *Twelfth Night* neatly plays off this courtship theme with a second plot, of Malvolio’s self-deception that he is desired by Olivia—an illusion that can be addressed only by the satirical devices of exposure and humiliation.

The Merry Wives of Windsor (c. 1597–1601) is an interesting deviation from the usual Shakespearean romantic comedy in that it is set not in some imagined far-off place like Illyria or Belmont or the forest of Athens but in Windsor, a solidly bourgeois village near Windsor Castle in the heart of England. Uncertain tradition has it that Queen Elizabeth wanted to see Falstaff in love. There is little, however, in the way of romantic wooing (the story of Anne

Page and her suitor Fenton is rather buried in the midst of so many other goings-on), but the play's portrayal of women, and especially of the two "merry wives," Mistress Alice Ford and Mistress Margaret Page, reaffirms what is so often true of women in these early plays, that they are good-hearted, chastely loyal, and wittily self-possessed. Falstaff, a suitable butt for their cleverness, is a scapegoat figure who must be publicly humiliated as a way of transferring onto him the human frailties that Windsor society wishes to expunge.

Completion of the Histories

Concurrent with his writing of these fine romantic comedies, Shakespeare also brought to completion (for the time being, at least) his project of writing 15th-century English history. After having finished in 1589–94 the tetralogy about Henry VI, Edward IV, and Richard III, bringing the story down to 1485, and then circa 1594–96 a play about John that deals with a chronological period (the 13th century) that sets it quite apart from his other history plays, Shakespeare turned to the late 14th and early 15th centuries and to the chronicle of Richard II, Henry IV, and Henry's legendary son Henry V. This inversion of historical order in the two tetralogies allowed Shakespeare to finish his sweep of late medieval English history with Henry V, a hero king in a way that Richard III could never pretend to be.

Richard II (c. 1595–96), written throughout in blank verse, is a sombre play about political impasse. It contains almost no humour, other than a wry scene in which the new king, Henry IV, must adjudicate the competing claims of the Duke of York and his Duchess, the first of whom wishes to see his son Aumerle executed for treason and the second of whom begs for mercy. Henry is able to be merciful on this occasion, since he has now won the kingship, and thus gives to this scene an upbeat movement. Earlier, however, the mood is grim. Richard, installed at an early age into the kingship, proves irresponsible as a ruler. He unfairly banishes his own first cousin, Henry Bolingbroke (later to be Henry IV), whereas the king himself appears to be guilty of ordering the murder of an uncle. When Richard keeps the dukedom of Lancaster from Bolingbroke without proper legal authority, he manages to alienate many nobles and to encourage Bolingbroke's return from exile. That return, too, is illegal, but it is a fact, and, when several of the nobles (including York) come over to Bolingbroke's side, Richard is forced to abdicate. The rights and wrongs of this power struggle are masterfully ambiguous. History proceeds without any sense of moral imperative. Henry IV is a more capable ruler, but his authority is tarnished by his crimes (including his seeming assent to the execution of Richard), and his own rebellion appears to teach the barons to rebel against him in turn. Henry eventually dies a disappointed man.

The dying king Henry IV must turn royal authority over to young Hal, or Henry, now Henry V. The prospect is dismal both to the dying king and to the members of his court, for Prince Hal has distinguished himself to this point mainly by his penchant for keeping company with the disreputable if engaging Falstaff. The son's attempts at reconciliation with the father succeed temporarily, especially when Hal saves his father's life at the battle of Shrewsbury, but (especially in *Henry IV, Part 2*) his reputation as wastrel will not leave him. Everyone expects from him a reign of irresponsible license, with Falstaff in an influential position. It is for these reasons that the young king must publicly repudiate his old companion of the tavern and the highway, however much that repudiation tugs at his heart and the audience's.

Falstaff, for all his debauchery and irresponsibility, is infectiously amusing and delightful; he represents in Hal a spirit of youthful vitality that is left behind only with the greatest of regret as the young man assumes manhood and the role of crown prince. Hal manages all this with aplomb and goes on to defeat the French mightily at the Battle of Agincourt. Even his high jinks are a part of what is so attractive in him. Maturity and position come at a great personal cost: Hal becomes less a frail human being and more the figure of royal authority.

Thus, in his plays of the 1590s, the young Shakespeare concentrated to a remarkable extent on romantic comedies and English history plays. The two genres are nicely complementary: the one deals with courtship and marriage, while the other examines the career of a young man growing up to be a worthy king. Only at the end of the history plays does Henry V have any kind of romantic relationship with a woman, and this one instance is quite unlike courtships in the romantic comedies: Hal is given the Princess of France as his prize, his reward for sturdy manhood. He takes the lead in the wooing scene in which he invites her to join him in a political marriage. In both romantic comedies and English history plays, a young man successfully negotiates the hazardous and potentially rewarding paths of sexual and social maturation.

Romeo and Juliet

Apart from the early *Titus Andronicus*, the only other play that Shakespeare wrote prior to 1599 that is classified as a tragedy is *Romeo and Juliet* (c. 1594–96), which is quite untypical of the tragedies that are to follow. Written more or less at the time when Shakespeare was writing *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Romeo and Juliet* shares many of the characteristics of romantic comedy. *Romeo and Juliet* are not persons of extraordinary social rank or position, like *Hamlet*, *Othello*, *King Lear*, and *Macbeth*. They are the boy and girl next door, interesting not for their philosophical ideas but for their appealing love for each other. They are character types more suited to Classical comedy in that they do not derive from the upper class. Their wealthy families are essentially bourgeois. The eagerness with which Capulet and his wife court Count Paris as their prospective son-in-law bespeaks their desire for social advancement.

Accordingly, the first half of *Romeo and Juliet* is very funny, while its delight in verse forms reminds us of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. The bawdry of Mercutio and of the Nurse is richly suited to the comic texture of the opening scenes. Romeo, haplessly in love with a Rosaline whom we never meet, is a partly comic figure like Silvius in *As You Like It*. The plucky and self-knowing Juliet is much like the heroines of romantic comedies. She is able to instruct Romeo in the ways of speaking candidly and unaffectedly about their love rather than in the frayed cadences of the Petrarchan wooer.

The play is ultimately a tragedy, of course, and indeed warns its audience at the start that the lovers are “star-crossed.” Yet the tragic vision is not remotely that of *Hamlet* or *King Lear*. *Romeo and Juliet* are unremarkable, nice young people doomed by a host of considerations outside themselves: the enmity of their two families, the misunderstandings that prevent Juliet from being able to tell her parents whom it is that she has married, and even unfortunate coincidence (such as the misdirection of the letter sent to Romeo to warn him of

the Friar's plan for Juliet's recovery from a deathlike sleep). Yet there is the element of personal responsibility upon which most mature tragedy rests when Romeo chooses to avenge the death of Mercutio by killing Tybalt, knowing that this deed will undo the soft graces of forbearance that Juliet has taught him. Romeo succumbs to the macho peer pressure of his male companions, and tragedy results in part from this choice. Yet so much is at work that the reader ultimately sees *Romeo and Juliet* as a love tragedy—celebrating the exquisite brevity of young love, regretting an unfeeling world, and evoking an emotional response that differs from that produced by the other tragedies. Romeo and Juliet are, at last, “Poor sacrifices of our enmity” (Act V, scene 3, line 304). The emotional response the play evokes is a strong one, but it is not like the response called forth by the tragedies after 1599.

The “problem” plays

Whatever his reasons, about 1599–1600 Shakespeare turned with unsparing intensity to the exploration of darker issues such as revenge, sexual jealousy, aging, midlife crisis, and death. Perhaps he saw that his own life was moving into a new phase of more complex and vexing experiences. Perhaps he felt, or sensed, that he had worked through the romantic comedy and history play and the emotional trajectories of maturation that they encompassed. At any event, he began writing not only his great tragedies but a group of plays that are hard to classify in terms of genre. They are sometimes grouped today as “problem” plays or “problem” comedies. An examination of these plays is crucial to understanding this period of transition from 1599 to 1605.

The three problem plays dating from these years are *All's Well That Ends Well*, *Measure for Measure*, and *Troilus and Cressida*. *All's Well* is a comedy ending in acceptance of marriage, but in a way that poses thorny ethical issues. Count Bertram cannot initially accept his marriage to Helena, a woman of lower social station who has grown up in his noble household and has won Bertram as her husband by her seemingly miraculous cure of the French king. Bertram's reluctance to face the responsibilities of marriage is all the more dismaying when he turns his amorous intentions to a Florentine maiden, Diana, whom he wishes to seduce without marriage. Helena's stratagem to resolve this difficulty is the so-called bed trick, substituting herself in Bertram's bed for the arranged assignation and then calling her wayward husband to account when she is pregnant with his child. Her ends are achieved by such morally ambiguous means that marriage seems at best a precarious institution on which to base the presumed reassurances of romantic comedy. The pathway toward resolution and emotional maturity is not easy; Helena is a more ambiguous heroine than Rosalind or Viola.

Measure for Measure (c. 1603–04) similarly employs the bed trick, and for a similar purpose, though in even murkier circumstances. Isabella, on the verge of becoming a nun, learns that she has attracted the sexual desire of Lord Angelo, the deputy ruler of Vienna serving in the mysterious absence of the Duke. Her plea to Angelo for her brother's life, when that brother (Claudio) has been sentenced to die for fornication with his fiancée, is met with a demand that she sleep with Angelo or forfeit Claudio's life. This ethical dilemma is resolved by a trick (devised by the Duke, in disguise) to substitute for Isabella a woman (Mariana) whom Angelo was supposed to marry but refused when she could produce no dowry. The Duke's

motivations in manipulating these substitutions and false appearances are unclear, though arguably his wish is to see what the various characters of this play will do when faced with seemingly impossible choices. Angelo is revealed as a morally fallen man, a would-be seducer and murderer who is nonetheless remorseful and ultimately glad to have been prevented from carrying out his intended crimes; Claudio learns that he is coward enough to wish to live by any means, including the emotional and physical blackmail of his sister; and Isabella learns that she is capable of bitterness and hatred, even if, crucially, she finally discovers that she can and must forgive her enemy. Her charity, and the Duke's stratagems, make possible an ending in forgiveness and marriage, but in that process the nature and meaning of marriage are severely tested.

Troilus and Cressida (c. 1601–02) is the most experimental and puzzling of these three plays. Simply in terms of genre, it is virtually unclassifiable. It can hardly be a comedy, ending as it does in the deaths of Patroclus and Hector and the looming defeat of the Trojans. Nor is the ending normative in terms of romantic comedy: the lovers, Troilus and Cressida, are separated from one another and embittered by the failure of their relationship. The play is a history play in a sense, dealing as it does with the great Trojan War celebrated in Homer's Iliad, and yet its purpose is hardly that of telling the story of the war. As a tragedy, it is perplexing in that the chief figures of the play (apart from Hector) do not die at the end, and the mood is one of desolation and even disgust rather than tragic catharsis. Perhaps the play should be thought of as a satire; the choric observations of Thersites and Pandarus serve throughout as a mordant commentary on the interconnectedness of war and lechery. With fitting ambiguity, the play was placed in the Folio of 1623 between the histories and the tragedies, in a category all by itself. Clearly, in these problem plays Shakespeare was opening up for himself a host of new problems in terms of genre and human sexuality.

Julius Caesar



Watch William Shakespeare's eponymous protagonist dismiss Calpurnia's cautions in *Julius Caesar*

Caesar rejects Calpurnia's cautionary pleas with the words “What can be avoided whose end is purposed by the mighty gods?” from Act II, scene 2, of Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*.

Written in 1599 (the same year as *Henry V*) or 1600, probably for the opening of the Globe Theatre on the south bank of the Thames, *Julius Caesar* illustrates similarly the transition in Shakespeare's writing toward darker themes and tragedy. It, too, is a history play in a sense, dealing with a non-Christian civilization existing 16 centuries before Shakespeare wrote his plays. Roman history opened up for Shakespeare a world in which divine purpose could not be easily ascertained. (Click here for a video clip of Caesar's well-known speech.) The characters of *Julius Caesar* variously interpret the great event of the assassination of Caesar as one in which the gods are angry or disinterested or capricious or simply not there. The wise Cicero observes, "Men may construe things after their fashion, / Clean from the purpose of the things themselves" (Act I, scene 3, lines 34–35).

Human history in *Julius Caesar* seems to follow a pattern of rise and fall, in a way that is cyclical rather than divinely purposeful. Caesar enjoys his days of triumph, until he is cut down by the conspirators; Brutus and Cassius succeed to power, but not for long. Brutus's attempts to protect Roman republicanism and the freedom of the city's citizens to govern themselves through senatorial tradition end up in the destruction of the very liberties he most cherished. He and Cassius meet their destiny at the Battle of Philippi. They are truly tragic figures, especially Brutus, in that their essential characters are their fate; Brutus is a good man but also proud and stubborn, and these latter qualities ultimately bring about his death. Shakespeare's first major tragedy is Roman in spirit and Classical in its notion of tragic character. It shows what Shakespeare had to learn from Classical precedent as he set about looking for workable models in tragedy.

The tragedies

An informal overview of Elizabethan and Jacobean tragedy, particularly William Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* and *Hamlet*.

Hamlet (c. 1599–1601), on the other hand, chooses a tragic model closer to that of *Titus Andronicus* and Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy*. In form, *Hamlet* is a revenge tragedy. It features characteristics found in *Titus* as well: a protagonist charged with the responsibility of avenging a heinous crime against the protagonist's family, a cunning antagonist, the appearance of the ghost of the murdered person, the feigning of madness to throw off the villain's suspicions, the play within the play as a means of testing the villain, and still more.

Yet to search out these comparisons is to highlight what is so extraordinary about *Hamlet*, for it refuses to be merely a revenge tragedy. Shakespeare's protagonist is unique in the genre in his moral qualms, and most of all in his finding a way to carry out his dread command without becoming a cold-blooded murderer. *Hamlet* does act bloodily, especially when he kills Polonius, thinking that the old man hidden in Gertrude's chambers must be the King whom *Hamlet* is commissioned to kill. The act seems plausible and strongly motivated, and yet *Hamlet* sees at once that he has erred. He has killed the wrong man, even if Polonius has brought this on himself with his incessant spying. *Hamlet* sees that he has offended heaven and that he will have to pay for his act. When, at the play's end, *Hamlet* encounters his fate in a duel with Polonius's son, Laertes, *Hamlet* interprets his own tragic story as one that

Providence has made meaningful. By placing himself in the hands of Providence and believing devoutly that “There’s a divinity that shapes our ends, / Rough-hew them how we will” (Act V, scene 2, lines 10–11), Hamlet finds himself ready for a death that he has longed for. He also finds an opportunity for killing Claudius almost unpremeditatedly, spontaneously, as an act of reprisal

Gertrude is forced by Hamlet to face her own treachery in Act III, scene 4, of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*.

Hamlet thus finds tragic meaning in his own story. More broadly, too, he has searched for meaning in dilemmas of all sorts: his mother’s overhasty marriage, Ophelia’s weak-willed succumbing to the will of her father and brother, his being spied on by his erstwhile friends Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, and much more. His utterances are often despondent, relentlessly honest, and philosophically profound, as he ponders the nature of friendship, memory, romantic attachment, filial love, sensuous enslavement, corrupting habits (drinking, sexual lust), and almost every phase of human experience.

One remarkable aspect about Shakespeare’s great tragedies (*Hamlet*, *Othello*, *King Lear*, *Macbeth*, and *Antony and Cleopatra* most of all) is that they proceed through such a staggering range of human emotions, and especially the emotions that are appropriate to the mature years of the human cycle. Hamlet is 30, one learns—an age when a person is apt to perceive that the world around him is “an unweeded garden / That grows to seed. Things rank and gross in nature / Possess it merely” (Act I, scene 2, lines 135–137). Shakespeare was about 36 when he wrote this play. *Othello* (c. 1603–04) centres on sexual jealousy in marriage. *King Lear* (c. 1605–06) is about aging, generational conflict, and feelings of ingratitude. *Macbeth* (c. 1606–07) explores ambition mad enough to kill a father figure who stands in the way. *Antony and Cleopatra*, written about 1606–07 when Shakespeare was 42 or thereabouts, studies the exhilarating but ultimately dismaying phenomenon of midlife crisis. Shakespeare moves his readers vicariously through these life experiences while he himself struggles to capture, in tragic form, their terrors and challenges.

These plays are deeply concerned with domestic and family relationships. In *Othello* Desdemona is the only daughter of Brabantio, an aging senator of Venice, who dies heartbroken because his daughter has eloped with a dark-skinned man who is her senior by many years and is of another culture. With *Othello*, Desdemona is briefly happy, despite her filial disobedience, until a terrible sexual jealousy is awakened in him, quite without cause other than his own fears and susceptibility to Iago’s insinuations that it is only “natural” for Desdemona to seek erotic pleasure with a young man who shares her background. Driven by his own deeply irrational fear and hatred of women and seemingly mistrustful of his own masculinity, Iago can assuage his own inner torment only by persuading other men like Othello that their inevitable fate is to be cuckolded. As a tragedy, the play adroitly exemplifies the traditional Classical model of a good man brought to misfortune by hamartia, or tragic flaw; as Othello grieves, he is one who has “loved not wisely, but too well” (Act V, scene 2, line 354). It bears remembering, however, that Shakespeare owed no loyalty to this Classical model. *Hamlet*, for one, is a play that does not work well in Aristotelian terms. The search for an Aristotelian hamartia has led all too often to the trite argument that Hamlet

suffers from melancholia and a tragic inability to act, whereas a more plausible reading of the play argues that finding the right course of action is highly problematic for him and for everyone. Hamlet sees examples on all sides of those whose forthright actions lead to fatal mistakes or absurd ironies (Laertes, Fortinbras), and indeed his own swift killing of the man he assumes to be Claudius hidden in his mother's chambers turns out to be a mistake for which he realizes heaven will hold him accountable.

Daughters and fathers are also at the heart of the major dilemma in King Lear. In this configuration, Shakespeare does what he often does in his late plays: erase the wife from the picture, so that father and daughter(s) are left to deal with one another. (Compare *Othello*, *The Winter's Tale*, *Cymbeline*, *The Tempest*, and perhaps the circumstances of Shakespeare's own life, in which his relations with his daughter Susanna especially seem to have meant more to him than his partly estranged marriage with Anne.) Lear's banishing of his favourite daughter, Cordelia, because of her laconic refusal to proclaim a love for him as the essence of her being, brings upon this aging king the terrible punishment of being belittled and rejected by his ungrateful daughters, Goneril and Regan. Concurrently, in the play's second plot, the Earl of Gloucester makes a similar mistake with his good-hearted son, Edgar, and thereby delivers himself into the hands of his scheming illegitimate son, Edmund. Both these erring elderly fathers are ultimately nurtured by the loyal children they have banished, but not before the play has tested to its absolute limit the proposition that evil can flourish in a bad world.

The gods seem indifferent, perhaps absent entirely; pleas to them for assistance go unheeded while the storm of fortune rains down on the heads of those who have trusted in conventional pieties. Part of what is so great in this play is that its testing of the major characters requires them to seek out philosophical answers that can arm the resolute heart against ingratitude and misfortune by constantly pointing out that life owes one nothing. The consolations of philosophy preciously found out by Edgar and Cordelia are those that rely not on the suppositious gods but on an inner moral strength demanding that one be charitable and honest because life is otherwise monstrous and subhuman. The play exacts terrible prices of those who persevere in goodness, but it leaves them and the reader, or audience, with the reassurance that it is simply better to be a Cordelia than to be a Goneril, to be an Edgar than to be an Edmund.

The Weird Sisters (Three Witches) conspire in Act I, scene 1, of Shakespeare's *Macbeth*.

- Watch Lady Macbeth goad Macbeth to kill Duncan in a film adaptation of Shakespeare's *Macbeth*

Lady Macbeth encourages her husband to stand by his oath to kill Duncan, in Act I, scene 7, of William Shakespeare's *Macbeth*; an excerpt from a 1964 film produced by Encyclopædia Britannica Educational Corporation.

Macbeth is in some ways Shakespeare's most unsettling tragedy, because it invites the intense examination of the heart of a man who is well-intentioned in most ways but who discovers that he cannot resist the temptation to achieve power at any cost. *Macbeth* is a

sensitive, even poetic person, and as such he understands with frightening clarity the stakes that are involved in his contemplated deed of murder. Duncan is a virtuous king and his guest. The deed is regicide and murder and a violation of the sacred obligations of hospitality. Macbeth knows that Duncan's virtues, like angels, "trumpet-tongued," will plead against "the deep damnation of his taking-off" (Act I, scene 7, lines 19–20). The only factor weighing on the other side is personal ambition, which Macbeth understands to be a moral failing. The question of why he proceeds to murder is partly answered by the insidious temptations of the three Weird Sisters, who sense Macbeth's vulnerability to their prophecies, and the terrifying strength of his wife, who drives him on to the murder by describing his reluctance as unmanliness. Ultimately, though, the responsibility lies with Macbeth. His collapse of moral integrity confronts the audience and perhaps implicates it. The loyalty and decency of such characters as Macduff hardly offset what is so painfully weak in the play's protagonist.

Antony and Cleopatra approaches human frailty in terms that are less spiritually terrifying. The story of the lovers is certainly one of worldly failure. Plutarch's *Lives* gave to Shakespeare the object lesson of a brave general who lost his reputation and sense of self-worth through his infatuation with an admittedly attractive but nonetheless dangerous woman. Shakespeare changes none of the circumstances: Antony hates himself for dallying in Egypt with Cleopatra, agrees to marry with Octavius Caesar's sister Octavia as a way of recovering his status in the Roman triumvirate, cheats on Octavia eventually, loses the battle of Actium because of his fatal attraction for Cleopatra, and dies in Egypt a defeated, aging warrior. Shakespeare adds to this narrative a compelling portrait of midlife crisis. Antony is deeply anxious about his loss of sexual potency and position in the world of affairs. His amorous life in Egypt is manifestly an attempt to affirm and recover his dwindling male power.

Yet the Roman model is not in Shakespeare's play the unassailably virtuous choice that it is in Plutarch. In *Antony and Cleopatra* Roman behaviour does promote attentiveness to duty and worldly achievement, but, as embodied in young Octavius, it is also obsessively male and cynical about women. Octavius is intent on capturing Cleopatra and leading her in triumph back to Rome—that is, to cage the unruly woman and place her under male control. When Cleopatra perceives that aim, she chooses a noble suicide rather than humiliation by a patriarchal male. In her suicide, Cleopatra avers that she has called "great Caesar ass / Unpolicied" (Act V, scene 2, lines 307–308). Vastly to be preferred is the fleeting dream of greatness with Antony, both of them unfettered, godlike, like Isis and Osiris, immortalized as heroic lovers even if the actual circumstances of their lives were often disappointing and even tawdry. The vision in this tragedy is deliberately unstable, but at its most ethereal it encourages a vision of human greatness that is distant from the soul-corrupting evil of *Macbeth* or *King Lear*.

Two late tragedies also choose the ancient Classical world as their setting but do so in a deeply dispiriting way. Shakespeare appears to have been much preoccupied with ingratitude and human greed in these years. *Timon of Athens* (c. 1605–08), probably an unfinished play and possibly never produced, initially shows us a prosperous man fabled for his generosity. When he discovers that he has exceeded his means, he turns to his seeming friends for the kinds of assistance he has given them, only to discover that their memories are short. Retiring

to a bitter isolation, Timon rails against all humanity and refuses every sort of consolation, even that of well-meant companionship and sympathy from a former servant. He dies in isolation. The unrelieved bitterness of this account is only partly ameliorated by the story of the military captain Alcibiades, who has also been the subject of Athenian ingratitude and forgetfulness but who manages to reassert his authority at the end. Alcibiades resolves to make some accommodation with the wretched condition of humanity; Timon will have none of it. Seldom has a more unrelievedly embittered play been written.

Coriolanus (c. 1608) similarly portrays the ungrateful responses of a city toward its military hero. The problem is complicated by the fact that Coriolanus, egged on by his mother and his conservative allies, undertakes a political role in Rome for which he is not temperamentally fitted. His friends urge him to hold off his intemperate speech until he is voted into office, but Coriolanus is too plainspoken to be tactful in this way. His contempt for the plebeians and their political leaders, the tribunes, is unsparing. His political philosophy, while relentlessly aristocratic and snobbish, is consistent and theoretically sophisticated; the citizens are, as he argues, incapable of governing themselves judiciously. Yet his fury only makes matters worse and leads to an exile from which he returns to conquer his own city, in league with his old enemy and friend, Aufidius. When his mother comes out for the city to plead for her life and that of other Romans, he relents and thereupon falls into defeat as a kind of mother's boy, unable to assert his own sense of self. As a tragedy, *Coriolanus* is again bitter, satirical, ending in defeat and humiliation. It is an immensely powerful play, and it captures a philosophical mood of nihilism and bitterness that hovers over Shakespeare's writings throughout these years in the first decade of the 1600s.

The Romances

Concurrently, nonetheless, and then in the years that followed, Shakespeare turned again to the writing of comedy. The late comedies are usually called romances or tragicomedies because they tell stories of wandering and separation leading eventually to tearful and joyous reunion. They are suffused with a bittersweet mood that seems eloquently appropriate to a writer who has explored with such unsparing honesty the depths of human suffering and degradation in the great tragedies.

Pericles, written perhaps in 1606–08 and based on the familiar tale of Apollonius of Tyre, may involve some collaboration of authorship; the text is unusually imperfect, and it did not appear in the Folio of 1623. It employs a chorus figure, John Gower (author of an earlier version of this story), to guide the reader or viewer around the Mediterranean on Pericles' various travels, as he avoids marriage with the daughter of the incestuous King Antiochus of Antioch; marries Thaisa, the daughter of King Simonides of Pentapolis; has a child by her; believes his wife to have died in childbirth during a storm at sea and has her body thrown overboard to quiet the superstitious fears of the sailors; puts his daughter Marina in the care of Cleon of Tarsus and his wicked wife, Dionyza; and is eventually restored to his wife and child after many years. The story is typical romance. Shakespeare adds touching scenes of reunion and a perception that beneath the naive account of travel lies a subtle dramatization of separation, loss, and recovery. Pericles is deeply burdened by his loss and perhaps, too, a sense of guilt for having consented to consign his wife's body to the sea. He is recovered

from his despair only by the ministrations of a loving daughter, who is able to give him a reason to live again and then to be reunited with his wife.

The Winter's Tale (c. 1609–11) is in some ways a replaying of this same story, in that King Leontes of Sicilia, smitten by an irrational jealousy of his wife, Hermione, brings about the seeming death of that wife and the real death of their son. The resulting guilt is unbearable for Leontes and yet ultimately curative over a period of many years that are required for his only daughter, Perdita (whom he has nearly killed also), to grow to maturity in distant Bohemia. This story, too, is based on a prose romance, in this case Robert Greene's *Pandosto*. The reunion with daughter and then wife is deeply touching as in *Pericles*, with the added magical touch that the audience does not know that Hermione is alive and in fact has been told that she is dead. Her wonderfully staged appearance as a statue coming to life is one of the great theatrical coups in Shakespeare, playing as it does with favourite Shakespearean themes in these late plays of the ministering daughter, the guilt-ridden husband, and the miraculously recovered wife. The story is all the more moving when one considers that Shakespeare may have had, or imagined, a similar experience of attempting to recover a relationship with his wife, Anne, whom he had left in Stratford during his many years in London.

In *Cymbeline* (c. 1608–10) King Cymbeline drives his virtuous daughter Imogen into exile by his opposition to her marriage with Posthumus Leonatus. The wife in this case is Cymbeline's baleful Queen, a stereotypical wicked stepmother whose witless and lecherous son Cloten (Imogen's half brother) is the embodiment of everything that threatens and postpones the eventual happy ending of this tale. Posthumus, too, fails Imogen by being irrationally jealous of her, but he is eventually recovered to a belief in her goodness. The dark portraiture of the Queen illustrates how ambivalent is Shakespeare's view of the mother in his late plays. This Queen is the wicked stepmother, like Dionyza in *Pericles*; in her relentless desire for control, she also brings to mind Lady Macbeth and the Weird Sisters in *Macbeth*, as well as Coriolanus's mother, Volumnia. The devouring mother is a forbidding presence in the late plays, though she is counterbalanced by redeeming maternal figures such as Hermione in *The Winter's Tale* and Thaisa in *Pericles*.

The *Tempest* (c. 1611) sums up much of what Shakespeare's mature art was all about. Once again we find a wifeless father with a daughter, in this case on a deserted island where the father, Prospero, is entirely responsible for his daughter's education. He behaves like a dramatist in charge of the whole play as well, arranging her life and that of the other characters. He employs a storm at sea to bring young Ferdinand into the company of his daughter; Ferdinand is Prospero's choice, because such a marriage will resolve the bitter dispute between Milan and Naples—arising after the latter supported Prospero's usurping brother Antonio in his claim to the dukedom of Milan—that has led to Prospero's banishment. At the same time, Ferdinand is certainly Miranda's choice as well; the two fall instantly in love, anticipating the desired romantic happy ending. The ending will also mean an end to Prospero's career as artist and dramatist, for he is nearing retirement and senses that his gift will not stay with him forever. The imprisoned spirit Ariel, embodiment of that temporary and precious gift, must be freed in the play's closing moments. Caliban, too, must be freed, since Prospero has done what he could to educate and civilize this Natural Man. Art can only go so far.

The Tempest seems to have been intended as Shakespeare's farewell to the theatre. It contains moving passages of reflection on what his powers as artist have been able to accomplish, and valedictory themes of closure. As a comedy, it demonstrates perfectly the way that Shakespeare was able to combine precise artistic construction (the play chooses on this farewell occasion to observe the Classical unities of time, place, and action) with his special flair for stories that transcend the merely human and physical: *The Tempest* is peopled with spirits, monsters, and drolleries. This, it seems, is Shakespeare's summation of his art as comic dramatist.

But *The Tempest* proved not to be Shakespeare's last play after all. Perhaps he discovered, as many people do, that he was bored in retirement in 1613 or thereabouts. No doubt his acting company was eager to have him back. He wrote a history play titled *Henry VIII* (1613), which is extraordinary in a number of ways: it relates historical events substantially later chronologically than those of the 15th century that had been his subject in his earlier historical plays; it is separated from the last of those plays by perhaps 14 years; and, perhaps most significant, it is as much romance as history play. History in this instance is really about the birth of Elizabeth I, who was to become England's great queen. The circumstances of Henry VIII's troubled marital affairs, his meeting with Anne Boleyn, his confrontation with the papacy, and all the rest turn out to be the humanly unpredictable ways by which Providence engineers the miracle of Elizabeth's birth. The play ends with this great event and sees in it a justification and necessity of all that has proceeded. Thus history yields its providential meaning in the shape of a play that is both history and romance.

Collaborations And Spurious Attributions

The Two Noble Kinsmen (c. 1612–14) brought Shakespeare into collaboration with John Fletcher, his successor as chief playwright for the King's Men. (Fletcher is thought to have helped Shakespeare with *Henry VIII*, and the two playwrights also may well have written the now-lost *Cardenio* in 1613, of which *Double Falsehood*, 1727, purports to be a later adaptation.) The story, taken out of Chaucer's *Knight's Tale*, is essentially another romance, in which two young gallants compete for the hand of Emilia and in which deities preside over the choice. Shakespeare may have had a hand earlier as well in *Edward III*, a history play of about 1590–95, and he seems to have provided a scene or so for *The Book of Sir Thomas More* (c. 1593–1601) when that play encountered trouble with the censor. Collaborative writing was common in the Renaissance English stage, and it is not surprising that Shakespeare was called upon to do some of it. Nor is it surprising that, given his towering reputation, he was credited with having written a number of plays that he had nothing to do with, including those that were spuriously added to the third edition of the Folio in 1664: *Lochrine* (1591–95), *Sir John Oldcastle* (1599–1600), *Thomas Lord Cromwell* (1599–1602), *The London Prodigal* (1603–05), *The Puritan* (1606), and *A Yorkshire Tragedy* (1605–08). To a remarkable extent, nonetheless, his corpus stands as a coherent body of his own work. The shape of the career has a symmetry and internal beauty not unlike that of the individual plays and poems.

Understanding Shakespeare

Readers and playgoers in Shakespeare's own lifetime, and indeed until the late 18th century, never questioned Shakespeare's authorship of his plays. He was a well-known actor from Stratford who performed in London's premier acting company, among the great actors of his day. He was widely known by the leading writers of his time as well, including Ben Jonson and John Webster, both of whom praised him as a dramatist. Many other tributes to him as a great writer appeared during his lifetime. Any theory that supposes him not to have been the writer of the plays and poems attributed to him must suppose that Shakespeare's contemporaries were universally fooled by some kind of secret arrangement.

Learn about William Friedman, who sought to prove that Sir Francis Bacon wrote Shakespeare's plays

An introduction to William F. Friedman, the breaker of the Japanese Purple code in World War II. Friedman learned cryptanalysis while investigating the hypothesis that Sir Francis Bacon wrote the plays of William Shakespeare; encoded clues in the printed text supposedly proved Bacon's authorship.

Yet suspicions on the subject gained increasing force in the mid-19th century. One Delia Bacon proposed that the author was her claimed ancestor Sir Francis Bacon, Viscount St. Albans, who was indeed a prominent writer of the Elizabethan era. What had prompted this theory? The chief considerations seem to have been that little is known about Shakespeare's life (though in fact more is known about him than about his contemporary writers), that he was from the country town of Stratford-upon-Avon, that he never attended one of the universities, and that therefore it would have been impossible for him to write knowledgeably about the great affairs of English courtly life such as we find in the plays.

The theory is suspect on a number of counts. University training in Shakespeare's day centred on theology and on Latin, Greek, and Hebrew texts of a sort that would not have greatly improved Shakespeare's knowledge of contemporary English life. By the 19th century, a university education was becoming more and more the mark of a broadly educated person, but university training in the 16th century was quite a different matter. The notion that only a university-educated person could write of life at court and among the gentry is an erroneous and indeed a snobbish assumption. Shakespeare was better off going to London as he did, seeing and writing plays, listening to how people talked. He was a reporter, in effect. The great writers of his era (or indeed of most eras) are not usually aristocrats, who have no need to earn a living by their pens. Shakespeare's social background is essentially like that of his best contemporaries. Edmund Spenser went to Cambridge, it is true, but he came from a sail-making family. Christopher Marlowe also attended Cambridge, but his kindred were shoemakers in Canterbury. John Webster, Thomas Dekker, and Thomas Middleton came from similar backgrounds. They discovered that they were writers, able to make a living off their talent, and they (excluding the poet Spenser) flocked to the London theatres where customers for their wares were to be found. Like them, Shakespeare was a man of the commercial theatre.

Other candidates—William Stanley, 6th earl of Derby, and Christopher Marlowe among them—have been proposed, and indeed the very fact of so many candidates makes one

suspicious of the claims of any one person. The late 20th-century candidate for the writing of Shakespeare's plays, other than Shakespeare himself, was Edward de Vere, 17th earl of Oxford. Oxford did indeed write verse, as did other gentlemen; sonneteering was a mark of gentlemanly distinction. Oxford was also a wretched man who abused his wife and drove his father-in-law to distraction. Most seriously damaging to Oxford's candidacy is the fact that he died in 1604. The chronology presented here, summarizing perhaps 200 years of assiduous scholarship, establishes a professional career for Shakespeare as dramatist that extends from about 1589 to 1614. Many of his greatest plays—*King Lear*, *Antony and Cleopatra*, and *The Tempest*, to name but three—were written after 1604. To suppose that the dating of the canon is totally out of whack and that all the plays and poems were written before 1604 is a desperate argument. Some individual dates are uncertain, but the overall pattern is coherent. The growth in poetic and dramatic styles, the development of themes and subjects, along with objective evidence, all support a chronology that extends to about 1614. To suppose alternatively that Oxford wrote the plays and poems before 1604 and then put them away in a drawer, to be brought out after his death and updated to make them appear timely, is to invent an answer to a nonexistent problem.

When all is said, the sensible question one must ask is, why would Oxford want to write the plays and poems and then not claim them for himself? The answer given is that he was an aristocrat and that writing for the theatre was not elegant; hence he needed a front man, an alias. Shakespeare, the actor, was a suitable choice. But is it plausible that a cover-up like this could have succeeded?

Shakespeare's contemporaries, after all, wrote of him unequivocally as the author of the plays. Ben Jonson, who knew him well, contributed verses to the First Folio of 1623, where (as elsewhere) he criticizes and praises Shakespeare as the author. John Heminge and Henry Condell, fellow actors and theatre owners with Shakespeare, signed the dedication and a foreword to the First Folio and described their methods as editors. In his own day, therefore, he was accepted as the author of the plays. In an age that loved gossip and mystery as much as any, it seems hardly conceivable that Jonson and Shakespeare's theatrical associates shared the secret of a gigantic literary hoax without a single leak or that they could have been imposed upon without suspicion. Unsupported assertions that the author of the plays was a man of great learning and that Shakespeare of Stratford was an illiterate rustic no longer carry weight, and only when a believer in Bacon or Oxford or Marlowe produces sound evidence will scholars pay close attention.

Feminist Criticism And Gender Studies

Feminist and gender-study approaches to Shakespeare criticism made significant gains after 1980. Feminists, like New Historicists, were interested in contextualizing Shakespeare's writings rather than subjecting them to ahistorical formalist analysis. Turning to anthropologists such as Claude Lévi-Strauss, feminist critics illuminated the extent to which Shakespeare inhabited a patriarchal world dominated by men and fathers, in which women were essentially the means of exchange in power relationships among those men. Feminist criticism is deeply interested in marriage and courtship customs, gender relations, and family structures. In *The Tempest*, for example, feminist interest tends to centre on Prospero's

dominating role as father and on the way in which Ferdinand and Miranda become engaged and, in effect, married when they pledge their love to one another in the presence of a witness—Miranda’s father. Plays and poems dealing with domestic strife (such as Shakespeare’s *The Rape of Lucrece*) take on a new centrality in this criticism. Diaries, marriage-counseling manuals, and other such documents become important to feminist study. Revealing patterns emerge in Shakespeare’s plays as to male insecurities about women, men’s need to dominate and possess women, their fears of growing old, and the like. *Much Ado About Nothing* can be seen as about men’s fears of being cuckolded; *Othello* treats the same male weakness with deeply tragic consequences. The tragedy in *Romeo and Juliet* depends in part on Romeo’s sensitivity to peer pressure that seemingly obliges him to kill Tybalt and thus choose macho male loyalties over the more gentle and forgiving model of behaviour he has learned from Juliet. These are only a few examples. Feminist critics of the late 20th and early 21st centuries included, among many others, Lynda Boose, Lisa Jardine, Gail Paster, Jean Howard, Karen Newman, Carol Neely, Peter Erickson, and Madelon Sprengnether.

Conclusion

The implications of deconstruction for Shakespeare criticism have to do with language and its protean flexibility of meanings. Patricia Parker’s *Shakespeare from the Margins: Language, Culture, Context* (1996), for example, offers many brilliant demonstrations of this, one of which is her study of the word *preposterous*, a word she finds throughout the plays. It means literally *behind* for *before*, *back* for *front*, *second* for *first*, *end* or *sequel* for *beginning*. It suggests the cart before the horse, the last first, and “arsieversie,” with obscene overtones. It is thus a term for disorder in discourse, in sexual relationships, in rights of inheritance, and much more. Deconstruction as a philosophical and critical movement aroused a good deal of animosity because it questioned the fixity of meaning in language. At the same time, however, deconstruction attuned readers to verbal niceties, to layers of meaning, to nuance.

Late 20th-century and early 21st-century scholars were often revolutionary in their criticism of Shakespeare. To readers the result frequently appeared overly postmodern and trendy, presenting Shakespeare as a contemporary at the expense of more traditional values of tragic intensity, comic delight, and pure insight into the human condition. No doubt some of this criticism, as well as some older criticism, was too obscure and ideologically driven. Yet deconstructionists and feminists, for example, at their best portray a Shakespeare of enduring greatness. His durability is demonstrable in the very fact that so much modern criticism, despite its mistrust of canonical texts written by “dead white European males,” turns to Shakespeare again and again. He is dead, white, European, and male, and yet he appeals irresistibly to readers and theatre audiences all over the world. In the eyes of many feminist critics, he portrays women with the kind of fullness and depth found in authors such as Virginia Woolf and George Eliot.

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