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**SHAKESPEARE:
TEN GREAT COMEDIES
COURSE GUIDE**



Professor Raphael Shargel
PROVIDENCE COLLEGE

Shakespeare: Ten Great Comedies

Professor Raphael Shargel
Providence College



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Ten Great Comedies
Professor Raphael Shargel



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About Your Professor

Raphael Shargel

Raphael Shargel is an associate professor of English at Providence College, where he teaches Shakespeare, seventeenth-century literature, drama, and film. He is also active in Providence College's program in the Development of Western Civilization, a team-taught interdisciplinary course that traces Western literature, history, philosophy, theology, and the arts from their beginnings to the present day.

Professor Shargel received his M.A. and Ph.D. from the University of Virginia and his B.A. from Yale. Passionate about teaching, he has conducted classes for students of all ages. But he works chiefly at the college level, where he has developed a reputation as a thought-provoking lecturer and leader of class discussion. He has taught Shakespeare in introductory courses as well as upper-level seminars, where he encourages students to pay special attention to Shakespeare's use of language.

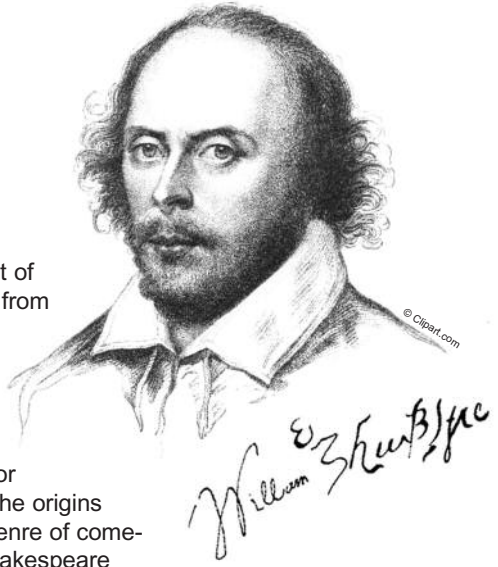
He has also taught literature surveys and classes in the Victorian novel, medieval literature, nineteenth- and twentieth-century American literature, and English composition. A lover of movies, Professor Shargel has taught and developed a number of courses on film, including introductions to the history and aesthetics of the cinema as well as courses on film romance, political films, the representation of race in American cinema, Southern life as portrayed in Hollywood movies, and film noir. He is the film critic for *The New Leader*.

Recent publications include an edition of collected interviews with Ingmar Bergman as well as articles on playwright Ben Jonson, Shakespeare's great contemporary, which focus on Jonson's literary theory, his neglected works, and the history of his critical reception.

He dedicates these lectures to George Guidall.

Introduction

This course traces the development of Shakespeare as a comic playwright from his early years to his maturity. Professor Raphael Shargel closely analyzes ten of Shakespeare's comedies, investigating nuances of language even as he covers the big ideas each play expresses. Professor Shargel offers students insight into the origins and defining characteristics of the genre of comedy and talks at length about how Shakespeare adopted and revised the comic form as he created his masterpieces.



One of the advantages of studying Shakespeare's comedies in the order in which they were written is that it allows students to see how Shakespeare developed as an artist. He turned from composing works like *The Comedy of Errors*, *Love's Labor's Lost*, *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, and *Taming of the Shrew*, which conform to and update classical and medieval models, to penning strikingly unique plays that set opposing worlds in contrast. *A Midsummer Night's Dream* plunges its human characters into an unpredictably transformative world of magic while *The Merchant of Venice* sets its fairy-tale elements in the brutal world of commerce and exchange. The romantic comedies *Much Ado About Nothing*, *As You Like It*, and *Twelfth Night* feature multiple plots, powerful representations of love and romance, and extraordinary games with language. Later still, Shakespeare composed the dark and disturbing *Measure for Measure*, which revisits comic conventions only to demonstrate their limitations.

But no matter how serious their themes and despite their wildly unpredictable climaxes, Shakespeare's comedies are always delightful, brimming with hilarious dialogue, wonderful characters, and funny situations. The world of Shakespearean comedy teems with women who masquerade as men, men who woo women under assumed identities, young lovers who rebel against the older generation, wives who rebel against their husbands, lords who choose to go into exile, servants and jesters who prove more clever than their masters, philosophers wounded by the follies of the world, wits who exploit those same follies for the entertainment of the audience, men of faith who seek to prove that their fallen friends can rise to a more enlightened state, and agents of the marketplace who demand that those they deal with fall victim to the bottom line.

Professor Shargel's lively lectures explore the wit, charm, and brilliance of some of the best plays ever written.

Lecture 1:
Shakespeare, Comedy, and Shakespearean Comedy:
The Comedy of Errors and Love's Labor's Lost

The **Suggested Readings** for this lecture are Shakespeare's "The Comedy of Errors" and "Love's Labor's Lost" in *The Riverside Shakespeare*.

Invocation

O for a Muse of fire, that would ascend
The brightest heaven of invention!
A kingdom for a stage, princes to act,
And monarchs to behold the swelling scene!

In Shakespeare's *Henry V*, the actor who recites the play's prologue yearns for the stage to represent England's past in all its grandeur. But at the same time, he acknowledges that the theater is a simple platform across which performers parade. It is imagination that makes the theater exciting, not just the imagination of the playwright and the cast, but also the imagination of the audience participating in the experience.

It is in this spirit that I invite you into the gorgeous, thought-provoking, and magnificently funny world of Shakespearean comedy, which I present to you on the simple platform of these lectures. If you are already familiar with the comedies, I hope my lectures will generate sufficient interest that you'll want to read them again or perhaps to buy tickets for an upcoming performance. If you don't know them, I hope my discussion of the plays will encourage you to make their acquaintance.

In this introductory lecture, I'll make some remarks about comedy and define it against its opposite, the genre of tragedy. I'll demonstrate how Shakespeare, in his comedies, both borrows from and updates the comic tradition. I'll then offer a more detailed sense of Shakespeare's engagement with that tradition by briefly discussing two of his earliest plays, *The Comedy of Errors* and *Love's Labor's Lost*.

Tragedy and Comedy

What differentiates comedy from tragedy? Can we simply say that tragedy is the genre of tears and sadness while comedy is about fun and laughter? While one can imagine exceptions to almost any rule, in the classical period it was generally agreed that tragedy was the drama of state while comedy dealt more with common issues and ordinary people.

The heroes of tragedy were figures from the nobility. Comic protagonists came from the middle or the working classes. Tragedy was set in the court or in battlefields. Comedies could take place in the countryside, but were most often set in the city.

Tragedy was the drama of separation. Its characters ended by being isolated from one another. Comedy was the genre of unity. In the end, its characters

PASSAGES FOR STUDY

Henry V

Prologue, 1–4

Love's Labor's Lost

III.i.174–205

IV.iii.286–362

V.ii.894–929

got together. Because the ultimate form of isolation is death, tragedies tended to end in death. Comedies, by contrast, often wrapped up with husbands, wives, and children finding themselves reunited or with a marriage that promised the beginning of a new family.

Note that in order for both genres to end as they do, they must, if there is to be any intrigue at all, begin in the opposite state. Most of Shakespeare's comedies open in moments of tension, where characters who will ultimately unite are separated from one another and at odds.

Tragedy negotiates notions of law and justice, asking us to worry about what is and is not fair. Comedy, on the other hand, tends to be more democratic. In comedies, several points of view can coexist. We may be invited to sympathize with more than one of them, even when they oppose each other.

Shakespeare and His Sources

When we study Shakespeare in the context of the history of drama, we discover that his comedies incorporated elements from almost every type of literature that preceded it while also staking out new and delightful territory. In Shakespeare's comedies, we can detect elements of the Greek playwright **Aristophanes**, who perfected what was known as the "**Old Comedy**," as well as his Latin successors, **Plautus** and **Terence**, who wrote in the later tradition of "**New Comedy**," which is similar to the situation comedies of today.

In Shakespeare, we also find aspects of medieval drama, the romance tradition, and early novels, many of which Shakespeare adapted when he wrote his comedies. Indeed, with the exception of *Love's Labor's Lost* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, all of the plays we will study in this course are drawn directly—and in some cases extensively—from earlier sources. Nevertheless, it is important to recognize that while Shakespeare borrowed the plots of other writers and imbued his characters with personalities invented by predecessors, these plots and characters survive in the literary imagination because of what Shakespeare did to them. Indeed, one of the defining characteristics of Shakespeare's originality is the way he breathed life into old plays and tales.

Plautus and *The Comedy of Errors*

Beside the eight comedies I'll discuss in subsequent lectures, there are two others, probably written very early in Shakespeare's career, that will help set up some of this course's themes. They are *The Comedy of Errors* and *Love's Labor's Lost*, both of which reveal Shakespeare dabbling in and revamping earlier dramatic traditions.

In *The Comedy of Errors*, Shakespeare borrowed directly from plays by Plautus, particularly *The Brothers Menaechmus*. In Plautus's version, twin brothers are separated at birth. One of them has settled with his wife in Epidamnus, where he keeps a mistress in the house across the street. Meanwhile, the other, totally unaware that he has an identical twin, comes to



town. The play is filled with comic confusion as the loved ones and acquaintances of one brother mistake his twin for him.

Shakespeare set his revision of Plautus in the city of Ephesus. In *The Comedy of Errors*, Antipholus of Ephesus, like the married brother in Plautus's play, has a mistress and a wife. He too runs into trouble when his actions are taken for those of his visiting twin, Antipholus of Syracuse. Shakespeare, however, compounds the intrigue by giving each Antipholus a servant. These servants are another set of long-lost twins! The action in *The Comedy of Errors* is even faster and more chaotic than that in Plautus.

Shakespeare, at this early stage of his career, composed a play whose conclusion is wonderfully tidy. It ends in a union where marriages and pacts are made in love and peace. A communal spirit reigns at the end, one that is celebrated through family reunion and the forgiveness of wrongs.

Love's Labor's Lost

Love's Labor's Lost is another early play by Shakespeare that also features a number of stock characters and situations. But its sources and emphases are quite different. Rather than rely on the traditions of New Comedy, Shakespeare, in *Love's Labor's Lost*, draws upon medieval and Renaissance works that trade in stock characters who display specific personality traits, or "humors." We can see Shakespeare turning away from his classical models in the very setting of the play, which takes place not among the working or middle classes, but in the French court of Navarre.

At the beginning of *Love's Labor's Lost*, the King of Navarre and his attendant lords plan to spend the next three years devoting themselves entirely to study, abstaining from all pleasures. Early on, Berowne, the cleverest and most irreverent of the group, expresses doubts that young men should be shutting themselves off from physical delight.

The plans for the academy are interrupted by the arrival of the Princess of France and the three ladies in her train. Making an exception for the sake of the state, the king and his lords meet with them, and even though they stand on opposite sides of a political fence, all four men fall instantly and helplessly in love with the women.

At III.i.174–205, Berowne delivers a **soliloquy**, a type of speech where characters, talking in isolation, unburden their inner thoughts. Berowne, in a kind of glorious agony, surrenders his heart to Rosaline even as he acknowledges that until this moment he has mocked passionate lovers.

In the final scene, when the four lords, after much hesitation, finally confess their love, the news is brought to the Princess that her father has died. Here is where the title *Love's Labor's Lost*, certainly an odd one for a comedy, begins to resonate. The Princess informs the King that she must mourn. She will, however, ultimately accept his suit, but only if he himself will live as a hermit, relinquishing the pleasures of the court and subjecting himself to the whims of nature for the entire year in which she will grieve.

Given the behavior of the men up to this point, and given also the seriousness of marriage, the Princess is probably right to demand such stern penance from the King. The foolish and lackadaisical gesture of asceticism the

King made in act I must now, if he is to win his beloved, be transformed into a serious commitment.

Despite the strangeness of its ending, it's possible to see *Love's Labor's Lost* as a more reassuring play than *The Comedy of Errors*. The hope of union is not destroyed. It is merely postponed. The four lords took love too lightly up until the very last moments. Rather than ask the audience to believe that they will suddenly remain chaste for the rest of their lives, the play concedes to the wisdom of the women, who are right to imagine that these men need an education in the hard experiences of life before they are ready to commit themselves seriously. Having the men agree to sacrifice their comforts while the women they love faithfully mourn helps the audience accept as credible that over time all eight central characters may be ready for marriage. None of them, the women included, is ready now. So, if love's labors are lost for the time being, the play offers hope that in the long run, that which was postponed may in time be achieved.

At the very end of the play, when we understand that a full year must pass before our characters are reunited, the personification of Spring and Winter step forward and describe the changing countryside during these seasons. The vision in these poems is not of noble existence but, in the spirit of comedy as defined by its classical defenders, of common living, in this instance, the rural existence the four men must experience during their penance. In the chorus of both poems, a bird sings the notes of the season. In springtime, the cuckoo reminds married people that this is the season of copulation, the time when one's spouse may be turning a wayward eye. In winter, the owl sings merrily in counterpoint as the people struggle against the forcefulness of cold and wind and in the labor of staying alive:

Spring: When daisies pied, and violets blue,
And lady-smocks all silver-white,
And cuckoo-buds of yellow hue
Do paint the meadows with delight,
The cuckoo then on every tree
Mocks married men; for thus sings he,
"Cuckoo;
Cuckoo, cuckoo" – O word of fear,
Unpleasing to a married ear!

When shepherds pipe on oaten straws,
And merry larks are ploughmen's clocks;
When turtles tread, and rooks and daws,
And maidens bleach their summer smocks,
The cuckoo then on every tree
Mocks married men; for thus sings he,
"Cuckoo;
Cuckoo, cuckoo" – O word of fear,
Unpleasing to a married ear!

Winter: When icicles hang by the wall,
And Dick the shepherd blows his nail,
And Tom bears logs into the hall,
And milk comes frozen home in pail;
When blood is nipp'd, and ways be foul,
Then nightly sings the staring owl,
"Tu-whit; Tu-who!" –
A merry note,
While greasy Joan doth keel the pot.

When all aloud the wind doth blow,
And coughing drowns the parson's saw,
And birds sit brooding in the snow,
And Marian's nose looks red and raw;
When roasted crabs hiss in the bowl,
Then nightly sings the staring owl,
"Tu-whit; Tu-who!" –
A merry note,
While greasy Joan doth keel the pot.

–*Love's Labor's Lost*,
V.ii.894–929

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING



Questions

1. What distinguishes comedy from tragedy?
2. Are these distinctions strict or malleable? Why or why not?
3. How does Shakespeare both adapt and extend the comic tradition in his plays?
4. What does Shakespeare, in *The Comedy of Errors*, change from his Plautine source? Can you justify these changes?
5. What distinguishes Berowne from the other lords in *Love's Labor's Lost*?
6. Is the ending of *Love's Labor's Lost*, where a year must pass before there is any hope of marriage, disappointing to you? Why or why not?

Suggested Reading

Shakespeare, William. *The Riverside Shakespeare*. 2nd ed. Eds. G. Blakemore Evans and J.J.M. Tobin. Boston: Heinle, 1996.

Other Books of Interest

Lyly, John. *Gallathea* (1592). Facsimile ed. New York: Oxford University Press, USA, 1999.

Plautus. *The Pot of Gold and Other Plays*. Trans. E.F. Watling. New York: Penguin, 1965.

———. *The Rope and Other Plays*. Trans. E.F. Watling. New York: Penguin, 1968.

Lecture 2: *The Taming of the Shrew*

The **Suggested Reading** for this lecture is Shakespeare's "The Taming of the Shrew" in *The Riverside Shakespeare*.

In this lecture, I will discuss some of the textual problems scholars face when they analyze Shakespeare. I will go on to summarize the plot of *The Taming of the Shrew* and to talk about its characters. Finally, I will investigate an important and controversial monologue delivered, at the end of the play, by Katherina, or Kate, the shrew of the title.

PASSAGE FOR STUDY

The Taming of the Shrew

V.ii.142–79

Shakespeare's Texts

In 1623, seven years after Shakespeare's death, a group of friends and former business partners published a large volume, known today as the **First Folio**, which contains thirty-six of the thirty-eight plays we now believe to be by Shakespeare. Before 1623, when the First Folio appeared, about half of Shakespeare's plays were published in little **quarto** volumes. The texts of the plays in the quartos sometimes diverge from the versions in the folio; in certain cases, the differences are extensive. A whole branch of Shakespearean scholarship is devoted to determining how these texts came into being and which version holds the most authority—that is, which is closest to what Shakespeare himself wrote.

Some of Shakespeare's textual conundrums are so bewildering that they may never be resolved to anyone's complete satisfaction. And yet, their solutions, if we could come up with them, would in many instances help us better understand the meaning of the plays. *The Taming of the Shrew* presents us with one such mystery. The comedy as we read and know it today was published in the First Folio of 1623. However, in 1594, an anonymous play was published in quarto entitled *A Pleasant Conceited History, Called The Taming of a Shrew*. Although *The Taming of a Shrew* and *The Taming of the Shrew* tell the same story, their language and plots are quite different.

Christopher Sly and the Dangling Induction

While it would be nice to concentrate just on the well-known text in the Folio, which sounds much more like Shakespeare than the text in the quarto, the Folio presents us with dilemmas that the quarto text tries to resolve. Most interesting is the attempt by the author of *The Taming of a Shrew* to deliver a more rounded and complete narrative than *The Taming of the Shrew*. The Folio version, like the 1594 quarto, commences with an **induction**, a prefatory playlet.

The Taming of the Shrew begins with a drunkard named Christopher Sly arguing with the hostess of an inn over some glassware he has broken. In the middle of the fight, he falls into an inebriated sleep. Suddenly, a Lord

enters, fresh from hunting. Regarding the dozing figure of Christopher Sly with disgust, he decides to conduct a social experiment. The Lord will have Sly dressed as an aristocrat and will surround him with attendants who will claim that he is a member of the nobility. As the Lord's attendants scurry to follow his orders, a band of traveling players enters the inn. The Lord invites them to act their latest comedy for Christopher Sly.

In the second scene of the induction, Sly awakens in the Lord's house waited upon by servingmen who assure him, much to his initial protestation, that he is in fact a wealthy lord with a beautiful wife. As the Lord predicted, Sly quickly accepts their words and begins to behave in an imperial fashion.

The induction concluded, we move immediately to the main plot, which we now must think of as a play within a play. Oddly, after act I, the Folio text never returns to Christopher Sly. However, in *The Taming of a Shrew*, we revisit Sly on several occasions between scenes, where he offers commentary. We get a sense of him sitting in the sidelines the whole time the comedy is performed. *The Taming of a Shrew* ends with Sly remarking with delight that he now knows how to tame a shrew. The satisfaction we might have in following Sly's reactions is denied to us in the Folio text. Why does the Folio leave us hanging? Can the answer be found in the comedy's main plot?

Petruchio's Gambit

Here's the story of the play within the play. Baptista Minola, a rich citizen of Padua, has a beautiful daughter named Bianca who is pursued by three suitors. But Baptista refuses to allow Bianca to marry until after the wedding of Kate, his eldest child. Kate, somewhat like Rosaline in *Love's Labor's Lost*, is independent minded, sharp tongued, and not particularly interested in marriage. Incredibly witty, she also lashes out with physical violence at anyone who gets in her way. The suitors despair of Bianca because they cannot imagine who in the world would choose to marry Kate.

Enter Petruchio. He's an old friend of Hortensio's, and the two men run into one another on the street. Hortensio tells Petruchio of his dilemma, not neglecting to mention that Kate, while rich, would make a shrewish wife. To Hortensio's delight, Petruchio says that he doesn't care about the temperament of the woman he marries so long as she has money.

Although they spar at their first meeting, Kate agrees to marry Petruchio. After the wedding, Petruchio sets about taming Kate. Mocking the wife whom nothing will please, Petruchio punishes her by taking her displeasure literally. He brings her to his country house but refuses to allow her to dress and eat because no



Taming of the Shrew, IV.iii.63–169

Petruchio, in an effort to get his new wife to submit to his will, finds fault with all the gifts he bought for her, and sends them away.

clothes or food can be good enough for her. He torments her continually by carrying garments and vittles into her rooms and then whisking them away because they're beneath her.

Petruchio makes it known that Kate will only be allowed to enjoy the basic comforts of life when she submits completely to her husband's will, putting his word above her reason.

Meanwhile, back in Baptista's house, Lucentio gets the upper hand on the other suitors by disguising himself as a schoolteacher named Cambio, who then gets to spend a lot of time "tutoring" Bianca. He woos her instead.

Kate's Conclusion

In the end, Lucentio convinces Bianca to elope with him and the two appear before Baptista as husband and wife. Baptista accepts them. At the concluding feast, Lucentio, Petruchio, and Hortensio, who has given up on Bianca and married a widow, make a bet to see whose wife will come fastest when they summon her. To the surprise of the others, Kate is the only one of the three who comes instantly. Kate turns to Bianca and the Widow and delivers a speech defending women's subservience to men.

More disturbingly than *Love's Labor's Lost*, we have a comedy that seems to roll toward an expected conclusion only suddenly to careen off the tracks. It's one thing for Kate to learn civility and even the obedience articulated in the marriage vow, but it is quite another for her to offer a philosophical defense of women's inferiority. Petruchio, it seems, has not only tamed Kate, but has also brainwashed her into accepting a misogynistic ideology.

Kate argues that women's bodies are soft and yielding because of the way nature created them. The physical differences between men and women are mirrored in the social conventions that make men the master of the public sphere and women the protectors of the private world of the home. These provide empirical evidence, according to Kate, that women should not only serve men but obey their commands with gratitude. On the surface, at least, Kate's final speech would suggest that Shakespeare's play is itself misogynistic, an argument about the subservience and inferiority of women.

Interpreting the Ending

Yet there is much in the play that undermines the idea that Kate is Shakespeare's mouthpiece. Petruchio, though he is a flashy talker, hardly stands as a male ideal. We've seen his willingness to marry for money rather than love, and while Kate's sufferings in his house can be played for laughs, they also reveal Petruchio as someone with a distinct lack of sympathy and mercy.

On the other hand, Bianca retains self-sufficiency and courage. Though she speaks more in action than word at the end of *The Taming of the Shrew*, she stands against the content of Kate's speech. Since Bianca has always been a more admirable figure than Kate, her presence in the final scene challenges the morality of Kate's discourse.

We should also remember that Shakespeare, in the Induction, takes pains to establish *The Taming of the Shrew* as a play within a play. Emphasizing the fact that Kate's world is an artifice rather than a reality, Shakespeare may be

highlighting the contrivances in his plot. Though she appears to talk sincerely, Kate may be continuing to act a role. The dissatisfaction of not returning to the Sly plot at the end may be mirrored in the dissatisfying ethics of Kate's final speech.

Folio Kate and Quarto Kate

Another reason to be suspicious, both of the authority Shakespeare invests in Kate's diatribe and in the virtue of her marriage to Petruchio, can be found in the version of the monologue spoken by the Kate in *The Taming of a Shrew*. The Kate of 1594 makes a religious argument. She sees the pettiness of womankind and the necessity of female obedience going back to the days of Mother Eve and the primary act of disobedience that is original sin. The Kate of the quarto seems to be saying that to believe in God, to accept the doctrine of original sin is also to accept the biblical dictum that women are subservient to men. By contrast, Folio Kate relies not upon God as her authority, but instead upon her interpretation of nature and custom. If we quarrel with Quarto Kate, we must attack a bedrock interpretation of scripture. But in objecting to the ideas of Folio Kate, we need only point out the flaws in her interpretation of nature and its relation to custom. Shakespeare appears to have rewritten an argument that relies upon divine authority into one that is less dogmatic and easier to refute.

In my first lecture, I mentioned that comedy is a more democratic genre than tragedy. Comedies, I said, often allow for a variety of competing opinions to survive in the end. Whether or not you agree with the sentiments in Kate's speech, it's hard not to feel uncomfortable by her abrupt transformation from independent-minded shrew to self-immolating slave. The theatrical conceit involving Christopher Sly as well as Petruchio's chauvinism and the difference in the content of Kate's speech in this play and her monologue in the earlier quarto put the idea of comfortable resolution into question. Here, then, is a first example of an idea that will become important in many of Shakespeare's subsequent comedies. As we move to later works, we'll see that the pat ending of *The Comedy of Errors* and the hopeful conclusion of *Love's Labor's Lost* will be more the exception than the rule. In his later comedies, Shakespeare opens up a multitude of perspectives. He welcomes objections to the sometimes suspicious actions that lead to his plays' concluding unions.

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING



Questions

1. Why is it difficult to date Shakespeare's plays?
2. What are some of the problems presented by the surviving texts of Shakespeare's plays?
3. Why do some critics feel that the play entitled *The Taming of a Shrew* is not by Shakespeare?
4. Should stage directors seeking to shorten the length of *The Taming of the Shrew* cut the Induction? Why or why not? If they do include it, should they add the dialogue for Sly that appears only in *The Taming of a Shrew*? Why or why not?
5. How do you interpret Kate's concluding speech? How might you defend your interpretation?

Suggested Reading

Shakespeare, William. *The Riverside Shakespeare*. 2nd ed. Eds. G. Blakemore Evans and J.J.M. Tobin. Boston: Heinle, 1996.

Other Books of Interest

- Morris, Brian, ed. "Introduction." *The Taming of the Shrew*, pp. 1041–1070. *The Arden Shakespeare: Complete Works*. Eds. Richard Proudfoot, Ann Thompson, and David Scott Kastan. London: Thomson Learning, 2006.
- "The Taming of a Shrew: The 1594 Quarto." *The New Cambridge Shakespeare: The Early Quartos*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008.

Lecture 3: *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*

The **Suggested Reading** for this lecture is Shakespeare's "The Two Gentlemen of Verona" in *The Riverside Shakespeare*.

Shakespeare's Worst Comedy?

I think it's fair to say that of all Shakespeare's comedies, *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* is the most despised.

And yet its dialogue is consistently brisk and witty and its characters fascinating. The central action revolves around the attempts of Proteus and Valentine, the two gentlemen of the title, to woo two ladies, Julia and Silvia, and the women's corresponding struggles to win the lovers they desire.

Other figures include a number of servants, some clever, some foolish, who add sparkle and merriment to the conversation. The play has fiery speeches, daring escapes, and a band of crazy outlaws. And yet the final scene is so profoundly disturbing to audiences and critics that many put down the text or leave the theater wishing that Shakespeare had never written it. The climax of *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* makes the unsettling postponement of romance in *Love's Labor's Lost* and the radical transformation of Kate at the end of *The Taming of the Shrew* seem trivial by comparison.

Love's Metamorphoses

The Two Gentlemen of Verona places the concept of friendship at its forefront. Proteus and Valentine are great friends, even though when they speak they often play a game of one-upmanship. In the first scene, we learn that Valentine is about to leave Verona for the court of Milan to serve the Duke. Proteus swears that he will think of and pray for Valentine while his friend is away. Valentine in turn makes fun of Proteus because he knows why Proteus does not share his desire to see the world. Proteus is in love with Julia. He wants to stay in Verona so that he can be near her.

When Valentine gets to Milan, he is forced to eat his teasing words when he falls for Silvia, the Duke's daughter. Soon, Proteus arrives, sent, like Valentine, to serve the Duke. Valentine boasts that his Silvia is superior to Proteus's Julia. Silvia enters briefly during the conversation and Proteus gets a quick look at her. After Valentine exits, Proteus realizes that he too is smitten with Silvia.

Back in Verona, Julia, whose love for Proteus burns on, can't bear his absence. She disguises herself as a young man, calls herself Sebastian, and makes off for Milan. Meanwhile, Proteus tells the Duke of Valentine's

PASSAGES FOR STUDY

The Two Gentlemen of Verona

I.i.63–69

II.i.17–32

II.iv.191–204

III.i.170–87

IV.iv.90–107

V.iv.68–87

V.v.172–73

plan to elope with her. The Duke, who wants his daughter to marry the foolish Thurio, banishes Valentine from the court and imprisons Silvia. Proteus, hearing that Valentine's schemes have been foiled, pretends to be sympathetic, woos Silvia himself. The faithful Silvia spurns his advances.

When Julia, disguised as Sebastian, arrives in town, she discovers Proteus courting Silvia. Proteus takes a liking to Sebastian, employs him as a courier, and orders him to carry a love letter to Silvia. Julia, who feels obligated to follow the will of her beloved, recognizes the intense irony of her situation, for if she, as Sebastian, should succeed in appealing to Silvia, she would defeat her own dearest wish. Meanwhile, Silvia escapes from prison and the Duke runs after her, with Thurio, Proteus, and Julia following.

A Disturbing Resolution

And now we come to that final scene I warned you about. Proteus rescues Silvia from a band of outlaws, but when she continues to declaim her love for Valentine, reminding Proteus of his debt to Julia, Proteus, frustrated, declares that if he can have Silvia no other way, he'll behave like a soldier and force himself upon her. But before he can commit rape, Valentine intercedes:

Valentine: . . . Proteus,
I am sorry I must never trust thee more,
But count the world a stranger for thy sake.
The private wound is deepest: O time most accurst!
'Mongst all foes that a friend should be the worst!

Proteus: My shame and guilt confounds me.
Forgive me, Valentine; if hearty sorrow
Be a sufficient ransom for offence,
I tender 't here: I do as truly suffer
As e'er I did commit.

Valentine: Then I am paid;
And once again I do receive thee honest.
Who by repentance is not satisfied
Is nor of heaven nor earth, for these are pleas'd;
By penitence th' Eternal's wrath's pleas'd:
And that my love may appear plain and free,
All that was mine in Silvia I give thee.

(V.iv.68–87)

This seems too much to bear. In less than a minute, Proteus plays the roles of belligerent rapist, humiliated friend, and penitent. Just as he undergoes these transformations, Valentine, who has sought the love of Silvia since the day he met her, invokes the idea of divine forgiveness as he offers Silvia to Proteus as a gift, as if Silvia, whom we all know to be a woman of integrity, would be part of such a transaction.

Even at this stage in our study of Shakespeare, it's clear that our author does not take the easy way out, especially in climaxes. He seems to relish giving us something that we don't expect and asking us to grapple with complex transformations.

I began this lecture by saying that of all Shakespeare's plays, *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* puts the ideal of friendship at the forefront. The most convincing argument critics have used to explain the play's appalling climax is to note that these two gentlemen are saved from their passions by their recollection of their good will to one another. Perhaps Proteus, consumed by thoughts of Silvia, is only capable of understanding the sordidness of his action when Valentine's rebuke makes him see what he's doing through the eyes of the friend he has grown up trying to impress. Valentine too may feel the grand pedestal upon which he placed Silvia kicked out from under her when the redemption of his dear friend is in question.

That's good news for the men. But what about the women? Proteus's shallow treatment of Julia, his forcing himself upon Silvia, in this scene and earlier in the play, remains intolerable. Valentine, who swore that nothing could prompt him to abandon his beloved, sacrifices Silvia on the altar of his friendship at the expense of Silvia's own autonomy.

As in *The Taming of the Shrew*, Shakespeare presents us with an unsettling ending that forces the questions the play has raised back upon themselves and us. In Shakespeare's day, it was a romantic ideal to argue that falling in love necessitated a transformation of identity, the creation of a new oneness between two people. In the love poetry of Shakespeare's predecessors and contemporaries like Thomas Wyatt, Philip Sidney, and John Donne, men insist upon mutual commitment when they feel consumed by the flames of passion. This idea also appears frequently in Shakespeare's sonnets, which may, like *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, have been written early in his career. As if to mock this ideal, *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* asks us to consider the other side of the equation, how women who have wills of their own might feel when such love is visited upon them. Proteus, at the height of his frustration with Silvia, cries out, "O, 'tis the curse in love, and still approv'd,/When women cannot love where they're belov'd!" Silvia, responding

This ring I gave him when he parted from me,
To bind him to remember my good will;
And now am I, unhappy messenger,
To plead for that which I would not obtain,
To carry that which I would have refused,
To praise his faith which I would have dispraised."

~*The Two Gentlemen of Verona*

IV.iv.99-104

snappily to his misogynistic plaint about women foolishly failing to submit to men's adoration, cries, "When *Proteus* cannot love where he's beloved!/Read over Julia's heart . . ." (V.iv.43–45; italics mine). She points out that Proteus's self-centeredness prevents him from seeing that she, Silvia, is spurning him as he himself has spurned Julia. Silvia, faithful to Valentine, her first choice, is setting an example for Proteus, who ought to be equally faithful to the woman who had his pledge.

Our dissatisfaction at the end of the play certainly presents us with a challenge. We expect that characters who behave like swine in drama be punished, even though we all know that in life, matters don't always work out that way. Despite Valentine's use of sacred imagery, it's hard to accept the final transformation as a form of repentance. Neither Proteus nor Valentine ever apologize for their behavior. They may be humbled by one another, but they don't appear to acknowledge the evils of their past cruelties or their insatiable egotism. But Silvia and Julia, volatile characters who are strangely silent at the end of the play, do seem still to love these men. Perhaps the ultimate psychological stakes of *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* lie not in the characters but in our reactions to them. Shakespeare tests the moral fiber of his audience by asking us if we can stand to respond cheerfully when figures about whom we have doubts tread blissfully toward marriage. Our four lovers are happy. They have buried the hatchet. What right, then, do we have to dig it up?



Silvia
by Charles Edward Perugini, 1888

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING



Questions

1. Is *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* at heart a play about the virtues of friendship? Why or why not?
2. In what sense does *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* undermine the Renaissance ideal of romantic love?
3. Since Julia and Silvia seem more admirable than the title characters, why isn't the play named after them?
4. Do you agree that the ending of the play is disturbing? Do you accept arguments in defense of the ending or do you feel, along with a good number of critics, that Shakespeare failed fully to critique the complexity of his characters and their situations?

Suggested Reading

Shakespeare, William. *The Riverside Shakespeare*. 2nd ed. Eds. G. Blakemore Evans and J.J.M. Tobin. Boston: Heinle, 1996.

Other Books of Interest

A good deal of scholarly literature considers Shakespeare's comedies as a group. For secondary reading on this play and others, please consult the **Course Materials** beginning on page 76.

Lecture 4: *A Midsummer Night's Dream, Part I*

The **Suggested Reading** for this lecture is Shakespeare's "A Midsummer Night's Dream" in *The Riverside Shakespeare*.

The language of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is more dense, more complex, and more beautiful than that of the earlier plays. It is also more consistent. A magical spirit resonates in every scene. In this lecture, I'll go over the plot of the play and talk about the way it incorporates concepts from Shakespeare's earlier comedies into its structure. My main focus will be on how the play's characters negotiate ideas of love and reason.

PASSAGES FOR STUDY

A Midsummer Night's Dream

I.i.226–51

II.i.199–213

II.ii.111–22

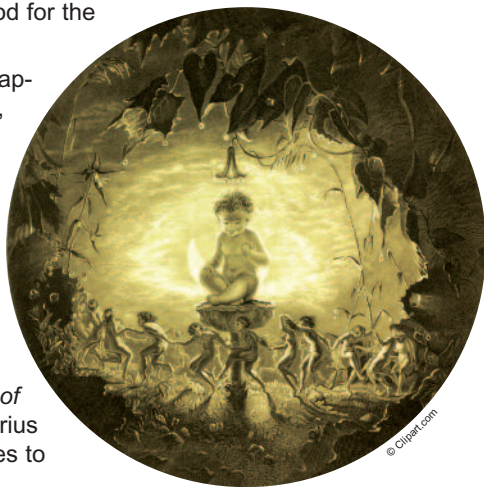
III.i.120–48

Plot Upon Plot

While *The Comedy of Errors*, *The Taming of the Shrew*, and *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* experiment with double plots, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* has no less than four storylines. Moreover, each narrative strand in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is woven into the whole more intricately than in the previous comedies.

As the play opens, Theseus, Duke of Athens, reminds Hippolyta, his Amazon bride, that their wedding day is fast approaching. *A Midsummer Night's Dream* takes place between two key moments in Theseus's life: his betrothal, which occurred before the play began, and his marriage, which will be consecrated after the play ends. The anticipation of the couple's nuptials sets the mood for the comedy as a whole.

The second plot has some of the trappings of bad soap opera. Demetrius, who used to be in love with Helena, has now decided that he wants to marry Hermia. Hermia, however, is in love with Lysander. Egeus, Hermia's father, insists that she marry Demetrius. Hermia and Lysander decide to elope by fleeing into the forest. They tell their friend Helena of their plans. But Helena, like Proteus in *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, betrays them, telling Demetrius that the two have fled. Demetrius flies to the forest in pursuit and Helena, fawning over him, follows.



Puck and the Fairies
by Charles Knight, 1873

As it turns out, a number of spirits, figures from medieval romance, are also camping in the forest. Their king, Oberon, observes Demetrius's cruel treatment of Helena. He takes pity on the lass and resolves to help her. He tells his servant Puck that if the juice of a certain flower is squeezed over the eyelids of anyone who is asleep, that person, upon awakening, will fall in love with the first creature he or she beholds. Oberon orders Puck to drop the aphrodisiac into the eyes of the Athenian man who has run into the forest. The idea is that Demetrius will be transformed into Helena's lover.

But Puck, not knowing one Athenian man from another, instead comes across the sleeping Lysander. He drips the potion into his eyes and Lysander awakes just as Helena is walking by. Suddenly smitten, he chases after her.

Oberon looks down and sees that Demetrius is the same as he ever was. He reprimands Puck for not doing his duty. When Demetrius goes to sleep, Oberon tells Puck that this is the Athenian he meant him to infect and Demetrius's eyes are watered with the purple flower. Helena is brought near him and when Demetrius wakes up, he too pursues Helena.

All four lovers confront one another. Hermia, who previously had two men pursuing her, now finds both of her admirers despising her for the sake of Helena. Helena, on the other hand, refuses to believe that men who showed no interest in her just that morning have changed their minds. She is sure that they are making fun of her. Lysander speaks harsh, cruel words to Hermia, the woman who commanded his absolute devotion just one hour earlier. Demetrius is so angry with his rival Lysander that he entertains murderous thoughts.

Many angry words are bandied about until finally Oberon intervenes again. The lovers are put to sleep. More juice is squeezed into Lysander's eyes so that he may again love Hermia. Now when they wake up, the four are matched off appropriately, Lysander with Hermia and Demetrius with Helena. Met by Egeus and Theseus, they confess their affections. The older men, seeing them happy, give them their blessing.

Love looks not with the eyes but with the mind;
And therefore is wing'd Cupid painted blind.
Nor hath Love's mind of any judgment taste;
Wings, and no eyes, figure unheedy haste;
And therefore is Love said to be a child,
Because in choice he is so oft beguiled.

~*A Midsummer Night's Dream*
I.i.234-39

In the third plot, Oberon and the fairy queen Titania have a quarrel of their own. Titania has brought an Indian boy into her entourage, a changeling child whom Oberon craves for himself. When Titania refuses to turn the boy over to Oberon, Oberon commands Puck to squeeze the love juice into Titania's eyes. The first creature Titania sees is a weaver named Bottom. But this simple Athenian has been enchanted. Puck, for the fun of it, has given Bottom the head of an ass.

Titania dotes over this monster until Oberon begs her for the Indian boy, and Titania agrees to surrender him. Triumphant, Oberon restores Titania's will and Bottom's human head.

In plot number four, Bottom and his fellow artisans rehearse a play they wish to perform before the court of Theseus. Their tragedy, so awkwardly performed that it winds up being more funny than sad, occupies most of *A Midsummer Night's Dream's* fifth and final act.



Study for *The Quarrel of Oberon and Titania*
by Sir Joseph Noel Paton, ca. 1849

Reason and Love

In each plot, a thematic holdover from *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* maintains a central position: the relationship between reason and love.

One of the most curious moments in the play is the scene where Helena decides to tell Demetrius that Hermia and Lysander are escaping to the forest. Despite Helena's claim to be reasoning logically, she proves so helplessly in love that she doesn't see the long-term benefits of Hermia's absence. Helena's obsession with Demetrius reaches an unhealthy peak when she confronts him in the forest as he searches for Hermia. Helena is so besotted with Demetrius that she wants to humiliate herself before him. Demetrius's wrathful rebuff is equally unsettling.

Although Lysander and Hermia are a sweeter couple, Lysander, after he is enchanted, claims, like Proteus before him, that he is perfectly justified in his change of heart:

Content with Hermia? No; I do repent
The tedious minutes I with her have spent.
Not Hermia, but Helena I love.
Who will not change a raven for a dove?
The will of man is by his reason sway'd;
And reason says you are the worthier maid.

Things growing are not ripe until their season,
So I, being young, till now ripe not to reason;
And touching now the point of human skill,
Reason becomes the marshal to my will,
And leads me to your eyes, where I o'erlook
Love's stories written in Love's richest book.

(II.ii.111–22)

Helena defended her love for Demetrius by claiming that it was reasonable to suppose that love could not be ruled by good judgment. Otherwise, Demetrius would love her. In this speech Lysander claims that Love and Reason are allies and that he only failed to recognize Helena's objective superiority to Hermia because until just this moment he wasn't mature enough to appreciate the perfections of love and nature that rest truly in Helena's body. Despite his claims, Lysander's final lines, in which he insists that the story of love is written in Helena's eyes, are more poetic excess than hard rationalism. We learn that he too is so consumed by passion that he is incapable of thinking logically.

The Eye and the Mind

Of all the symbols and metaphors in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, the figure of the eye may be most important. The eye is the gateway of both reason and love. It is through the eye that we most powerfully understand experience. If we take scientific measure of the world of nature, we do so chiefly by using our eyes. But it is also through the eyes that lovers are attracted to one another. Shakespeare's lovers become victims of the eye's double purpose, confusing its objective and subjective qualities.

But the eye has still another role in the play. When the lovers talk about eyes, they consider not only their function but also their beauty. Early on, Helena is convinced that Demetrius loves Hermia because her eyes are pretty. Lysander, in the speech I just cited, claims the ability to read Helena's eyes as if they were the Book of Love. What neither woman realizes is that the men have been manipulated by Puck, who controls their affections by enchanting their eyes.

What Is Love?

What kind of comment does *A Midsummer Night's Dream* make about love? Does the play argue that love is random? that it contains destructive power? Oberon never says that Cupid's arrows were designed to make people more cruel. And yet, until the lovers are revived at the end of act IV, cruelty is exactly what all their passions foster. Oberon says nothing about the potion as a generator of self-love. But when Demetrius and Lysander, enchanted by the flower, throw themselves at Helena's feet, they have no urge to be kind to her in any way. When she claims that their pleas are torturing her, they ignore her suffering and continue to claim her, passionately, for themselves.

As in his earlier plays, Shakespeare is not offering us a simple resolution to the problems that arise when characters burn with passionate intensity. Even as they spout romantic ideals of love, they also demonstrate that love can manifest itself as crushing selfish desire.

Fairies and Humans

Keeping this in mind, we can recognize Shakespeare's wisdom in incorporating other plots in which these same issues are tossed about. Another remedy for the severe love quarrels of our human lovers can be found in the relationship between Titania and Bottom.

The psychology of the fairies is much less complex than that of the human characters. When Titania falls for Bottom, there is no anger or jealousy or selfishness. She is sweet and adoring. The enchanted Bottom's simple acceptance of Titania's adulation is very funny, reminiscent of the transformed Christopher Sly's acceptance of his own exalted position after a few words from the Lord's servingman.



Titania Embracing Bottom
by Johann Henirch Füssli, 1792

Should we, human beings who fancy ourselves cultured enough to read and appreciate Shakespeare, be ourselves humiliated by the purity of Titania and Bottom's cuddling? Fairy love is a lot more honest and generous than human love. It is also more earthy. In the human world, the civilized world, Hermia's speech to Lysander about avoiding sex before marriage seems noble. But when Puck comes across two Athenians sleeping apart in the forest, he assumes they must be the quarreling couple Oberon told him to find. Under fairy logic, the logic of nature, why else would attractive boys and girls avoid each other in the night?

If anything, Titania's love for Bottom highlights the absurdity of love in general, as well as its mystery. If Bottom in his enchanted state can become an object of desire, couldn't anyone? In *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, fairies and humans alike fall under the spell of love, but Love itself remains more powerful and more elusive than any of them, than all of them.

All of them, that is, except for Puck. Puck stands apart from love, untouched by it. He observes love in others, but does not feel it in himself. Though Puck races about with a flower that has been touched by the arrow of Cupid, he appears in the play as the image of Cupid, heartlessly injecting foreign passions into the souls of others while remaining immune to them himself.

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING



Questions

1. Why do you think Shakespeare wove four discrete plots into *A Midsummer Night's Dream*?
2. How do Theseus and Hippolyta, who appear only at the beginning and the end of the comedy, influence its main actions?
3. Helena and Lysander both use logic and reason to make arguments about love in this play. What makes their conclusions unreasonable?
4. Why does *A Midsummer Night's Dream* repeatedly mention the eye? What does the eye represent to the characters in the play?
5. What differentiates the passions of the humans in the play from those of the fairies?

Suggested Reading

Shakespeare, William. *The Riverside Shakespeare*. 2nd ed. Eds. G. Blakemore Evans and J.J.M. Tobin. Boston: Heinle, 1996.

Other Books of Interest

A good deal of scholarly literature considers Shakespeare's comedies as a group. For secondary reading on this play and others, please consult the **Course Materials** beginning on page 76.

Lecture 5:
A Midsummer Night's Dream, Part II

The **Suggested Reading** for this lecture is Shakespeare's "A Midsummer Night's Dream" in *The Riverside Shakespeare*.

The title *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is quite evocative. Because midsummer nights are the shortest of the year, it therefore makes sense that *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is one of Shakespeare's shortest plays. The midsummer moon was also associated with madness, so the title also suggests that the play is a kind of hallucination. If we think of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* as carrying the logic of a dream rather than that of the real world, we may more easily accept its forays into the supernatural as well as its characters' extraordinary changes of temperament, which follow a kind of dream logic.

PASSAGES FOR STUDY

A Midsummer Night's Dream

V.i.1–27

V.i.32–37

II.ii.145–50

III.ii.259–62

IV.i.200–19

IV.i.75–82

II.i.122–37

II.i.43–57

V.i.423–38

The Lunatic, the Lover, and the Poet

The play contains a number of specific references to dreaming. The most striking of these links dreaming to the art of poetry. At the beginning of act V, Theseus and Hippolyta, surrounded by their members of the court, ruminate about the bizarre claims the lovers made about their experiences in the forest.

Hippolyta: 'Tis strange, my Theseus, that these lovers speak of.

Theseus: More strange than true. I never may believe
These antique fables, nor these fairy toys.
Lovers and madmen have such seething brains,
Such shaping fantasies, that apprehend
More than cool reason ever comprehends.
The lunatic, the lover and the poet
Are of imagination all compact.
One sees more devils than vast hell can hold;
That is the madman. The lover, all as frantic,
Sees Helen's beauty in a brow of Egypt.
The poet's eye, in fine frenzy rolling,
Doth glance from heaven to earth, from earth to heaven;
And as imagination bodies forth
The forms of things unknown, the poet's pen
Turns them to shapes, and gives to airy nothing
A local habitation and a name.
Such tricks hath strong imagination,
That if it would but apprehend some joy,

It comprehends some bringer of that joy;
Or in the night, imagining some fear,
How easy is a bush suppos'd a bear!

(V.i.1–23)

Reality and Poetic Vision

The play seems to invite its audience to feel both sympathy and antipathy for Theseus's statements. Theseus's disdain for poets and lovers and his sense that they are on a par with lunatics is fascinating. But his logic undermines itself. Let's not forget that Theseus is a figure from classical mythology talking to an Amazonian queen. He is the fanciful creation of a poet. Moreover, because he speaks in verse, well reasoned and nicely logical, the very form of his expression undermines his argument that poetry is, by definition, wildly unhinged.

Hippolyta, by contrast, is more in tune with the play's magic. She finds the lovers' account of the night's strange events credible, investing her imagination more strongly in its romantic miracle. One of the things to which Hippolyta, like the audience, may be responding is the fact that the play she and her fiancé inhabit is one of Shakespeare's most musical, awash in poetic imaginings. With the exception of the artisans, most of the characters converse in verse. If we carry Theseus's suggestion that poets, like lovers, can be linked to lunatics, then wouldn't the play itself qualify as the ravings of a lunatic? Shakespeare may be offering us a bit of irony in putting Theseus's speech into his play. He may be suggesting that in order to be entertained by his work, we must all become mad along with the playwright.

And, as it turns out, with Theseus as well. For as if to further undermine his own position, Theseus, as soon as he finishes debating with Hippolyta, begs to be entertained. He cries that the hours between supper and bed are "anguish" without some kind of distraction. He therefore feeds off the very fancies he dismissed in his doubting speech.

Rhyming Nonsense

The play Theseus calls for is the very one the artisans were rehearsing earlier. It is a drama based on the tale of *Pyramus and Thisby*. Most of its humor comes from the fact that the artisans, who are not well versed in romantic narrative, fail to convey the tragic loftiness of their story. We are thus struck, at the end of the play, by an example of theatrical artifice that supports Theseus's thesis about the folly of imagination. If all poetry, all drama were as poorly wrought as the play *Pyramus and Thisby*, poets would indeed be frivolous creatures. For those in the audience who sympathize with the rhapsodic expressions of Hermia and Helena, Demetrius and Lysander, the concluding play-within-a-play reminds lovers to laugh at themselves.

The Dreamers

The play is as obsessed with poetry as it is with dreaming. In the forest, several characters have troubling dreams. It is through those dreams that the human figures find an imaginative link to the spirits they cannot see.

Hermia's nightmare in act II is prophetic of the terrible pains she will suffer when arguing with the enchanted Lysander. Bottom, in one of the play's most beloved monologues, is revived after having been transformed into an ass with only the vaguest memory of what happened to him. Yet, as in the scene where he first encountered Titania, he offers an innocent but comically wise interpretation of his experience:

I have had a most rare vision. I have had a dream, past the wit of man to say what dream it was. Man is but an ass, if he go about t'expound this dream. Methought I was—there is no man can tell what. Methought I was, and methought I had—but man is but a patch'd fool, if he will offer to say what methought I had. 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. I will get Peter Quince to write a ballet of this dream. It shall be called "Bottom's Dream," because it hath no bottom; and I will sing it in the latter end of a play, before the Duke. Peradventure, to make it the more gracious, I shall sing it at her death.



Bottom's Dream
by Johann Henirch Füssli, 1792

His wonderful speech crystallizes the confusion of humankind in the presence of the fairy magic. Like the four lovers, Bottom is utterly confounded by what he has been through. Yet although he does not bring a lover with him from the forest in the end, he admits that his adventure has changed him forever. Even in puzzlement, Bottom can speak of a connection to the spirit world with halting expressions that are nevertheless truer to the world the play represents than Theseus's eloquent dismissal of fairyland.

Dreaming and Sovereignty

How different the spirit sovereign is from the human one! Theseus, the Duke of Athens, doesn't just err in his speech about the lunatic, the lover, and the poet. At the beginning of the play, he fails to impose his authority over Hermia. He also, as we have seen, never seems to be on the same page with Hippolyta, who has a mind of her own. But Oberon, the Fairy King, can inject his will into the hearts and minds of those he deems his subjects. He appears as a kind of god, albeit a god who is self-centered, short sighted, and capable of error.

And again it is the impish Puck who stands beyond such control. Puck, of course, is Oberon's messenger boy, but when he's not working for the man, he pursues his own fancies. Puck appears as a Protean sprite, a shape changer that even his fellow fairies seem to mistrust. If Oberon is an autocratic being who tries to bring order to the transcendent world, Puck is his antithesis, a figure of chaos, an agent of misrule. At the same time, Puck is one of the play's most entertaining characters. The audience is invited to enjoy his mischievous flittering.

Thus, the content of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is amazingly multifaceted. Theseus and Hippolyta on dreams, Lysander and Demetrius on the way to treat a lady, the four lovers and the artisans on the worthiness of expressing romantic passion, Oberon and Titania on the way to win an argument with your lover, the world of reality and the world of dreams: the play reflects intricate debates even as it respects a variety of perspectives.

Come now; what masques, what dances shall we have,
To wear away this long age of three hours
Between our after-supper and bed-time?
Where is our usual manager of mirth?
What revells are in hand? Is there no play
To ease the anguish of a torturing hour?

~*A Midsummer Night's Dream*
V.i.32-37

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING



Questions

1. Why does Theseus argue that the lunatic, the lover, and the poet “are of imagination all compact”?
2. When the plot is resolved at the end of act IV, why doesn't *A Midsummer Night's Dream* simply end? What happens in act V that is necessary to our appreciation of the play as a whole?
3. Was Titania right to surrender the Indian boy to Oberon? Why or why not?
4. Is it possible to think of the fairies in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* as figures who are not part of the real world, but merely figments of the characters' imagination? Why or why not?

Suggested Reading

Shakespeare, William. *The Riverside Shakespeare*. 2nd ed. Eds. G. Blakemore Evans and J.J.M. Tobin. Boston: Heinle, 1996.

Other Books of Interest

A good deal of scholarly literature considers Shakespeare's comedies as a group. For secondary reading on this play and others, please consult the **Course Materials** beginning on page 76.

Lecture 6: *The Merchant of Venice, Part I*

The **Suggested Reading** for this lecture is Shakespeare's "The Merchant of Venice" in *The Riverside Shakespeare*.

Portia's Integrity

Portia, a beautiful heiress who lives in the city of Belmont, is a different kind of heroine than those we have met in earlier Shakespearean comedy. Kate and Bianca in *The Taming of the Shrew*, Julia and Silvia in *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, and Hippolyta and Titania in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* are independent-minded individuals. But in the end, they are all made to serve their men. Portia, by contrast, not only holds a more central place in her play than her predecessors but also emerges triumphant, stepping out from under the shadow of her husband Bassanio. Indeed, instead of being subjected to his will, Portia tames him, although in the end the question of whether Bassanio will permanently reform remains open.

At the midpoint of *The Merchant of Venice*, Bassanio arrives in Belmont to woo Portia, only to discover that he must pass a test. After entering a room where he is instructed to open one of three caskets, Bassanio makes the correct decision, and chooses the leaden one. When he turns, triumphant, to Portia, she opens her heart to him even as she cannily comes up with a method to ensure his fidelity (III.ii.149–74). Portia claims to be an unschooled girl who must learn from her husband, whom she calls lord, governor, and king. And yet just as she gives herself openly and wholeheartedly to her man, she also takes measures to protect herself. Portia gives Bassanio a ring, a conventional symbol of betrothal as if she were the presiding voice at her own marriage.

Portia tells Bassanio that if he loses the ring, he would give her the right to accuse him of infidelity, to reproach him for betraying her. Bassanio, deeply in debt, is about to marry an heiress who will provide him with a life of ease. Portia's warning reminds him that the wealth and comfort he will have in the future springs from the promise of fidelity he made to his beloved.

Bassanio's Oath

Portia's mistrust of men comes through more openly a few scenes after her betrothal. The newly married Bassanio rushes off to Venice to appear at the trial of Antonio, Bassanio's dear friend. Antonio is about to be executed for defaulting on a loan, money he procured so that Bassanio could sail to Belmont and woo Portia. Portia turns to Nerissa and suggests that they also go to Venice, disguised, like Julia in *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, as

PASSAGES FOR STUDY

The Merchant of Venice

III.ii.149–74

III.iv.62–78

V.i.192–208

V.i.240–48

III.ii.63–69

III.ii.73–107

I.i.161–176

young men. Portia appears at Antonio's trial as Balthazar, a young scholar who turns the tables on the moneylender and wins the case. As a reward for his work, Balthazar demands Bassanio's ring. Portia's servant Nerissa, who has been courted by Gratiano, Bassanio's friend, convinces Gratiano to hand over his ring as well.

Portia arrives in Belmont just minutes before Bassanio and Antonio's return. She makes all the servants of her household promise not to reveal that she has been gone. When Portia, with feigned surprise, discovers that Bassanio has returned home with a naked hand, she rebukes him so strongly that he says he wishes he had cut off that hand rather than arrive without his ring. Bassanio, in an attempt to make amends, asserts that "I never more will break an oath with thee" (V.i.248). But since Bassanio has proven himself to be a promise breaker, why should Portia believe his promise never to break another oath?

The Passion of Antonio

Portia may feel obligated to submit Bassanio to a test once she realizes that she is competing with Antonio for his love. Commentators on the play have often noted Antonio's overweening, self-immolating love for Bassanio. When Antonio expresses his devotion to Bassanio, he sounds a little like the crazily passionate figures from *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Some of the ardent lovers in earlier comedies, particularly *Love's Labor's Lost*, were all talk and no action, but Antonio is different. He puts his mouth where his money is. When he learns that he is to perish for his debts, he appears almost happy to do so if it means dying for his beloved Bassanio.

When, at the end, Antonio and Portia meet in Belmont, only one of them can hold first place in Bassanio's heart.

Portia triumphs in the end because she is able to outwit Bassanio by showing him that her accusation of infidelity was only a game. When Portia and her servant Nerissa produce their rings and show them to their husbands, the men are dumbstruck. If Portia and Nerissa can appear to be in two places at once, in Belmont and in Venice, the men must think twice before they allow their eyes to roam. Unlike Petruccio, Proteus, and Theseus, Portia does not conquer her spouse by subduing his body or controlling his will. Her conquest of Bassanio is intellectual and spiritual and thus far more delightful than men's unsettling triumphs in the earlier comedies.

Bassanio's Choices

But is Bassanio worth her trouble? In the scene where he chooses the leaden casket, he speaks eloquently but hypocritically. He disdains the gold



Portia as Balthazar
by Henry Woods, 1888

because he claims that finery and good looks can be deceiving. He has no use for the falseness of mere appearance. He scorns the silver because it reminds him of money, which he finds corrupt.

. . . [B]ut thou, thou meagre lead,
Which rather threat'nest than dost promise aught,
Thy paleness moves me more than eloquence,
And here choose I. Joy be the consequence!

(III.ii.104–07)

Bassanio delivers a nice little moral treatise. However, his speech seems to contain a good deal of posturing. In fact, his choice may have been prompted by the clues Portia provides in the song she orders to be performed as Bassanio circles the caskets. It is difficult to reconcile the sentiments in this speech with the character of Bassanio as we know it in *The Merchant of Venice*. Despite the disdain he expresses in his monologue, Bassanio elsewhere proves to be obsessed with monetary gain. For him to turn up his nose at gold and silver because they remind him of false ornament and commercial exchange sounds terribly hypocritical.

Bassanio does express a good deal of devotion to Portia when he is with her, but can we believe that he would have bothered to seek her out in the first place if she were not incredibly wealthy? Earlier in the play, when Bassanio spoke of Portia to Antonio, he described her in metaphors that were almost wholly economic (I.i.161–76). He thought only in terms of her value and his understanding that in marrying her, her wealth would clear him of his debts. And lest we think that Bassanio's relationship to Antonio is different, have a look at I.i.131, where Bassanio embraces Antonio as the man "I owe the most in money and in love." Note that money comes first on the list. All of Bassanio's relationships involve indebtedness of one kind or another.

Bassanio's least attractive moment may be the one that teaches us the most about the mercenary who lives in his heart. In I.iii., when the money-lender insists that if Antonio is unable to pay the debt, he will have the right to cut a pound of flesh from his body, Bassanio offers just two lines of

In Belmont is a lady richly left,
And she is fair and fairer than that word,
Of wondrous virtues. Sometimes from her eyes
I did receive fair speechless messages.
Her name is Portia, nothing undervalu'd
To Cato's daughter, Brutus' Portia.

~*The Merchant of Venice*
(I.i.161–66)

protest: “You shall not seal to such a bond for me,/I’ll rather dwell in my necessity” (I.i.154–55).

After making his thoughts known in this little couplet, Bassanio is content to let Antonio reassure him that he will easily be able to repay the cash on time. Bassanio never speaks another word of protest. He lets Antonio risk his life so that he, Bassanio, can make his fortune.

Perhaps we should feel relieved in the end when Portia gains dominance over a husband with such a cold, hard manner. Bassanio sees the world in terms of wealth and substance, that which can be bought and sold. His speeches about love are colored by notations of value, the weighing of one type of gain against another. It is because Bassanio thinks in this fashion that Antonio is able to convince him to give his ring to Balthazar. At IV.i.449–51, Antonio, who has heard Bassanio refuse Balthazar, says, “My Lord Bassanio, let him have the ring./Let his deservings and my love withal/Be *valued* against your wife’s commandment” (italics mine).

As in *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, two friends decide that their affection for one another is worth more than love for a woman. Although Bassanio may have been willing to sacrifice Antonio’s life when it came to enriching himself, when he is married and in possession of Portia’s fortune, her “commandments” hold less significance for him. But in act V, Portia turns the tables, proving that Antonio’s judgment has consequences neither he nor Bassanio had considered. The marriage vow is binding even when standing at a distance from one’s spouse seems to set other priorities above her.

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING



Questions

1. What ideas and situations does *The Merchant of Venice* share with *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*?
2. What differentiates the plot of *The Merchant of Venice* from that of a conventional fairy tale?
3. Describe the character of Portia.
4. Are Portia and Nerissa right to terrify Bassanio and Gratiano in the play's final act? Why or why not?
5. What does Bassanio say and do that makes him seem more mercenary than romantic?
6. How does Antonio's love for Bassanio threaten Bassanio's marriage to Portia?

Suggested Reading

Shakespeare, William. *The Riverside Shakespeare*. 2nd ed. Eds. G. Blakemore Evans and J.J.M. Tobin. Boston: Heinle, 1996.

Other Books of Interest

A good deal of scholarly literature considers Shakespeare's comedies as a group. For secondary reading on this play and others, please consult the **Course Materials** beginning on page 76.

Lecture 7: *The Merchant of Venice, Part II*

The **Suggested Reading** for this lecture is Shakespeare's "The Merchant of Venice" in *The Riverside Shakespeare*.

Shylock and Stereotyping

Shylock the moneylender stands at the center of this lecture, though, as I will argue, Shylock's function in *The Merchant of Venice* is, at least in part, to reveal the moral character of the people with whom he interacts. Some readers and critics, in an attempt to rescue Shakespeare from the charge of antisemitism, try to argue that Shylock is a heroic victim. And yet, although I think it is possible to feel some sympathy for him, there really is no getting around his monstrous behavior. The cruelty of Shylock, his bloodthirsty nature, can't be sidestepped.

But it's more of an open question whether Shylock's villainy is rooted directly in his Jewishness or whether Shylock is the way he is because he is an individual responding to stimulus. It is possible that despite Shylock's malevolence, the prejudices the other characters articulate are not to be taken as truth, but as signs of their own limitations. That the heroes of our play have contempt for Shylock and all Jews does not necessarily mean that the play itself is antisemitic. As I stated in the last lecture, the main characters of *The Merchant of Venice* are significantly flawed in many respects. It never occurs to any of them to treat Shylock like a fellow human being.

Certainly, Shylock's vendetta against the play's Christians, and Antonio in particular, springs from genuine grievances. When we first meet Shylock, in I.iii, Antonio asks him for money. And Shylock is overwhelmed by the irony of the situation. The hatred Shylock feels for Antonio is a reaction to Antonio's personal treatment of him as well as Antonio's attempts to undermine him in business. Antonio is not a moneylender by profession and yet he competes with Shylock

PASSAGES FOR STUDY

The Merchant of Venice

I.iii.106–37

III.i.47–73

IV.i.18–39

IV.i.181–202

IV.i.282–97



Antonio reproaches Shylock from an eighteenth-century book of Shakespeare's plays.

when people are in need of funds, lending cash without interest, which cuts into Shylock's business. Antonio has no compunction about admitting that he spit upon Shylock, whom he despises not just as a usurer, but also as a Jew. I noted in the previous lecture that Antonio often measures moral values as if they were commodities. Yet he has the temerity to loathe Shylock, who deals in money and is successful in business. Antonio's hatred thus takes on a personal and a political cast. By despising the Jew who trades in money, Antonio can self-righteously loathe his competitor. He can feel superior even as he wades in similar economic ponds.

Shylock's "Instruction"

Shylock's demand for a pound of flesh may be seen as an effort to teach Antonio that the value of money is insignificant when compared to the value of a life. But if that's what Shylock is attempting, neither Antonio nor Bassanio benefit from this lesson. When Antonio signs the bond, both fail the test.

In Shylock's most famous speech, he talks directly about the instruction the play's Christians have given him about their sense of his value as a human being. He is not making a plea for equal rights, as many suppose when they read the speech out of context. Instead, Shylock, when asked to show mercy to Antonio, insists that he will be just as merciful to Antonio as Antonio and all of the Christian world has been to him:

Shylock: [Antonio] hath disgrac'd me, and hind'red me half a million, laugh'd at my losses, mock'd at my gains, scorn'd my nation, thwarted my bargains, cool'd my friends, heated mine enemies; and what's his reason? I am a Jew. Hath not a Jew eyes? Hath not a Jew hands, organs, dimensions, senses, affections, passions; fed with the same food, hurt with the same weapons, subject to the same diseases, heal'd by the same means, warm'd and cool'd by the same winter and summer, as a Christian is? If you prick us, do we not bleed? If you tickle us, do we not laugh? If you poison us, do we not die? And if you wrong us, shall we not revenge? If we are like you in the rest, we will resemble you in that. If a Jew wrong a Christian, what is his humility? Revenge. If a Christian wrong a Jew, what should his sufferance be by Christian example? Why, revenge. The villainy you teach me, I will execute, and it shall go hard but I will better the instruction.



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(III.i.54–73)

Sir Herbert Beerbohm Tree as Shylock
by Charles Buchel, 1914

Shylock means to teach Antonio how it feels to suffer at Antonio's own prejudicial hands. He claims that when it comes to revenge, Jews can be just as petty as the play's Venetians.

Here Shylock reminds me a little bit of Kate at the end of *The Taming of the Shrew*. Kate also drew conclusions based on observation of the natural and social world around her. Shylock's argument, however, is more compelling, not only because it speaks, as Kate did not, directly to his own experience of the pettiness of the citizens around him, but also because it addresses our experience of the Venetians in this play.

Shylock the Scapegoat

For example, at Antonio's trial, the Duke of Venice talks down to Shylock, demanding that in response to Antonio's plight, "We all expect a gentle answer, Jew!" (IV.i.34). The Duke addresses Shylock by name at the beginning of his speech, but simply calls him "Jew" at the end. There is a resonance to this, because the word "Jew" is contrasted with the word "gentle," which sounds a good deal like the word "gentile." Thus, the Duke is describing the gentile as a merciful creature and insisting that Shylock emulate him. Yet mercy is not something that comes as a result of someone else's order. It is a quality generated from the heart.

Portia, when disguised as Balthazar, begins her interrogation of Shylock with a similar demand. Shylock's continued intransigence leads Portia to deliver another monologue that, while justifiably famous, is like the "Hath not a Jew eyes" speech in that it takes on new meaning when understood in the context of this play's plot:

Portia: The quality of mercy is not strain'd,
 It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven
 Upon the place beneath. It is twice blest:
 It blesseth him that gives and him that takes.
 'Tis mightiest in the mightiest, it becomes
 The throned monarch better than his crown.
 His sceptre shows the force of temporal power,
 The attribute to awe and majesty,
 Wherein doth sit the dread and fear of kings;
 But mercy is above this sceptred sway,
 It is enthroned in the hearts of kings,
 It is an attribute to God himself;
 And earthly power doth then show likest God's
 When mercy seasons justice. Therefore, Jew,
 Though justice be thy plea, consider this,
 That in the course of justice, none of us
 Should see salvation. We do pray for mercy,
 And that same prayer doth teach us all to render
 The deeds of mercy.

(IV.i.184–202)

While Portia offers a strikingly eloquent explanation of the Christian quality of mercy, she also reflects a conventional prejudice. She, like many characters

in the play, sees Jews as practitioners of justice, Christians as agents of mercy. Yet at the same time that she argues that the Christ-like quality of mercy is not “strained,” she says that the Jew *must* be merciful. Portia’s refusal to note the interior contradiction in her words again, like Antonio’s antisemitism, presses expectations upon the Jew that the gentiles in the play do not hold for themselves.

Christian Mercy

This point leads us to an overwhelming question: which Christians in *this* play act mercifully? I’m not talking about Christians in general. In fact, *The Merchant of Venice* has the deepest respect for Christian virtues, the ideals of forgiveness and grace, the keen sense of holiness that comes from the figure and example of Jesus. But who in this play behaves mercifully?

Not Bassanio, who is content to allow Antonio to risk his life so that he can woo Portia. It never occurs to Bassanio to show mercy to Shylock or to anyone else. Antonio and the Duke are even more vicious. Antonio’s friends Solario and Solanio seem to spend a good deal of their leisure time insulting Shylock and calling him a dog. Gratiano mocks and jeers Shylock throughout the course of the trial, celebrating in contemptuous triumph when Balthazar defeats him. Shylock’s daughter Jessica, without so much as a goodbye, steals a great deal of money from Shylock’s house and runs off with Lorenzo. When the citizens of Venice discover Shylock dashing through the streets crying for his ducats and his daughter, they jeer at him.

The play’s Venetians invest Shylock with the expectation, the demand that he behave as they never would. And when he fails their test, they punish him. Their torment of Shylock, who will not behave as they expect him to, makes them feel virtuous. I’m sure you’ll agree that a feeling of virtuousness that comes from mistreating others is no virtue at all.

This is just one of the reasons why *The Merchant of Venice* is a difficult play to perform successfully on stage. Audiences who rejoice along with Gratiano at the trial or who feel smug and comforted by the matchmaking that happens over Shylock’s battered identity misunderstand the play’s investigation of the true meaning of mercy. Just as *The Merchant of Venice* sets us against the vengeful Shylock, it also sets us against those hypocritical Venetians who punish him.

Shylock’s Humanity

Shylock may have a spiteful nature and an appetite for bloody vengeance, but when it comes to matters of the heart, he is the most humane figure in the play. In a world where even love functions as a kind of transaction, we discover that he was devoted to his wife Leah. When Shylock learns that Jessica



Shylock and Jessica
artist unknown, ca. 1870s

traded a turquoise ring for a monkey, he is overcome with sadness. Leah gave that ring to him when he was a bachelor. "I would not have given it," he says, "for a wilderness of monkeys" (III.i.122–23).

It can't be an accident that Shylock here confesses that he would never surrender the ring of his beloved, which is the very action that gets Bassanio and Gratiano in so much trouble at the end of the play. During the trial scene, Shylock stands by as the unregenerate Antonio and Bassanio continue to think of other people as having a value that can be traded. The example that Antonio and Bassanio set before Shylock provides him with good reason for wishing that his daughter had avoided marriage with a gentile. Shylock condemns the "Christian husbands" who wish their wives dead and in the grave for the sake of rescuing their good friend. These comments, and Shylock's interpretation of them, make the men in this play seem morally inferior to the Jewish Shylock.

The Elevation of Christian Values

Let me reiterate that *The Merchant of Venice* never attacks Christian values. Quite the contrary. The play supports the beautiful moral sentiments of Portia when she explains that the quality of mercy is not strained. It supports the magnificent expressions of personal affection that characters sometimes link to the sacred loves in classical mythology and the Bible, particularly in act V. At the same time, the play dramatizes that for too many people, there can be a strong distinction between the Christianity they preach and the Christianity they practice. *The Merchant of Venice* demonstrates how easily those who talk a good game can fail to live up to their idealism when they find themselves confronting adversity.

Antonio, I am married to a wife
Which is as dear to me as life itself,
But life itself, my wife, and all the world,
Are not with me esteem'd above thy life.
I would lose all, ay, sacrifice them all
Here to this devil, to deliver you.

~*The Merchant of Venice*
(IV.i.282–87)

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING



Questions

1. Is *The Merchant of Venice* an antisemitic play? Why or why not?
2. What is hypocritical about the Venetians' treatment of Shylock?
3. In what way are Shylock's "Hath not a Jew eyes" speech and Portia's speech beginning "The quality of mercy is not stained" misunderstood when quoted out of context?
4. In what sense might Shylock appear to be more humane and loving than Antonio and Bassanio? Why do you think Shakespeare includes such details in *The Merchant of Venice*?
5. What distinction does the play draw between true Christian mercy and the practice of the play's characters?

Suggested Reading

Shakespeare, William. *The Riverside Shakespeare*. 2nd ed. Eds. G. Blakemore Evans and J.J.M. Tobin. Boston: Heinle, 1996.

Other Books of Interest

A good deal of scholarly literature considers Shakespeare's comedies as a group. For secondary reading on this play and others, please consult the **Course Materials** beginning on page 76.

Lecture 8: *Much Ado About Nothing*, Part I

The **Suggested Reading** for this lecture is Shakespeare's "Much Ado About Nothing" in *The Riverside Shakespeare*.

Something Out of "Nothing"

The title *Much Ado About Nothing* works on several levels. On the surface, it sounds like an author's concession to commercial appeal. How much content can a play with such a title have? Perhaps we are in for a nice frivolous evening at the theater where characters busy themselves with matters of no real consequence. On the other hand, Shakespeare's audiences, looking at a phrase like *Much Ado About Nothing*, might have seen "nothing" as a synonym for "noting." This is a matter of some dispute among critics, but it's very tempting to take the pun seriously. For by dropping the "h" from the word "nothing," the title suggests that the comedy's characters will be paying close critical attention to what is said and done.

Moreover, the word "nothing" has sexual significance. There is a scene in *Hamlet* where the protagonist states that "nothing" is "a fair thought to lie between maids' legs" (III.ii.118–19). If "nothing" can signify the feminine void men wish to fill, the title *Much Ado About Nothing* now implies that the comedy's characters will zealously devote themselves to exploring female sexuality.

It is fitting that there should be multiple innuendo in the title of this work. *Much Ado About Nothing* is all about language, how it can be used to manipulate and create misunderstandings on the one hand, and how it can on the other hand generate profoundly significant ideas. *Much Ado About Nothing* also contains a good deal of wordplay, like the wordplay featured in the title.

Language and Love

The comedy has a double plot. Benedick and Beatrice, the couple in plot #1, are breathtakingly witty, two of the cleverest negotiators of words in all of Shakespeare. They are initially hostile to one another, and only as the play progresses do they come to express their love. Plot #2 concerns Hero and Claudio, who are infatuated with each other, but as the story progresses they are driven apart by the play's villains. In both plots, love is born, complicated, and achieved through the characters' manipulation of language.

Figures who stand on the periphery of these plots contribute to the main action's comedy of language. The low characters in *Much Ado About Nothing*, as usual in Shakespeare, work out a benign version of deeper matters that appear in the main plots. The most memorable of the play's buffoons is Dogberry, a constable, who is backed up by his underlings, known as the

PASSAGES FOR STUDY

Much Ado About Nothing

I.i.296–305

II.iii.7–35

I.i.119–45

II.iii.219–46

III.i.107–16

V.iv.74–98

II.i.73–80

IV.i.274–80

Watch. Shakespeare gives Dogberry several scenes in which he jovially (and unintentionally) undermines his own authority. Dogberry, like the secondary figures in *Love's Labor's Lost*, misuses words to amusing effect. He thinks he is uttering refined speech, but his funny malapropisms have the effect of making him seem ignorant rather than important. He often says the opposite of what he intends.

Dogberry's verbal ticks prove that words, when used foolishly, can make a fool out of the speaker. Conversely, words wisely spoken indicate a fine mind and good authority. Again, as in *Love's Labor's Lost*, the world of *Much Ado About Nothing* is the world of the court. The action takes place in Messina, a port city in northern Sicily, where the Spanish Don Pedro and a number of young Italian lords congregate. The Lords have just come back from fighting in the wars and are settling into a time of peace. Claudio makes the transition rather easily. He desires Hero from the play's very first scene. Benedick, by contrast, recognizes the change in Claudio and is disappointed.

Benedick and Beatrice

However, although Benedick does not realize it, he is already in love. Benedick claims to prefer the state of war to the state of love, but for him,



A nineteenth-century wood engraving of Dogberry and the Watchmen accosting Conrade and Borachio.

Beatrice embodies both. Their wit-combats are a kind of merry war. The more they cross verbal swords, the more they prove they are meant for each other.

Benedick and Beatrice have been so adored as romantic icons that when *Much Ado About Nothing* was revived in the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries, the plotline involving Hero and Claudio was muted or even cut so that the sparring lovers could stand at the play's center. That Beatrice and Benedick are perfectly matched is clear to everyone but the couple themselves. And so, in II.i, Don Pedro hatches a conspiracy, getting Leonato, Claudio, and Hero to help him. He suggests that the men, in a place where Benedick is sure to overhear them, converse loudly about how Beatrice is in love with Benedick. They are also to say that they can never tell Benedick about Beatrice's love because he is too proud to return her affections. Hero agrees to bring some women into the conspiracy and to get Beatrice to overhear a similar conversation regarding her pride and Benedick's passion for her.

When Benedick and Beatrice believe that the other is smitten, each is thunderstruck. Just as they were similar in linguistic talent, so are they alike in the way they respond to the rumor of the other's desires. They are also equally hurt by the criticism that their pride will never permit them to reciprocate affection.

The next time Beatrice and Benedick meet, they express unconditional love for each other. Although difficulties of the Hero and Claudio love plot delay their betrothal, in the end they discover Don Pedro's ploy. In the play's final scene, Benedick and Beatrice must either make the kind of public confession the lead characters in *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* avoided like the plague or once again bury their affections. Claudio and Hero produce love notes that their friends have composed. Benedick and Beatrice find themselves defeated by the very words they committed to paper, which articulate the feelings they guarded so dearly.

As so often in Shakespearean comedy, we conclude with the hope of reformation that is not quite dramatized on stage.

The Cynics

Although the repartee of Benedick and Beatrice is wonderful, *Much Ado About Nothing* would not be a true Shakespearean comedy if it didn't have its darker side. Although the play ends in a dance, Benedick introduces it by praising marriage in a backhanded way, recommending it to Don Pedro even as he asserts that all wives are by nature unfaithful to their husbands. Indeed, throughout the play, Benedick and his male companions make lewd sexual jokes that, while funny, also make them seem rather childish. For her part,



Beatrice and Benedick in the garden.

Beatrice has imagined the course of love as a cautionary tale. In II.i.73–80, she tells Hero that if marriage is a dance, it is a dance of death.

All-Consuming Love

Much Ado About Nothing has more feasts and parties than any other play in Shakespeare. In the spirit of peacetime, our characters seem to do little more than attend dances and dinners. Benedick and Beatrice, in tune with the mood of the times, articulate metaphors of eating and devouring. The imagery they employ is sometimes disturbing. In the speech where Benedick declares that he will marry Beatrice, he compares her to the meat that is noxious to a youth but which an older man finds delicious. (Is Beatrice no more than meat to him?) Beatrice, for her part, in a passage I cited earlier in this lecture, says her disdain feeds off Benedick. At another point, we learn that she told Benedick before he went off to war that she was so sure he'd prove a coward that she promised to eat everyone he killed.

In one sense, the couple's obsession with carnal metaphors may work as expressions of desire, their longing to devour each other. But at the same time, there is a kind of savagery in the conflation of promising, eating, and sexual activity, for to devour something can be to conquer it, to destroy it. There is more than a tinge of unpleasantness in the metaphorical language these lovers use.

But again, we may hope that these young lovers are on their way to a brighter, healthier future, a future signified by the lack of culinary metaphors that appear in their final dialogue in act V.

Benedick: By my sword, Beatrice, thou lovest me.

Beatrice: Do not swear and eat it.

Benedick: I will swear by it that you love me, and I will
make him eat it that says I love not you.

Beatrice: Will you not eat your word?

Benedick: Will no sauce that can be devis'd to it. I protest
I love thee.

~*Much Ado About Nothing*
(IV.i.274–80)

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING



Questions

1. What are the multiple meanings implied by the title *Much Ado About Nothing* and why are these meanings appropriate for this play?
2. Describe the persona and speech of Dogberry.
3. Why is Don Pedro successful in his scheme to outwit Benedick and Beatrice?
4. After Benedick and Beatrice realize that they have been fooled, why don't they break off their betrothal?
5. Why do metaphors involving eating dominate this play?

Suggested Reading

Shakespeare, William. *The Riverside Shakespeare*. 2nd ed. Eds. G. Blakemore Evans and J.J.M. Tobin. Boston: Heinle, 1996.

Other Books of Interest

A good deal of scholarly literature considers Shakespeare's comedies as a group. For secondary reading on this play and others, please consult the **Course Materials** beginning on page 76.

Lecture 9: *Much Ado About Nothing*, Part II

The **Suggested Reading** for this lecture is Shakespeare's "Much Ado About Nothing" in *The Riverside Shakespeare*.

Don John's Villainy

This lecture concerns the romance of Claudio and Hero, which is disrupted by Don John, the brother of Don Pedro and the play's villain. Don John is a somewhat frustrating figure. He doesn't seem to have clear motivation for ruining Hero's life. In the fifth book of Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso*, one of Shakespeare's sources for the Hero-Claudio plotline, the Don John figure is in love with the woman whose marriage he corrupts. But Shakespeare's Don John is no *Don Juan*. The only reason he gives for doing ill is that it suits his mind to infect the court than beautify it. He insists that he is what he is and cannot be altered.

PASSAGES FOR STUDY

Much Ado About Nothing

- I.iii.27–37
- IV.i.29–62
- IV.i.288–323
- IV.i.158–70
- IV.i.210–44
- V.iv.58–67

Obstinacy and Obstruction

Don John may be remarkable for his single-mindedness, but he is not remarkable for his intelligence. Perhaps the real reason why Don John goes after Hero and Claudio is because he realizes that Claudio is even dumber than he is. At a masquerade party early in the play, Don John hints to Claudio that his brother Don Pedro is wooing Hero himself. Gullible Claudio accepts Don John's word and cries, "Farewell therefore Hero!" (II.i.182). He gives up on his beloved at the first sign of difficulty.

When this flimsy ploy fails, Don John admits that he's run out of ideas. It is not he but his follower Borachio who comes up with another scheme to tear the lovers apart. Borachio has seduced Hero's maidservant Margaret, and he arranges for Margaret to convince Hero to sleep in another room the night before her wedding. Margaret then stands at Hero's window and calls down passionately to Borachio, who is waiting below. Don John meanwhile brings Don Pedro and Claudio near the window so that they can witness a woman they believe to be Hero responding romantically to a strange man. Claudio is incensed. As we might expect in a work that places such importance on language, Claudio chooses to revenge himself with harsh words. Before he jilts Hero, he allows the wedding arrangements to proceed as if nothing were wrong. He doesn't let the cat out of the bag until he and Hero are actually standing before the Friar.

Misogyny in the Face of Innocence

At that moment, in a shocking public display, Claudio curses Hero. He is much more eloquent calling Hero a whore than he ever was in winning her as a bride. In what plays like a warm-up for *Othello*, Claudio, on the basis of small

evidence, claims that the golden girl the company thinks it sees is a deception. He swears that beneath her chaste appearance lies a hot-blooded harlot.

This scene is painful for some of the same reasons that *Othello* is painful. We learn that the misogynistic ideas about women that make up soldiers' talk are buried deep in Claudio's psyche. In truth, however, Claudio has it backwards. Hero has not betrayed him by compromising her virtue. Rather, it is Claudio who betrays Hero by holding fast to the preconceived notions of his bachelorhood.

Hero's denials are meaningless to Claudio and to Don Pedro. They assume that if she's been lying up to this point, she would continue to do so. Claudio bids Hero "farewell," as he did after Don John's first deception (IV.i.103–04).

Hero swoons. Don John calls Claudio and Don Pedro to his side and the three new best friends exit the stage. Now things get even uglier. Leonato, Hero's father, is convinced that the accusations are true. Over Hero's senseless body, he vaults into a long speech about his daughter's sluttishness, cursing himself for ever having loved her. When he learns from Beatrice that the previous night was the one time in the past year that Beatrice and Hero did not share a room together, Leonato cries "confirmed, confirmed!" (IV.i.150) as if Beatrice has given him irrefutable proof of Hero's infidelity. Leonato says that he wishes his daughter dead.

Of course, in reality, Beatrice's testimony confirms nothing. One would hope that Leonato, who is the governor of Messina, would know the difference between genuine proof and circumstantial evidence. We discover that Don Pedro's and Claudio's petty suspicions about women lurk in Leonato's heart as well.

The Road to Reformation

Now that the stakes are against her, how can Hero prove that she is innocent? Indeed, when considered guilty, how can anyone prove innocence? This is one of the key questions at the heart of this play, as it will be in *Othello*. As soon as her reputation is besmirched, Hero finds it impossible to demonstrate that her soul is free of the loose inclinations and dark deceptions that haunt the imaginations of the men in her life but have nothing to do with her.

Friar Francis tries to save the day. In a conventional comedy, the Friar's faith in Hero would prompt her remaining supporters to inaugurate an investigation that would ultimately uncover Don John's plots. But *Much Ado About Nothing* is not a conventional comedy. Rather than look for evidence, the Friar comes up with a plan that he hopes will instill Claudio with the same faith he himself has in Hero. He proposes that Hero go into hiding and that the world be told that she has died. His idea is that by advertising Hero's death, Claudio will remember only the beautiful and virtuous Hero with whom he fell in love. The Friar does not expect Claudio to decide that Hero is innocent. Instead, he believes that the sorrowful news of her death will inspire Claudio, slowly, over time, to forgive her. Only then will Claudio again be prepared to accept her as his bride.

The Friar's idea is beautiful. If his experiment could work, we would witness an incredible dramatization of the hopefulness inherent to the genre of

comedy as it is traditionally understood: the sense that people can change for the better.

But Claudio never benefits from the Friar's instruction. In the very next scene, Dogberry and the Watch nab Conrade and Borachio, who are made to confess what they have done.

In the end, Claudio learns that Hero is alive and still ready to marry him. He is able to embrace his bride without having had to change in any way the Friar planned.

Stasis, Change, and Redemption

In its final lines, the comedy offers new and unpleasant intrigue. We hear that Don John has tried to flee Messina but has been apprehended. Benedick plans to "devise brave punishments for him" (V.iv.128).

Once again, a Shakespearean comedy that seemed headed, in act IV, toward a redemptive conclusion throws a monkey wrench into the works. Little appears to have changed. The men seem as untrusting and untrustworthy as ever. Don John remains at odds with Messina. Benedick's militaristic solution to his treachery is torture. Audiences may be tempted to throw up their hands and call this no comedy at all.

Alternatively, we may acknowledge that Shakespearean comedy, as we have seen, is toying with tradition and convention in the name of a greater realism. After all, just because things don't conclude as we would like doesn't mean that men and women, bastards and lords must always remain at odds. As we learned as early as *Love's Labor's Lost*, true reform takes time. Despite its abrupt ending, *Much Ado About Nothing* has many fine moments of joy and celebration, cleverness and buffoonery, as well as seriousness and hope. Once again, Shakespeare seems to be flinging a gauntlet at the feet of his audience. Can we adopt the Friar's optimism? Can we have faith that Benedick will put aside his Berowne-like cynicism, that in time Claudio may learn to be a good husband?

When he shall hear she died upon his words,
Th'idea of her life shall sweetly creep
Into his study of imagination,
And every lovely organ of her life
Shall come apparell'd in more precious habit,
More moving, delicate, and full of life,
Into the eye and prospect of his soul,
Than when she liv'd indeed.

~*Much Ado About Nothing*
(IV.i.223–30)

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING



Questions

1. Why is the character of Don John frustrating to some readers?
2. How does Don John break Hero and Claudio apart?
3. What is the Friar's plan for bringing the couple back together?
4. Why doesn't his plan work? Are the characters better or worse off when it fails?
5. Is the ending of *Much Ado About Nothing* as troubling as the conclusions of *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, *The Taming of the Shrew*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, and *The Merchant of Venice*? Why or why not?

Suggested Reading

Shakespeare, William. *The Riverside Shakespeare*. 2nd ed. Eds. G. Blakemore Evans and J.J.M. Tobin. Boston: Heinle, 1996.

Other Books of Interest

A good deal of scholarly literature considers Shakespeare's comedies as a group. For secondary reading on this play and others, please consult the **Course Materials** beginning on page 76.

Lecture 10: *As You Like It*

The **Suggested Reading** for this lecture is Shakespeare's "As You Like It" in *The Riverside Shakespeare*.

Jaques's Melancholy

All the world's a stage,
And all the men and women merely players;
They have their exits and their entrances,
And one man in his time plays many parts,
His acts being seven ages . . .

(*As You Like It*, II.vii.139–43)

So begins the most famous speech in *As You Like It*, where the melancholy Jaques describes the seven ages of man. Because the speech describes the world as a stage, it is often read as an expression of Shakespeare's personal ideas about bringing theater to life. But, as mentioned earlier, we should be wary about taking statements in Shakespeare's plays for testaments by the author. Indeed, if we look closely at some of the lines, the speech becomes rather distressing. There is an absurdity to each of the seven ages; Jaques seems to be noting the pointlessness of feeling self-important when we are all on a path to futility and death. Moreover, individuality, originality, creativity are absent from this cynical portrait of the stages of life. Rather than offer a defense of the theater as a vehicle for representing real life, the speech instead seems to assert that life is as cardboard and insubstantial as the silly theatrics that crowd the stage. Shakespeare, a man of the theater, can't have believed that was true!

In the play, Duke Senior's younger brother, Duke Frederick, has seized power. Duke Senior and his exiled lords escape to the Forest of Arden. All do their best to keep up their spirits, all, that is, but Jaques.



The Seven Ages of Man
by William Mulready, 1838

PASSAGES FOR STUDY

As You Like It

II.vii.139–66

II.vii.42–69

II.i.1–17

III.iii.12–33

IV.i.88–124

Jaques is a type of character found often in early modern drama, a melancholy man. He moodily paces the Forest of Arden. He becomes fascinated by Touchstone, the jester of this play, a figure who is able to critique others to their faces without getting into trouble. Jaques too wants free license to mock humankind, believing that those he censures will be reformed because of his excellent lessons.

Even though he makes Duke Senior laugh, Jaques is another example of the kind of character who is anathema to the spirit of comedy. Duke Senior reminds him that he used to be a libertine when he lived at court, but like Don John in *Much Ado About Nothing*, Jaques seems incapable of further change. Unlike Don John, however, Jaques is no villain. Despite his gloom, cynicism, and self-importance, he has a keen sense of the wrongdoings of the world and genuinely desires to reform it. When Jaques refuses, at the play's climax, to be part of the general festivity, we should feel a pang of sadness. Jaques is too single-mindedly pensive to be reintegrated in the concluding union.

A Lighter Comedy . . .

As You Like It is a more benign play than *Much Ado About Nothing*. Its lascivious humor is spoken in a spirit of fun; its overtones aren't nearly as nasty and foreboding as the earlier play. Many of the comedy's lovers seem genuinely to like each other without carrying the defensive suspicions of some of their Shakespearean predecessors. The villains, the usurper Duke Frederick and the malicious Oliver, experience sudden and miraculous changes of heart, after which they make amends for their cruelty.

. . . But Heavy on Plot

Though its ending may be more soothing than that of other plays in this period, *As You Like It* is also one of Shakespeare's most bizarrely constructed comedies. As if to top the quadruple-plotted storyline of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *As You Like It* sports at least six separate plots, all of which converge upon one another.

Duke Senior is not the only person in exile. Orlando is an orphan and youngest son who is treated poorly by his older brother Oliver. Oliver wants to keep all the family property for himself. He prefers to see Orlando dead rather than give him the bit his father bequeathed to him.

Oliver is thrilled to learn that Orlando has challenged Charles the wrestler to a match that will be played before the Duke. He tells Charles, who has never been defeated, that Orlando is a cheater and that Charles should try to kill him. Instead, Orlando defeats Charles. Rosalind, Duke Frederick's niece and Duke Senior's daughter, chats with Orlando in this scene and they become enamored of each other. But when Duke Frederick learns that Orlando's father was an ally of his exiled brother, he banishes Orlando.

Duke Frederick, who seems to be in a particularly surly mood that day, also decides to banish Rosalind, the best friend of Duke Frederick's own daughter, Celia. Rosalind suggests that she escape into the forest disguised, like Julia in *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* and Portia of *The Merchant of Venice*, as a man. She calls herself Ganymede. Celia and Touchstone tag along. Celia changes her name to Aliena but retains her sexual identity. When Touchstone

enters the forest, he falls for a country wench named Audrey. Rosalind meets the shepherd Silvius, who is pining for a shepherdess named Phoebe. Phoebe won't give Silvius the time of day, but when Ganymede criticizes her callous treatment of him, Phoebe becomes infatuated with Ganymede. Orlando and Ganymede meet and Ganymede learns of Orlando's love for Rosalind. Ganymede invites Orlando to practice wooing Rosalind. Ganymede says that he can teach Orlando how to win a lady's heart, but only if Orlando engages in some role-playing. He must speak to Ganymede as if he were his lover. He must call him Rosalind.

Oliver and Orlando, Duke Senior and Duke Frederick, Orlando and Rosalind, Touchstone and Audrey, Silvius and Phoebe, the melancholy Jaques: Shakespeare tosses out strand after strand of plot and character, all of which become entwined in the forest of Arden.

Life in the Forest

Another great speech in *As You Like It* is delivered at the beginning of act II, when we first meet Duke Senior. Revising a theme from *Love's Labor's Lost*, the Duke compares the rough life in the forest to the luxurious experience of the court (II.i.1–17). He makes a delightful argument for the benefit of country living over court life. But at the same time, chinks appear in his logic.

He admits that forest living is both difficult and painful. Duke Senior describes the winter so vividly that it's clear he is very sensitive to its ferocious wind and cold. Embracing the countryside is his way of rejecting the court. His talk about how the winter is more honest than flatterers proves that he is still smarting from the wounds he felt when many of his underlings allowed Duke Frederick to usurp his place. At the end of the speech, Duke Senior claims that the forest is a book that teaches him how to be more virtuous. Perhaps he really believes this, though at the end of the play he packs for his return to the court as quickly as possible. Still, we have to give him credit for bucking up the troops. With the exception of Jaques, the other lords and followers seem to be able to keep up their morale.

Love in Exile

As for most of the other characters, their extended vacation in the forest becomes an opportunity to pursue romance. While Touchstone and Audrey don't come off as a suitable couple, Orlando and Rosalind are genuinely besotted with each other. We recall that Orlando's father was a loyal follower of Duke Senior, so the two children have a kind of neighborly connection, like the boy and girl next door. Orlando, once he gets into the Forest of Arden, pins love poems to trees, poems that, to put it gently, are really awful. Not since *Love's Labor's Lost* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream* has Shakespeare allowed himself to write verse that's so bad it's funny.

While Orlando publicizes his infatuation to the world, Rosalind, disguised as Ganymede, is more cautious. Some of the most delightful sequences in *As You Like It* involve Orlando courting Ganymede as if he were Rosalind. Of course, Ganymede *is* Rosalind, and the rehearsal of courtship becomes an actual courtship.

In the end, Rosalind publicly unmask. With that single act, what seems a miraculous transformation of gender, she solves almost everybody's problems. Phoebe loses romantic interest in Ganymede once he is revealed to be Rosalind and decides to stick with Silvius. Duke Senior is reunited with his long-lost daughter. Orlando realizes that the man he has been courting is in fact the woman he loves.

Meanwhile, Oliver, who entered the forest to murder his brother, is instead rescued by Orlando when a lion attacks. He falls in love with Celia. Just as all the young people seem happily matched, we hear that Duke Frederick had been planning to bring an army into the forest to kill his brother and his followers. But this warlike assault is nipped in the bud. Before he could reach the exiles, he encountered a hermit who converted him and convinced him to give up his dukedom and live an ascetic existence.

Thus, the final act of *As You Like It* contains a series of rapid transformations, some expected and some unexpected, that bring everyone but Jaques to a new place in life. These plot contrivances, which seem trivial on the surface, are, like the climax of so many Shakespearean comedies, rife with religious overtones. Our characters exit the forest like Adam and Eve leaving the Garden of Eden. And yet Arden is not really an Eden: it is a place of wild lions and battles against cold and starvation. The exit from Arden may contain echoes of the idea of the fortunate fall, the sense that Adam and Eve's sin, while it brought them and their descendants generations of misery, also paved the way for the Second Coming, a final redemption. Rosalind's disguise as Ganymede has been like a mini incarnation. Embodying a man has enabled her to preside over the multiple unions with which the comedy closes. Oliver's and Duke Frederick's conversions, uncharacteristic of the characters we met early in the play, are also miraculous. *As You Like It* tests our belief in miracles, not in the supernatural marvels of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, but the miraculous ability of human beings to free themselves from hatred and bitterness when they are treated with love.

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING



Questions

1. Is *As You Like It* a more optimistic play than *Much Ado About Nothing*? Why or why not?
2. How does experiencing Jaques's "Seven Ages of Man" speech within the context of *As You Like It* change our understanding of it?
3. How does Jaques demonstrate his melancholia?
4. In what ways does Duke Senior's description of life in the Forest of Arden seem ambiguous?
5. Is Rosalind right to test Orlando? Why or why not?

Suggested Reading

Shakespeare, William. *The Riverside Shakespeare*. 2nd ed. Eds. G. Blakemore Evans and J.J.M. Tobin. Boston: Heinle, 1996.

Other Books of Interest

A good deal of scholarly literature considers Shakespeare's comedies as a group. For secondary reading on this play and others, please consult the **Course Materials** beginning on page 76.

Lecture 11: *Twelfth Night*, Part I

The **Suggested Reading** for this lecture is Shakespeare's "Twelfth Night" in *The Riverside Shakespeare*.

"What You Will"

Twelfth Night, subtitled "What You Will," is perhaps Shakespeare's most perfectly constructed play. Its plot is as delightful as it is intricate. As the comedy opens, Orsino, Duke of Illyria, is pining for the Countess Olivia, whose brother has recently died. Like the Princess of France in *Love's Labor's Lost*, Olivia has designated a time for mourning in which she will not think about betrothal. But rather than give herself a year, Olivia has chosen to isolate herself for *seven* years. Orsino sends messengers to woo Olivia on his behalf, but they are unsuccessful.

Meanwhile, another lady named Viola, accompanied by a sea captain, washes up after a shipwreck on the coast of Illyria. She believes her brother Sebastian drowned when their vessel went down. Viola, like many women in Shakespearean comedy who find themselves without protection, dons men's clothing. Calling herself Cesario, she makes her way to the court of Orsino and finds employment as a page.

Back in Olivia's house, the countess's uncle, Sir Toby Belch, spends his time absorbing the contents of what must be a very well stocked wine cellar. He entertains a guest, the silly Sir Andrew Aguecheek, whom Toby irresponsibly proposes as a suitor for Olivia. The two revelers enjoy the company of the servant Maria and the fool Feste. When their partying gets out of hand, Olivia's steward Malvolio rebukes Sir Toby.

Malvolio is this play's example of the killjoy who is incapable of change. Yet he is quite different from Don John in *Much Ado About Nothing* and Jaques in *As You Like It*. He knows that he is just a steward, even though he scorns anyone he considers to be of lower rank or lesser virtue. He secretly fantasizes about marrying Olivia. Over the course of the play, Sir Toby, Maria, Feste, and another member of Olivia's household named Fabian trick Malvolio into believing that Olivia is attracted to him. Malvolio reads a forged letter that he thinks is a coded message from Olivia. But neither the humiliation of dressing and acting in the absurd way the letter advises nor his brief stint in the prison to which Sir Toby confines him reforms his priggishness.

When Viola is accepted into the court of Orsino, she falls in love with him. Orsino, thinking that Cesario is a man, sends his new attractive page to Olivia to court her on his behalf. After the first interview between Cesario and Olivia, Olivia, despite her resolution to dismiss all suitors, becomes infatuated with Cesario.

PASSAGES FOR STUDY

Twelfth Night

I.i.1–40

V.i.117–31

II.iv.93–121

I.v.257–77

III.i.137–44

II.ii.17–41

And now Sebastian, Viola's brother, who is very much alive, comes ashore to Illyria, accompanied by his friend Antonio. The family resemblance and the men's clothing make Sebastian look exactly like Cesario. After a lot of confusion and misapprehensions that are reminiscent of *The Comedy of Errors*, Olivia marries Sebastian, thinking he is Cesario; Orsino falls for Viola; and Sir Toby, thrilled with the cleverness of Maria when she outwits Malvolio, takes Maria as his bride.

Love and the Crisis of Identity

But before we reach this conclusion, the characters in *Twelfth Night* are staggered by the pains of unrequited love. Orsino pines after Olivia. Olivia can't talk to Cesario without begging him to love her. Cesario, a woman trapped in a man's body, must be silent about her feelings in the presence of Orsino, though it's easy for the audience to read between the lines of Cesario's sad speeches. And Antonio, who has much in common with the Antonio of *The Merchant of Venice*, loves Sebastian with all his heart.

Orsino, as I suggested, seems to be taking a kind of perverse pleasure in his misery. If he were serious about winning Olivia's affections, why wouldn't he make an occasional visit to her house? He seems to be more in love with the excitement of melancholy longing than with Olivia herself.



Viola, Duke Orsino, and Feste in act II, scene iv, of Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*
by Walter Howell Deverell, 1850

We've seen already that lovers in Shakespeare define themselves on the basis of their love. Their sense of themselves revolves around the object of their affection. Thus, if they believe their beloved is virtuous, beautiful, good, and true, more like a divine being than a person, then they can claim to live in the pursuit of virtue, beauty, goodness, truth, and faith. Orsino therefore may be paying himself a compliment by conceiving love for the unattainable Olivia.

Yet at the same time, many of Shakespeare's characters don't understand that they are defined not only on the basis of whom they love but also by how they love. As we've seen in almost all of the comedies we've studied up to this point, those who desperately pursue love can claim that their ends justify any means, that acts of cruelty and betrayal can be necessary if they spring from the pursuit of passion. At that point, the idealism associated with love becomes corrupt.

The Accidental Courtship

During the course of *Twelfth Night*, Orsino never lays eyes on Olivia until the final scene. After that point, Olivia has already married Sebastian, but when she sees Cesario, who is accompanying Orsino, she takes him for her husband and openly speaks of her affection for him. This infuriates Orsino, who delivers one of the bitterest speeches in the play. Yet Orsino's harsh words are no more justified than Claudio's and Leonato's in *Much Ado About Nothing*. Olivia never made any promises to him. If Orsino feels betrayed because Olivia fell in love with his messenger, shouldn't he be humbled by the realization that he himself inspired their romance?

Orsino may not know how to court a lady, but Cesario is an expert at it. Perhaps because Viola has been fantasizing about how Orsino might win her heart, Cesario is very creative when it comes to imagining just how an exquisite seduction might work. Yet the effect of Cesario's words makes Olivia interested, not in Orsino but in the beautiful young man who has spoken such pretty words.

Although Cesario is as consistent in his refusal of Olivia as Olivia is of Orsino, Cesario and Viola have had a lot more time to get to know each other than Orsino and Olivia. Of course, the same can be said for Viola and Orsino, and Orsino partly redeems himself in his angry speech by noting his strong affection for Cesario.

The Power That Breeds Helplessness

Olivia's love and Orsino's commands put Viola in a situation very similar to Julia's in *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*. If Viola is the most versatile and charismatic figure in all of *Twelfth Night*, she is also the most helpless. She cannot reveal her identity to Olivia or Orsino without being banished forever from the houses of both and left without friendship or connection. But in continuing to play the role of Cesario, she risks bringing herself, Olivia, and Orsino to the brink of disaster.

Leave it to Sebastian to solve the problem for her by embodying Cesario in gender and looks, if not quite in personality. We'll begin with Sebastian's words in the next lecture and then go on to talk about *Twelfth Night's* celebration of wit and buffoonery.

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING



Questions

1. How does *Twelfth Night* represent the problem of unrequited love?
2. Why might Orsino be described as a melancholy lover?
3. What are Orsino's limitations as a lover?
4. Why is Viola the most powerful and at the same time most helpless character in *Twelfth Night*?

Suggested Reading

Shakespeare, William. *The Riverside Shakespeare*. 2nd ed. Eds. G. Blakemore Evans and J.J.M. Tobin. Boston: Heinle, 1996.

Other Books of Interest

A good deal of scholarly literature considers Shakespeare's comedies as a group. For secondary reading on this play and others, please consult the **Course Materials** beginning on page 76.

Lecture 12: *Twelfth Night*, Part II

The **Suggested Reading** for this lecture is Shakespeare's "Twelfth Night" in *The Riverside Shakespeare*.

A World Gone Mad?

Like his sister, Sebastian is confounded by his experiences in Illyria. Viola felt the contradiction between her own desires and her role as Orsino's messenger; Sebastian is confused by Olivia's seduction. In *The Comedy of Errors*, when Antiochus of Syracuse was held responsible for the actions of a twin he didn't know he had, he concluded that everyone in Ephesus was insane. But Sebastian rejects this thought. He wants to marry the gorgeous dream girl who has come out of nowhere. He wants to believe that what he is experiencing is genuine.

Much of *Twelfth Night* takes place in a similarly confused space. A good deal of the play's humor springs from the questions that Sebastian and Viola ask: Do I really know who I am? Is the world around me deceiving me as to its true nature? When I don't understand other people's reactions, can I claim that the world is therefore mad? If I am different things to different people, does that mean I'm still one being? Or is it that many different kinds of beings live inside me?

The Linguistics of Being

No one has more fun with these questions than Feste, the most wonderful of all the fools in Shakespearean comedy. Feste's jests constantly challenge his interlocutors to look at themselves in a new light, to conclude that they are more foolish than a fool. His ontological obsession, that is, his obsession with the idea of being, of what it means to exist, often leads him to uncover the contradictions within those who speak to him.

When we first meet Feste, in I.v, the melancholy Olivia, who is not in the mood for his jokes, orders her attendants to take the fool away. Feste responds by telling them that they must take away the lady. Olivia is offended and Feste responds:

Clown: Good madonna, give me leave to prove you a fool.

Olivia: Can you do it?

Clown: Dexterously, good madonna.

Olivia: Make your proof.

Clown: I must catechise you for it, madonna. Good my mouse of virtue, answer me.

Olivia: Well, sir, for want of other idleness, I'll bide your proof.

PASSAGES FOR STUDY

Twelfth Night

IV.iii.1–21

I.v.57–74

IV.ii.20–61

V.i.10–24

III.i.1–30

II.iii.86–125

- Clown:* Good madonna, why mourn'st thou?
Olivia: Good fool, for my brother's death.
Clown: I think his soul is in hell, madonna.
Olivia: I know his soul is in heaven, fool.
Clown: The more fool, madonna, to mourn for your brother's soul, being in heaven. Take away the fool, gentlemen.
Olivia: What think you of this fool, Malvolio? doth he not mend?

(I.v.57-74)

If Olivia chooses to define herself as one who is perennially in mourning, then Feste demonstrates that Olivia is behaving illogically, for her confidence that her brother is in a better place contradicts her resolution to weep over his loss. Feste's proof does not succeed in convincing Olivia to stop grieving, but Olivia's remark to Malvolio, who despises Feste, indicates her appreciation of Feste's logic.

Feste's treatment of Malvolio is even funnier, yet also harsher. Sir Toby's order that Malvolio be imprisoned is only the beginning of his torment. Feste approaches the dark room where Malvolio is confined and ridicules him, twisting his words and his logic.

Words and Meaning

Feste achieves what Jaques, in *As You Like It*, desired after watching Touchstone: the ability to satirize his social superiors to their faces. Yet he has another role that is also related to the ontological crisis of Viola and Sebastian. He demonstrates the malleability of language and reason.

At the very beginning of act III, Cesario (Viola) comes across Feste, who is carrying a tabor, a small drum:

- Viola:* 'Save thee, friend, and thy music! Dost thou live by thy tabor?
Clown: No, sir, I live by the church.
Viola: Art thou a churchman?
Clown: No such matter, sir. I do live by the church; for I do live at my house, and my house doth stand by the church.
Viola: So thou mayst say the king lies by a beggar, if a beggar dwells near him; or the church stands by thy tabor, if thy tabor stand by the church.
Clown: You have said, sir. To see this age! A sentence is but a chev'ril glove to a good wit. How quickly the wrong side may be turned outward!
Viola: Nay, that's certain. They that dally nicely with words may quickly make them wanton.
Clown: I would therefore my sister had had no name, sir.
Viola: Why, man?
Clown: Why, sir, her name's a word, and to dally with that word might make my sister wanton. But indeed, words are very rascals since bonds disgrac'd them.
Viola: Thy reason, man?

Clown: Troth, sir, I can yield you none without words; and words are grown so false, I am loath to prove reason with them.

Viola: I warrant thou art a merry fellow, and car'st for nothing.

Clown: Not so, sir. I do care for something; but in my conscience, sir, I do not care for you. If that be to care for nothing, sir, I would it would make you invisible.

(III.i.1–30)

Cesario, at the beginning of this interchange, tries to explain the proper use of the word “by.” To say that you live *by* your tabor or *by* the church automatically leads the listener to think that you make a living as a musician or a churchman. Feste, in response to Cesario’s corrections, acknowledges the confusion he creates by his use of the word “by,” going on to argue that the problem is not the way he plays with words, but the age, the times that they live in. In what seems like a satire on Viola’s own abandonment of responsibility, Feste claims that words themselves are so full of contradiction that a speaker can’t control their meaning.

Feste, of course, is not really being serious. His ability to restructure sentences so that words and phrases signify something other than what they appear to mean is the way he makes his living. But for him to admit to this would be like a magician explaining how he performs his tricks. And so Feste, who inverts the meanings of words, keeps his aims a secret from Viola, who inverts the truth of her identity.

Shifting Waves of Identity

At one point or another, almost everyone in *Twelfth Night* appears to be someone else. Viola masquerades as Cesario. Feste impersonates Sir Topas, a priest who interviews the imprisoned Malvolio. Sebastian takes the place of Cesario in Olivia’s heart. Maria entraps Malvolio by forging a note in which she pretends to be Viola. When Cesario first calls upon Olivia, she appears with a veil over her face and initially refuses to identify herself as the lady of the house. Olivia advertises herself as a woman in mourning who can never love a man, yet she soon feels passion for Cesario. Orsino claims



Feste the Fool (Clown), Sir Toby Belch, and Sir Andrew Aguecheek being themselves.

to be devoted to Olivia and only Olivia, even though it's clear that his affection for Cesario grows as the play progresses. When Sir Andrew recognizes that Cesario is his rival for Olivia's attention, Sir Toby talks him into dueling with Cesario, even though Sir Andrew is in reality a terrible coward. Sir Toby himself does not pretend to be someone he is not, but his love of revelry leads him to preside over the deceits of Feste and Maria. In the spirit of the comic tradition, the characters in *Twelfth Night* who change from one position, one perspective, one identity to another are ultimately rewarded with a kind of happiness.

And although Sir Andrew is no better off at the end of the play than he was at the beginning, the two figures least capable of change are also the two who are left out of the final union. Antonio's desire for Sebastian is hopeless. Although some directors stage the play to the contrary, Sebastian doesn't seem to recognize the extent of Antonio's affection for him.

And Malvolio remains divorced from both change and comic union. Although Olivia does free him from prison, it is clear that his tormentors are not going to be punished. Furious, he runs offstage, crying "I'll be reveng'd on the whole pack of you" (V.i.378). Olivia comments that he has been abused and Orsino orders his attendants to "pursue him, and entreat him to a peace" (V.i.380). But it's hard to believe that Orsino's messengers will be any more successful with Malvolio than they were with Olivia.

Although we may feel that Malvolio deserves to be punished for standing in opposition to pleasure and joy, for rejecting the spirit of comedy that almost everyone else embraces, the punishment he receives does seem excessive.

In earlier lectures, I mentioned the democratic spirit of comedy, which permits a multitude of sometimes contradictory opinions to stand side by side. Even though I think most audiences in Shakespeare's time and in our own would reject Malvolio's priggishness, we may have to admit that his voice is a legitimate element of Shakespeare's loud and boisterous world.

Desire and Gender

A number of other subversive elements in *Twelfth Night* are equally interesting. For example, while the play ends with marriages between women and men, sexual desire in *Twelfth Night* is as malleable as Viola's identity or Feste's games with words. Antonio loves Sebastian. Olivia falls in love with a woman who she only thinks is a man. Orsino, unaware that Cesario is a woman in disguise, responds tenderly to him. Since the beginning of his career, certainly since *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Shakespearean comedies have argued that love can transcend reason. And although *Twelfth Night* ends with happy heterosexual unions, it seems to contend further that desire can trump gender.

The Perfect Comedy

As *Twelfth Night* fascinatingly deals with crises of identity, sexual confusion, the inconstancy of language, and the melancholy that springs from unrequited love, the spirit of joy and festivity presides over the proceedings. With this play, Shakespeare seems to be looking back nostalgically upon his early comedies. The clowning and festivity of *As You Like It*, the twins from *The*

Comedy of Errors, the disguised lover sent to woo her rival from *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, and the exciting but overweening dominance of the spirit of love from *A Midsummer Night's Dream* are all revived in *Twelfth Night*. *Twelfth Night* is an impeccable summation of what Shakespeare has achieved in comedy up to this point. But it is also a farewell. Now that he has written the perfect comedy, Shakespeare, as he enters the later phases of his career, moves beyond perfection. The later comedies may be less well loved because they are so much rougher. In them, the imbalances and dangers that lurked under the surface of earlier plays rear their terrifying heads.

Malvolio: If you can separate yourself and your misdemeanors, you are welcome to the house; if not, and it would please you to take leave of [my lady Olivia], she is very willing to bid you farewell . . .

Sir Toby: . . . Art any more than a steward? Dost thou think because thou art virtuous there shall be no more cakes and ale?

Clown: Yes, by Saint Anne, and ginger shall be hot i' the mouth too.

~*Twelfth Night*
(II.iii.98–118)

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING



Questions

1. How do Viola and Sebastian deal differently with their crises of selfhood?
2. Why might Feste seem to fulfill the role that Jaques, in *As You Like It*, craves for himself?
3. What makes Feste's games with words funny?
4. Do you feel sympathy for Malvolio? Why or why not?
5. In what sense is *Twelfth Night* a subversive comedy?
6. Why might *Twelfth Night* be seen as a compendium of everything Shakespeare has achieved in comedy up to this point in his career?

Suggested Reading

Shakespeare, William. *The Riverside Shakespeare*. 2nd ed. Eds. G. Blakemore Evans and J.J.M. Tobin. Boston: Heinle, 1996.

Other Books of Interest

A good deal of scholarly literature considers Shakespeare's comedies as a group. For secondary reading on this play and others, please consult the **Course Materials** beginning on page 76.

Lecture 13: *Measure for Measure*

The **Suggested Reading** for this lecture is Shakespeare's "Measure for Measure" in *The Riverside Shakespeare*.

A "Problem Comedy"

Troilus and Cressida, *All's Well That Ends Well*, and *Measure for Measure* are sometimes called the "problem comedies." They contain not one but many unregenerate characters who seem to buck the spirit of comedy's transformative power. Their endings are unsettling even by Shakespearean standards.

Measure for Measure, Shakespeare's last comedy, is perhaps the most startling of the three. As the play opens, Vincentio, the Duke of Vienna, abruptly leaves the city. Angelo, Vincentio's deputy, who takes charge, decides to enforce an old law which holds that copulation outside of marriage is punishable by death. Claudio, a young man who keeps company with his mistress Julietta, is Angelo's first victim. He fully intended to marry his beloved, but, as he tells his friend Lucio, Julietta is pregnant and the size of her belly now advertizes their affair to the world.

Sex and Death

In *Measure for Measure*, for better and for worse, sex seems to be on everyone's mind almost all the time. Angelo is no exception. Early in the play, Claudio asks Lucio to find his sister Isabella, who is training to become a nun, and beg her to plead with Angelo for his life. Angelo, who has jilted Marianna, a lady to whom he had been betrothed, tells Isabella that he will pardon Claudio only if she agrees to sleep with him.

Isabella refuses. She asserts that Angelo is asking her to commit a sin that would condemn her soul to hell. She decides to tell her brother that she will not, cannot save him.

Before Isabella can get to the prison where Claudio is being detained, he has another visitor. It is none other than Duke Vincentio, who has disguised himself as a friar and is wandering about Vienna, observing the effect of Angelo's judgments upon the citizens. The friar advises Claudio to accept death with a tranquil mind.

Up to this point, Claudio has seemed a somewhat acerbic but accommodating young man, while Isabella, clearly a prude, was open to doing the right thing. But Angelo's despicable nature buries into the souls of these siblings and brings out the basest parts of their natures. Claudio, despite his interview with the Friar, clings helplessly to life. Rather than speak of the sacrifice he wants his sister to make in an understanding tone, Claudio insists that to sin on his behalf would be not to sin at all. This is neither sensitive nor sensible.

PASSAGES FOR STUDY

Measure for Measure

II.ii.34–41; 99–110

I.ii.124–55; 176–86

II.i.1–31

III.i.5–43

III.i.114–36

Isabella, however, sinks even deeper. After listening to her brother's plea, she attacks him with such fury that we begin to wonder whether she has made her decision in order to save her soul or to protect herself from having to perform sexual favors that she finds disgusting.

The Duke's Grace

It is at this point that Vincentio, still disguised as the Friar, offers a solution. He tells Isabella about the plight of Mariana, who still waits for Angelo even though he never intends to return to her. The Duke suggests that Isabella agree to Angelo's demands, but switch places with Mariana in the dark. Isabella carries out the Duke's plan and Angelo unwittingly embraces Mariana.

But, cruelty of cruelties, even though Angelo thinks he got what he wanted, he orders Claudio's execution anyway. The Duke, ever the rescuer, negotiates with Claudio's jailors and convinces them to bring Angelo the head of someone who, conveniently, has just died in prison. Claudio is spared. Meanwhile, Lucio, Claudio's friend, has been trailing after the disguised Duke, spreading terrible rumors about Vincentio and making crass sexual jokes.

In the final scene, Angelo and the citizens of Vienna are commanded to meet the Duke at the city gate. His identity as the friar is revealed. He orders Mariana to marry Angelo. Since Lucio has confessed to having slept with a prostitute, Vincentio forces him, upon pain of death, to marry her. Claudio enters and is reunited with Julietta. Astoundingly, the Duke now turns to Isabella and decrees that she shall be his wife. Isabella, notoriously, has no lines at this point. The play ends with no textual assertion of whether or not she is content with her betrothal.

Union vs. Free Will

Are you content with the ending of our comedy? It's one matter for a Malvolio, a Don John, a Jaques, even a Shylock, to be left out of the concluding union. It's another matter for us to doubt, as we might in *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *The Merchant of Venice*, or *Much Ado About Nothing*, that the marriages that will take place after the curtain falls will be happy. But the unions at the end of *Measure for Measure* are enforced rather than agreed upon. In this play, marriage is not a bond made between two willing people, but an edict, a judgment passed down by a figure of

Duke: Be absolute for death: either death or life

Shall thereby be the sweeter. Reason thus with life:

If I do lose thee, I do lose a thing

That none but fools would keep.

~*Measure for Measure*

(III.i.5-8)

authority who can't be disobeyed. Angelo has rejected Mariana so thoroughly that he agrees to wed her only as a way to save his life. Lucio despises his betrothed and in marrying a prostitute is condemned to play the part of a cuckold. If Vincentio's disguise was in part a ploy to win the hand of Isabella, it's hard to think of a less suitable match for him. Isabella, after all, began the play about to make a vow of celibacy. She has given no indication during the course of the comedy that she has changed her mind about her vocation. Silence generally denotes assent, but it's an open question whether Isabella feels she has the power to reject the man who saved the life of her brother.

If it weren't for Vincentio, Claudio never would have been condemned in the first place. Because Vincentio established Angelo as his substitute, his own arrival as the figure of mercy who overwhelms stiff law seems like a political ploy aimed at getting the citizens to love him. In the end, Vincentio reestablishes himself as an absolute judge, but everyone else either returns to the state they were in before the play began or is forced into a marriage that only one member of the couple desires.

The Inversion of Comedy

If *Twelfth Night* is a compendium of Shakespeare's comic career, refashioning earlier motifs into a delightful whole, *Measure for Measure* plays like a cynical inversion of Shakespeare's earlier work. Angelo corrupts Vienna the way Duke Frederick of *As You Like It* wounded his court after chasing out Duke Senior, but, as I've noted, in this case the fiendish usurper is a puppet of the legitimate ruler. Like Phoebe in *As You Like It* and Olivia in *Twelfth Night*, Angelo becomes infatuated when a passionate young creature preaches to him, but rather than desire her hand in marriage, he wants to sleep with her, abandon her, and commit her brother to death. There is nothing positive or reformative in the arrow that Cupid shot at Angelo.

Lucio plays the role of jester in this play, but his thoughts rarely stray from the bottom of the gutter. Claudio's final unmasking mimics that of Hero's in *Much Ado About Nothing*, but in this case Claudio's beloved did not need to be reformed and only suffered when the news of his death was published. The Friar's concluding disclosure of his true identity is similar to Rosalind's revelation at the end of *As You Like It*, but it is not the spirit of love but the fist of the lawgiver that punches out the final union. While the earlier comedies tempered their lewd jokes with the language of love, *Measure for Measure* offers an abundance of the former and almost none of the latter.

If we've learned nothing else about Shakespeare and his relationship to the comic tradition, it is that he is not willing simply to imitate his predecessors. As his career progressed, he continually challenged himself to stretch his originality to a greater limit. *Measure for Measure* reveals a Shakespeare still pushing the boundaries of past works, those of others as well as his own, even as he demands that we meditate seriously upon the characters and situations that occupy his increasingly complex narratives.

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING



Questions

1. Why is *Measure for Measure* sometimes considered “problem comedy”?
2. Can Claudio be seen to benefit from his incarceration and the threat of execution? Why or why not?
3. If you were directing a production of *Measure for Measure*, what advice would you give the actress playing Isabella when she reacts to Vincentio’s offer of marriage?
4. How is Lucio both like and unlike jesting figures such as Speed, Touchstone, and Feste in earlier Shakespearean comedies? How do you account for the similarities and differences?
5. In what sense is *Measure for Measure* a play about justice? What does it argue about the idea of justice? What is the significance of the title with reference to this idea?

Suggested Reading

Shakespeare, William. *The Riverside Shakespeare*. 2nd ed. Eds. G. Blakemore Evans and J.J.M. Tobin. Boston: Heinle, 1996.

Other Books of Interest

A good deal of scholarly literature considers Shakespeare’s comedies as a group. For secondary reading on this play and others, please consult the **Course Materials** beginning on page 76.

Lecture 14:
The Music of Shakespeare's Comedies:
Shakespearean Verse and Song

The **Suggested Readings** for this lecture are Shakespeare's comedies in *The Riverside Shakespeare* with special attention to the songs in "Much Ado About Nothing," "As You Like It," "Twelfth Night," and "Measure for Measure."

Shakespeare's use of verse is such a rich topic that it deserves a lecture series of its own. I have devoted most of this course to plot and character, but I reserve this final lecture to discuss our author's use of poetic form.

Shakespeare's Rhyme

Rhyme is important to Shakespeare, particularly in his early work. In *The Comedy of Errors*, a merchant offers Antipholus of Syracuse a chain, but does not ask payment for it. Antipholus of Syracuse takes it, even though he's made plans to meet his servant Dromio and escape from the city of strangers who are making strange demands upon him. He says:

But this I think, there's no man is so vain
That would refuse so fair an offer'd chain.
I see a man here needs not live by shifts,
When in the streets he meets such golden gifts.
I'll to the mart and there for Dromio stay:
If any ship put out, then straight away.

(The Comedy of Errors, III.ii.180–85)

Here Shakespeare is probably trying to sound a little old-fashioned. He seems to be recalling the comedies of the previous generation, where the action was swift and the characters simple. The rhymes, too, are not complicated or unusual, though they do help carry the logic of the speech. The last words of each line, read in a series, tell us in brief what Antipholus of Syracuse is thinking: "vain, chain; shifts, gifts; stay, away." By leaning on the rhyme, Shakespeare makes his character's resolution easier to understand.

Shakespeare's Rhythm

Part of what makes poetry poetry is the fact that it has rhythm, a beat. The speech I just quoted is in **iambic pentameter**, the meter Shakespeare and his contemporaries used most commonly when they wrote their plays. An "iamb" is a metrical unit, a rhythmic measure that indicates an unstressed syllable followed by a stressed syllable. A line in iambic pentameter contains five iambs. The meter in the above passage is very regular; we can hear how the syllables conform to the beat.

PASSAGES FOR STUDY

The Comedy of Errors

III.ii.180–85

Much Ado About Nothing

II.iii.62–74

As You Like It

I.ii.31–47

Twelfth Night

II.iv.51–66

II.iii.39–52

V.i.134–45

Measure for Measure

I.iii.19–31

IV.i.1–7

But the most important thing to remember about the music of the iambic pentameter line is that the phrase “pentameter” signifies five **downbeats**. An iambic pentameter line may contain nine, ten, eleven, or more syllables, but will almost always have five downbeats. We feel the rhythm of poetry the way we feel the rhythm of music. You can think of those downbeats as the drum line, the percussion, the metronome that sets the pace for the music of the poetry.

While most of Shakespeare’s verse is in iambic pentameter, much of it is not rhymed. Unrhymed iambic pentameter is called **blank verse**. Here’s a good example of such verse, taken from the scene early in *Measure for Measure*, where Vincentio explains to his confidant Friar Thomas why he has chosen to give control of Vienna to Angelo and to stalk the city as a Friar:

We have strict statutes and most biting laws
(The needful bits and curbs to headstrong weeds),
Which for this nineteen years we have let slip,
Even like an o’ergrown lion in a cave,
That goes not out to prey. Now, as fond fathers,
Having bound up the threat’ning twigs of birch,
Only to stick it in their children’s sight
For terror, not to use, in time the rod
Becomes more mock’d than fear’d: so our decrees,
Dead to infliction, to themselves are dead,
And liberty plucks justice by the nose;
The baby beats the nurse, and quite athwart
Goes all decorum.

(*Measure for Measure*, I.iii.19–31)

This passage is more sophisticated and intriguing than the one I cited from *The Comedy of Errors*. A line like “Which for this nineteen years we have let slip” conforms perfectly to its metrical pattern. But “Having bound up the threatening twigs of birch” sounds far less regular. It begins with a stressed rather than an unstressed syllable (“Having”) and then stretches the symmetrical pattern. And yet, when all is said and done, it does have five downbeats. Shakespeare, like any good musician, mixes things up, improvises a bit even as he continues to pace his verse with a metrical pattern.

Shakespeare’s Imagery

Rhythm and the integrity of the line aren’t the only things that make Shakespeare’s verse poetic. In the above speech, Shakespeare’s—or rather Vincentio’s—use of imagery is also very powerful. In just twelve lines, Vincentio reveals a lot about himself. He compares the law to an animal that bites and to a gardener who cuts weeds. Noting that the strictures against premarital sex have not been enforced for nineteen years. He compares the monarch who withholds prosecution to a lion who stays in its cave and a father who is willing to show a switch to his children but not willing to whip them with it. He envisions the personification of Liberty plucking the personification of Justice by the nose; he says that the infant who is supposed to be disciplined by his nurse is instead beating that nurse.

Vincentio's basic point is clear. He maintains that by allowing the strict laws of Vienna to go unenforced, the citizens of Vienna are becoming loose and uncontrolled. But this speech does far more than convey a simple point. The lofty way in which Vincentio expresses himself, his self-confidence, his beautiful facility with language, his display of verbal wit, his use of disjunctive metaphors that make us doubt what he says even as he says it: we can understand these things only when we hear the lines that Shakespeare wrote and when we experience their rhythm, their meter, and their use of poetic imagery.

Shakespeare's Prose

And yet, though verse is a magnificent tool, it is also limited. Shakespearean verse, metrical, musical, has a formality to it, a stateliness that does not always suit the situations the playwright creates. It is commonly said that aristocratic characters in Shakespeare speak in verse while the lower class characters speak in prose. This is not at all true. As *You Like It*, *Twelfth Night*, and especially *Much Ado About Nothing* contain a good deal of prose. Characters from all walks of life move back and forth between verse and prose. As a dramatist, Shakespeare wrote great speeches, but also great dialogues. Dialogue in verse sounds very different from dialogue in prose and can be used to different purposes.

Shakespeare's Songs

Moreover, song plays a crucial role in the comedies. *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *Twelfth Night* are so full of songs that they could play on the stage like musicals. Some of the single-volume editions of the comedies give settings for the songs, and in any given production a director would have to decide whether to use older settings or whether to score the songs with more contemporary music.

One thing a director should never do is cut the songs, even though, with few exceptions, there would be no loss to the development of the plot. Feste's songs in *Twelfth Night* are especially breathtaking; he is talented enough to suit his tunes to the customer who has called for them. He selects pieces for Orsino and Sir Toby that fit their individual ears and moods.

Songs in Shakespeare function like glosses or interpretations of the action. They may add to the delight and the melancholy of the comedies. In *Measure for Measure*, Mariana has only a few lines of dialogue, but when we meet her in act IV, a passionate song sung by a boy who accompanies her tells us much of what we need to know about her character. The song perfectly captures what this discarded mistress of Angelo must be feeling as she waits in her moated grange for a man who, it seems, will never come:

Take, O, take those lips away,
That so sweetly were forsworn,
And those eyes, the break of day,
Lights that do mislead the morn;
But my kisses bring again, bring again,
Seals of love, but seal'd in vain, seal'd in vain.

(*Measure for Measure*, IV.i.1-7)

Nothing anyone could say about Mariana's interior life conveys it as beautifully, as succinctly, and as expressively as these lines. Just as Mariana waits day after day for Angelo, so the song repeats words and phrases; "Take, O take," "bring again, bring again," "seal'd in vain, seal'd in vain." The song helps us to identify with Mariana and also to be stunned by the tender yet regretful feelings this sympathetic woman has for Angelo.

Shakespeare's Magic

Shakespearean comedy is like a song, like the music of his verse in that nothing can really substitute for the thing itself. In these lectures, I've only been able to touch upon a few topics in the comedies that I find interesting. I've talked about Shakespeare's relationship to the comic tradition, the troubling ways in which he ends his plays, his focus on love and how it alters the personas of his characters, the manner in which characters grow—or fail to grow—during the course of their comedies, and the methods Shakespeare uses to critique the political and ethnic prejudices of his audience.

But there is so much more to discuss. No writer in the history of English literature has been more studied and debated than Shakespeare. His works are endlessly interesting and he continues to undergo interpretations and reinterpretations. In reading and talking about Shakespeare, we can join a fascinating conversation that has been going on for over four centuries.

What is love? 'Tis not hereafter;
Present mirth hath present laughter;
What's to come is still unsure.
In delay there lies no plenty,
Then come kiss me sweet and twenty;
Youth's a stuff will not endure.

~*Twelfth Night*
(II.iii.39–52)

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING



Questions

1. How does Shakespeare use rhyme in his comedies?
2. What effects are created by Shakespeare's use of blank verse?
3. What's the difference between understanding the basic meaning of a speech and investigating the resonances of its poetic imagery?
4. What are the different effects of verse and prose?
5. Why shouldn't stage productions of Shakespearean comedy omit the songs?

Suggested Reading

Shakespeare, William. *The Riverside Shakespeare*. 2nd ed. Eds. G. Blakemore Evans and J.J.M. Tobin. Boston: Heinle, 1996.

Other Books of Interest

A good deal of scholarly literature considers Shakespeare's comedies as a group. For secondary reading on this play and others, please consult the **Course Materials** beginning on page 76.

Suggested Reading for This Course:

You'll get the most out of this course if you read the following book:

Shakespeare, William. *The Riverside Shakespeare*. 2nd ed. Eds. G. Blakemore Evans and J.J.M. Tobin. Boston: Heinle, 1996.

Other Books of Interest:

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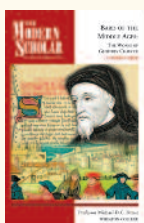
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