



## William Shakespeare: Comedies, Histories, and Tragedies

### Part II

- Lecture 13: *Richard II*—The Theory of Kingship
- Lecture 14: *Richard II*—The Fall of the King
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- Lecture 22: *Troilus and Cressida*—Heroic Aspirations
- Lecture 23: *Julius Caesar*—The Matter of Rome
- Lecture 24: *Julius Caesar*—Heroes of History

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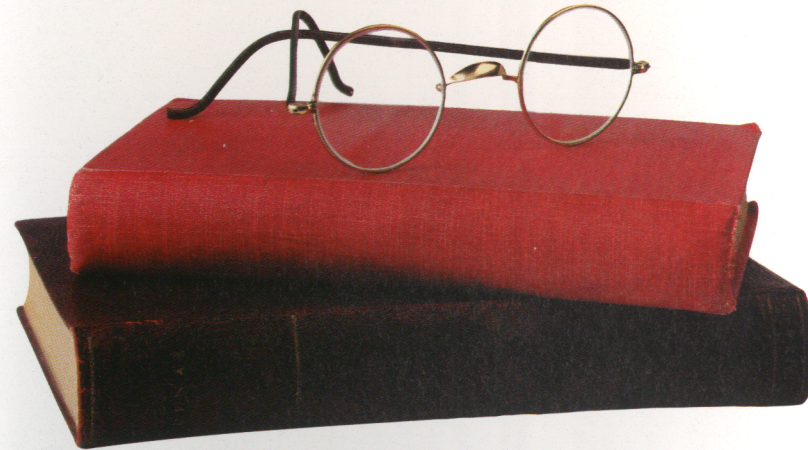
# THE Great Courses on Tape®

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## William Shakespeare: Comedies, Histories, and Tragedies

### Part II

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Dartmouth College



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William Shakespeare:  
Comedies, Histories, and Tragedies, Part II  
Professor Peter Saccio





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### William Shakespeare: Comedies, Histories and Tragedies

#### Scope:

In thirty-six half-hour lectures, *William Shakespeare: Comedies, Histories and Tragedies* introduces the plays of Shakespeare and delineates the achievement that makes Shakespeare the leading playwright in Western civilization. The key to that achievement is his "abundance," not only the number of plays he wrote and the length of each one, but also the variety of human experiences they depict, the multitude of actions and characters they contain, the combination of public and private life they deal with, the richness of feelings they express and can provoke in an audience and in readers, and the fullness of language and suggestion.

The first two lectures are introductory. They consider how Shakespeare's plays have been found valuable by four centuries of readers, and how they have been interpreted and reinterpreted by the generations who have read and seen them. The lectures consider the kind of theater for which he wrote, the characteristic structures of his plays, and the way the plays easily mingle events from different realms: different social levels, different levels of realism, different metaphysical contexts.

The course then proceeds to consider the plays in terms of genre. Lectures Three through Ten discuss four comedies. *Twelfth Night* offers an example of basic Shakespearean comic structure and subject matter: courtship by several young couples. Renaissance courtship practices are discussed, together with their implications about the place of romantic love in human life as a whole. Shakespeare also includes in his survey of lovers Malvolio the ambitious steward, for whom courtship is a means of social advancement. *The Taming of the Shrew* provides a more realistic look at bourgeois marriage customs and the place of a strong woman in a patriarchal society. It shows as well Shakespeare experimenting with an unusually sharp collision of romance and farce. *The Merchant of Venice* entails a particularly lofty form of romantic idealism in the courtship plot, but it confronts that idealism with the problematic, possibly tragic, character of Shylock, who has forced generations of actors into reinterpretation of Shakespeare. *Measure for Measure* shows Shakespeare on the verge of breaking out of comic conventions altogether. The characters marry at the end, as is customary, but the route to their unions is a gritty path entailing near-rape and near-execution via the courtrooms and the sexual underground of a corrupt modern society.

Lectures Eleven through Eighteen deal with five plays drawn from English history. The nature of the history play is explained. Richard III is followed through the arc of his villainous and entertaining career. *Richard II* raises constitutional problems that vex us still: what can be done with a ruler who is

undoubtedly entitled to rule and is also damaging the realm? The two plays named after Henry IV show Shakespeare's widest scope in depicting the realm of England from throne room to tavern to countryside, and they introduce Shakespeare's most remarkable comic creation, Falstaff. In *Henry V*, Shakespeare kills Falstaff in a scene of extraordinary artistic skill and emotional effect, and then takes the king to a military victory that still arouses all our conflicted convictions about the morality of warfare.

Lectures Nineteen through Thirty-Six deal with Shakespeare's tragedies. They show him taking Romeo and Juliet, who should be the leading pair of lovers in a comedy, and plunging their private bliss in the public violence of a city torn by feud. Why ancient Rome was important to Shakespeare (and to the Renaissance as a whole) is explored in two lectures on *Julius Caesar*. Two lectures on *Troilus and Cressida* show Shakespeare re-writing Homer into a bitter satire on vainglorious men and unfaithful women. Finally, three lectures apiece are devoted to each of the four greatest tragedies, *Hamlet*, *Othello*, *King Lear*, and *Macbeth*, so that the richness and variety of each can be explored. Emphasis falls on the scope of the tragic effect: Shakespeare's acute development of the inner consciousness in his tragic soliloquies, placed within the far-ranging philosophical and theological implications of tragic events for the whole of human life.

As with his students at Dartmouth, Professor Saccio expects his listeners and viewers to have some familiarity with the plays (he does not waste time on basic plot summary), but otherwise he provides the critical tools necessary for the appreciation of Shakespeare's world, his artistry, his significance, and his emotional power.

## Lecture Thirteen

### *Richard II: The Theory of Kingship*

**Scope:** This lecture considers the political issues that arise in *Richard II*, both their substance and the way that they are dramatized. Elizabethan political theory, as expounded in sermons for the whole population, held that the monarch is divinely ordained, and that disobedience and rebellion against the king are therefore heinous sins. Such theory lies behind many speeches and decisions in the play, particularly the fear that deposition of the king will lead to disastrous consequences for the realm.

On the other hand, the arrangement of scenes, contrasting Richard's and Bolingbroke's handling of similar problems, suggests that Bolingbroke is an abler ruler. The pattern of vertical movement that is manifest both visually and verbally in the play, also suggests that Richard's inadequacies as a ruler are more to be blamed than Bolingbroke's temerity in challenging him.

The lecture concludes that the play presents a perfectly balanced political paradox: a rebel can terminate the damage done by an erring king only by further damaging the realm.

### Outline

- I. Although *Richard II* may immediately appeal to readers today as a lyrical tragedy of chiefly psychological interest, its political content may have seemed more important to its original audiences.
  - A. A performance of the play was commissioned in 1601 by a supporter of the attempt by the earl of Essex to take over Elizabeth I's government.
    1. The Lord Chamberlain's Men were exonerated of conscious complicity in Essex's treason.
    2. They denied that the play would motivate any listener to engage in political action.
  - B. The play shows the spectacle of a divinely anointed king deposed by his subjects, and those subjects' justifying their action as proper. This action raises questions not at issue with obviously illegitimate kings such as Richard III.
- II. It was common doctrine, propagated in sermons, that kings were divinely appointed to rule, and that disobedience and rebellion against kings were therefore wicked.
  - A. St Paul argues that "the powers that be are ordained of God" (Rom. 13:1).

- B. A rebel is led into committing all seven deadly sins and breaking all Ten Commandments.
- C. This homiletic doctrine of obedience asserts the king's authority; it does not necessarily assert that the king is always right.
  1. Hence the royal uncles in the play, Gaunt and York, choose at crucial moments loyalty to the crown over loyalty to their own sons.
  2. Hence York's vehemence in denouncing Bolingbroke's return to England against Richard's decree of exile, and Carlisle's vehemence in predicting disasters to follow if Richard is deposed.

III. On the other hand, the doctrine of royal authority does not explain the whole of *Richard II*. We are also invited to compare the political virtues and defects of Richard and Bolingbroke.

- A. Shakespeare's abundance frequently entails such an invitation to compare different characters in similar situations.
- B. Richard and Bolingbroke must each deal with angry quarrels among their nobles. Richard's decisions in Act 1, although defensible, are flawed in various ways. Bolingbroke, in Act 4, retains more royal control.
- C. Richard and Bolingbroke must each confront rebellion.
  1. Richard in Act 3 does little in response, relying on his divinely sanctioned authority. He takes little constructive action to impede Bolingbroke.
  2. Bolingbroke is swift and efficient in practical action to foil the plot to restore Richard.
- D. Since Bolingbroke's effective rule follows Richard's mistakes, the play suggests that (despite the illegality of Bolingbroke's seizure of power) the kingdom is better off in his hands.

IV. The visual and verbal pattern of vertical movement contributes to the political content of the play.

- A. The chief action of the play may be diagrammed as an X, with Richard as the descending line, Bolingbroke as the ascending line.
  1. Richard is aloft at Coventry in Act 1, but he is "on the ground" when he returns from Ireland in Act 3. Later, Bolingbroke stands amid the kneeling Yorks in Act 5.
  2. Their paths cross in the scene at Flint Castle in Act 3, when Bolingbroke and his army catch up with Richard.
- B. Linguistically, the many verbal references in the play to "up" and "down" focus when Richard describes his descent from the Flint Castle walls to the "base court" as the fall of Phaeton.

- C. The vertical patterns of the play, both visual and verbal, suggest not that Bolingbroke is at fault for rebelling, but that Richard is at fault for ruling so poorly that he must be overthrown.
- V. The play, in depicting a conflict between a political theory proclaiming the supervening authority of the king and practical facts displaying the superior abilities of a usurper, presents a perfect political dilemma.
  - A. Bolingbroke can rid the realm of a damaging king only by further damaging the realm, leaving it open to civil war and kinstrife.
  - B. In consequence, the actual removal of Richard is a politically ambiguous event. York considers it a resignation, Northumberland wants an impeachment, Richard handles it as a de-coronation that sacrilegiously reverses the ceremonies of anointment and investiture. The event remains open to interpretation and violent dispute for a century to come.

#### Essential Reading:

Shakespeare, *Richard II*.

Saccio, *Shakespeare's English Kings*, chapter 2.

#### Supplementary Reading/Viewing:

See BBC-TV videotape of *Richard II*.

Gurr, Introduction to *Richard II* (New Cambridge edition).

Barkan, "The Theatrical Consistency of Richard II."

Kastan, "Proud Majesty Made a Subject: Shakespeare and the Spectacle of Rule."

#### Questions to Consider:

1. The American constitution provides a legal way to remove an unsatisfactory president from office: impeachment. The English Parliament had in fact discovered and developed powers of impeachment just before and during Richard's reign, but it used them only to eliminate unsatisfactory ministers of the crown, not the king himself. Would the political issues posed by Richard's rule be better solved by legally impeaching him?
2. The garden scene (3.4) allegorically represents the powers of government by analogy to the tasks of gardeners. Is the analogy useful? Does it satisfactorily suggest what Richard should have been doing as king? Does it satisfactorily suggest what should be done about Richard?



## Lecture Fourteen

### *Richard II: The Fall of the King*

**Scope:** This lecture considers the personal aspects of the leading characters of *Richard II*. Bolingbroke is an opaque character, forceful but not fully exposed to the audience, so that we are left wondering about his motives: it is not clear from the text when he decides to reach for the crown. Richard, on the other hand, is eloquently self-expressive.

The lecture explores Richard's character as it is manifest in the power of his language. Richard's language is sometimes powerful for an extrinsic reason: he is king. Kings can translate their words into reality more readily than other people can. Richard's language is also intrinsically powerful: Shakespeare gives him a series of beautiful and evocative speeches. His verbal power has the paradoxical effect of both moving the audience to sympathy and irritating the audience because he talks at length when he should be taking decisive action.

Richard's chief use of his eloquence is in the creation of glamorous roles for himself. In his final prison scene, however, he finds a new use for language: self-exploration rather than self-dramatization, so that he dies with more self-understanding than he has lived with.

### Outline

- I. Bolingbroke is an opaque character, forceful but not fully revealed to the audience.
  - A. Although normally talkative, he is silent at key moments. Neither in public utterance nor in soliloquy does he tell us at what moment he decides to reach for the crown itself instead of merely the restoration of his stolen inheritance.
  - B. As a consequence of Bolingbroke's opacity, an actor or a reader may interpret him either as secretly ambitious from the start or as a wholly accidental king.
  - C. Also as a consequence, the psychological interest of the play is focused on Richard.
    1. Richard forfeits his moral authority through his complicity in his uncle's death.
    2. He forfeits his economic power because of his extravagance.
    3. He forfeits his legal power by illegally seizing Bolingbroke's estates, thereby upsetting the natural order of society.

- II. Richard's character appears in the power of his language.
  - A. His language may be powerful for extrinsic reasons: he is king. The scene at the Coventry lists (1.3) demonstrates repeatedly his royal ability to translate his wishes into reality.
  - B. Richard's language is also powerful intrinsically. The Barkloughly Castle scene (3.2) shows his expressiveness in a variety of emotional modes: parental concern for the land of England, inspiring vigor in comparing himself to the sun, noble melancholy in resigning himself to misfortune, piercing grief on the fate of kings.
- III. The power of Richard's language may cause conflicting responses of sympathy and impatience.
  - A. We may be moved by its beauty and pathos.
  - B. We may be irritated by its excess, and by Richard's reliance on talk when action is necessary.
- IV. Richard uses language largely to construct roles for himself.
  - A. Greeting the English earth, he plays parental guardian of the land.
  - B. Invoking the analogy of king to sun, he assumes the splendor and glamour of the sun.
  - C. The fantasy of becoming a pilgrim (3.3.147–171) shows fully the detailed elaboration, the self-deception, and the double effect of these verbal self-portraits.
  - D. His favorite role is Jesus Christ.
    1. The analogy is justified: the king is God's deputy.
    2. The analogy is unjustified: it is presumptuous and inaccurate.
- V. In the prison scene (5.5), Richard starts to use language for self-exploration rather than self-dramatization.
  - A. His language is halting, tested, and considerate, rather than fluent and easily elaborated.
  - B. He arrives at *anagnorisis*, a realization of what he is and how his own actions have contributed to his downfall.

### Essential Reading:

Shakespeare, *Richard II*.

### Supplementary Reading/Viewing:

See BBC-TV videotape of *Richard II*.

Altick, "Symphonic Imagery in *Richard II*."

Calderwood, "*Richard II* and the Fall of Speech."

### Questions to Consider:

1. Read what Henry IV says about his usurpation of Richard's crown in *Henry IV*, Part 1, 3. 2, and *Henry IV*, Part 2, 3.1 and 4.4, and compare that to his actions, speeches, and silences as Bolingbroke in Richard II. How much can we conclude about his intentions and motives?
2. What may we infer about Richard II's character from his treatment of the dying Gaunt in 2.1? From his dialogue with the groom in 5.5?
3. Richard's queen at the time of his deposition was actually a child, a French princess whom he married for diplomatic reasons. It was Shakespeare's decision to make her a mature woman. What does he gain thereby? What is Richard's relationship with his wife?

## Lecture Fifteen

### *Henry IV: All the King's Men*

**Scope:** The two plays named after Henry IV constitute the most diverse accomplishment by any Western playwright in the staging of history. This lecture summarizes the political narrative of the plays, but it stresses that the protagonist is Prince Hal, not his father the king after whom the plays are named. Hal is a character whom Shakespeare inherits from legend as well as history, but whom Shakespeare has significantly changed.

The people and events in the plays are organized on the principle of contrast, especially the triangular contrast by which King Henry, Hotspur, and Falstaff provide a context for the central figure of Hal.

The lecture then focuses on Henry's notion of kingship and Hal's handling of his task as heir to the throne. It looks closely at Hal's soliloquy in which he announces his plans to the audience. It then explores how Hal carries out what could be considered a double reformation, an arrival at various different characteristics of good kingship as each of the two plays draws to a close.

### Outline

- I. *Henry IV Part 1* and *Henry IV Part 2* constitute a rich, diverse, and profound dramatic rendering of history.
  - A. The political narrative hinges on the legitimacy of Henry IV's crown. Anyone dissatisfied with his rule can claim that he ought not to be king anyway.
    1. The Percy family, led by the fiery young Hotspur, helped to put Henry on the throne, and it feels under-rewarded.
    2. Edmund Mortimer, a Percy in-law, was a closer heir by blood to Richard II.
    3. The archbishop of York, kin to the Percys, rises in arms to settle grievances.
  - B. The central role is Henry IV's eldest son, nicknamed Hal, whom legend had made a madcap prince, a prodigal son who haunts taverns with his friend Falstaff. Shakespeare makes him a self-conscious prodigal, deliberately courting a bad reputation in order to astonish England with his real excellence when he comes to the crown.
    1. Accordingly, although each play ends with Hal's historical deeds as prince of Wales, most of his scenes concern his private dealings with his tavern cronies and his father.
    2. The plays alternate public events with scenes not only in taverns but also in rural locations with artisans, servants, and farmers.

II. Organizing this rich diversity is the principle of contrast among three main groups: the king and his advisers, Falstaff and the tavern crew, and Hotspur and the rebels. One of the things that distinguishes these three groups is their attitude toward time.

- A. The court group, focused on the king, regards time as a linear chain of necessity, full of dangers, requiring constant calculation.
- B. The tavern crew, focusing on Falstaff, lives for entertainment and pleasure, disregarding time. It seeks to evade or defuse emergencies rather than to meet them.
- C. The rebels, led by Hotspur, regard time as the opportunity for chivalric exploits.
- D. Hal has significant resemblances to each group, but no one sees his overall plans. Each group underestimates him.

III. In this world, any sense of the divine right of kings has gone underground. Kingship has no aura or mystique in this play.

- A. Henry IV never speaks of the glory of the crown as Richard II had.
- B. He exploits the trappings of majesty purely as political tools.
- C. He is disappointed with Hal because Hal seems to have no political awareness.

IV. Hal is in fact highly political; his tactics differ greatly from his father's.

- A. His soliloquy in 1.2 outlines his scenario, hinging entirely on the principle of foil or contrast between his current lax behavior and his intended reformation.
  1. He believes that he can handle all contingencies.
  2. We may wonder to what extent he is rationalizing mere self-indulgence.
  3. Like Saint Augustine, Hal seeks to postpone his reformation.
- B. He does publicly earn acclaim for traditional royal virtues at the end of each play: valor and military honor at the end of Part 1, justice and good rule at the end of Part 2.

#### Essential Reading:

Shakespeare, *Henry IV, Parts 1 and 2*.

Saccio, *Shakespeare's English Kings*, chapter 3.

#### Supplementary Reading/Viewing:

See BBC-TV videotapes of *1 and 2 Henry IV*.

Bevington, *Introduction to 1 Henry IV* (Oxford edition).

Melchiori, *Introduction to 2 Henry IV* (New Cambridge edition).

Kernan, "The Henriad: Shakespeare's Major History Plays."

Greenblatt, "Invisible Bullets: Renaissance Authority and Its Subversion, *Henry IV* and *Henry V*."

#### Questions to Consider:

1. The historical Hotspur was two years older than King Henry IV: Shakespeare makes him a young man of Hal's age. Why? Discuss in detail the personality of Hotspur and the way Shakespeare uses him in Part 1.
2. What is Hal's conception of kingship?
3. What is the relevance of personal characteristics—and the reputation a person in public life has for private behavior—to his or her capacity to lead or rule? Do the *Henry IV* plays throw any light on public debates such as those America has had about the behavior of President Clinton?



## Lecture Sixteen

### Henry IV: The Life of Falstaff

**Scope:** This lecture traces the origins of Falstaff, not in history but in theatrical types such as the Vice of the morality plays, the *miles gloriosus* of ancient Roman comedy, and the medieval court jester. These types are not directly imitated, but they are adapted to Shakespeare's purpose: Falstaff's characteristic action in the *Henry IV* plays is to turn things on their head, to create holiday, to undermine the conventional serious view of things. He is the chameleonic opposite of the social order and kingly rule. Various speeches are discussed to demonstrate his improvisatory skill at disrupting normal practices and values.

The lecture concludes by posing Prince Hal against Falstaff, the leader and representative of the body politic against the man unwilling to be led, the body impolitic, the messy, funny human body itself. The lecture argues that Hal represents what we have come to call the Protestant ethic, whereas Falstaff represents the ethic of self-fulfillment that we have come to think of as counter-cultural.

#### Outline

- I. Falstaff, the Shakespearean character most frequently mentioned in surviving comments on Shakespeare's plays from his own time, remains one of his two or three most enduring creations, a dominating figure in the mythology of English-speaking peoples.
  - A. He is an intensely significant figure. Like Hamlet, he has been interpreted and re-interpreted.
  - B. To avoid excessively abstract intellectualization, it is wise to remember that on stage he is an imposing physical figure, a very fat man.
- II. Although Falstaff appears in two history plays, he is not based on a historical person. Instead, he is an adaptation of various theatrical types.
  - A. He derives from the Vice, the tempter figure, in medieval morality plays. Hal, however, is not deceived by him, as the protagonists of morality plays were by the Vice.
  - B. He derives from the *miles gloriosus*, the braggart soldier of ancient Roman comedy. Unlike that prototype, however, he is not humorless.
  - C. He derives from the parasite, the sponger of classical life and comedy and of early Elizabethan comedy. Unlike the parasite, however, he gives as well as takes.
  - D. He derives from the medieval court jester who entertains the prince, but he is also an acute social critic.

- III. His characteristic action is to turn things upside down, to invert the established order of things.
  - A. Excusing highway robbery, he claims it as his vocation.
  - B. Inventing a story to cover his cowardice in the Gadshill robbery, he accuses Hal and Poins of cowardice and tells a tale that is obviously unbelievable.
  - C. He turns the serious concerns of the world into a game, a game that has no fixed rules but is pure improvisation.
    1. He inverts conventional morality by accusing Hal of corrupting him.
    2. Although he himself is old, he says that members of the staid elder generation "hate us youth."
    3. On the battlefield, he plays dead to stay alive.
    4. Hal observes that Falstaff is like quicksilver; he can change roles very rapidly.
- IV. As Hal comes to represent leadership, he embodies what we now call the Protestant Ethic: a form of this-worldly asceticism that stresses devotion to duty, sobriety, and working for the public welfare.
  - A. Hal's version of the Protestant Ethic is unusual in that it is always present in him, even during his early experience as a wastrel, but it becomes apparent only over time.
  - B. Falstaff comes to embody everything that is the opposite of this Protestant ethic; he represents the ethic of pleasure and self-fulfillment, and the rejection of the Establishment and its values and pretensions.
  - C. Hal's rejection of Falstaff at the end of Part 2 is a great, almost mythical moment in Western civilization, codifying a deep division in human nature as we have known it.
  - D. It is one of the great marks of the abundance of Shakespeare that he creates and contains this moment, while he rejects neither Hal nor Falstaff.

#### Essential Reading:

Shakespeare, *Henry IV, Parts 1 and 2*.

#### Supplementary Reading/Viewing:

See BBC-TV videotapes of *1 and 2 Henry IV*.

Hunter, "Shakespeare's Comic Sense as It Strikes Us Today: Falstaff and the Protestant Ethic."

Wilson, *The Fortunes of Falstaff*.

#### Questions to Consider:

## Lecture Seventeen

### Henry V: The Death of Falstaff

1. Would you allow your twenty-year-old son to spend time with a hard-drinking, fornicating, funny old thief with a claim to military distinction? (Note that Falstaff does have a knighthood; at some point someone in authority thought he had behaved meritoriously on a battlefield.)
2. What significant differences exist between Falstaff as he appears in Part 1 and Falstaff as he appears in Part 2? Consider not only his personal characteristics—his way of speaking, his treatment of other people, his health, for example—but the kinds of things Shakespeare gives him to do, the sorts of scenes he appears in. Note for example that in Part 2 he appears only twice with Prince Hal, in 2.4 (where Hal is disguised for most of the scene) and 5.5 (where Hal has just been crowned king).

**Scope:** This lecture consists of a close reading of the first forty lines of *Henry V*, 2.3. The lines are explored in detail for their various emotional resonances and for their allusions to the Gospels, the Psalms, the Book of Revelation, and Plato's account of Socrates' death. The physical and spiritual details of Falstaff's death are noted and explained.

Shakespeare imagined a scene of complex and mixed emotions, any one of which may dominate in a particular production or reading, reasonably mixed with and supported by the others. The complexity and richness of the composition are compared with the complexity of Michelangelo's painting on the Sistine chapel ceiling.

### Outline

**Because a close reading does not lend itself readily to the standard outline format used in this booklet, we include instead a narrative that closely parallels Professor Saccio's script. The full text of the scene is printed in the appendix for ease of reference.**

This is a different kind of lecture from those I have been giving. Instead of talking about a big subject, a genre, a theme, a leading character, I want to do a close-up on detail. I want to show you the abundance of Shakespeare in a short passage. I will take about forty lines and show you the richness of their texture, share with you the ways in which Shakespeare can provoke in us—readers and playgoers—a multitude of emotional and intellectual responses.

This will be what critics call a close reading. For you to follow it best, please have the passage in front of you. It's printed in your booklet, so you may get it out whether you are watching this on video or hearing it on audio—please not if you are at the wheel of a car—and follow along phrase by phrase. Or you can get out an edition of Shakespeare: the passage is in *Henry V*, the first forty lines of Act 2 Scene 2, when the Hostess of the tavern describes to Pistol, Nym, Bardolph, and the Boy the death of Falstaff.

It is a simple passage. I have deliberately *not* chosen a stretch of high-flown verse rich in metaphor and mythological allusion. It is prose, they are down-to-earth characters grieving the death of a dear friend, not rising to royal eulogy but simply talking about what happened at the deathbed. A youngster could understand the basic sense without explanations. But it is remarkably rich in its effect upon an attentive audience.

The premise of the scene involves some emotional complication. These are comic characters, but at the moment they are sad. The audience will be sad too. The original audience in 1599 may have been not only sad but also surprised. They had been promised, in the epilogue to Shakespeare's previous history play, *Henry IV Part 2*, that the sequel, pursuing Prince Hal as king and his conquest of France, would also contain more adventures of Falstaff. The character has appeared in two or three plays already. He was a great public favorite. A serial character ought not to die. I am reminded of an old cartoon, of a boy sitting up in bed late at night, reading, with an expression of horror on his face. He's just reached the death of Sherlock Holmes. And of course, Conan Doyle wasn't allowed to get away with killing Holmes; he had to go on, write more stories, invent some way of getting him out of that waterfall. *Why* Shakespeare decided to kill Falstaff is a matter open to speculation; but *since* he decided to kill him, he had to give him an appropriate send-off. Consider who Falstaff was: an embodiment of tremendous vitality, a man who joked and drank and schemed and fornicated and saw through the public pretenses of kings and social order. A man witty in himself and the cause of wit in other men. The greatest drinking buddy, the greatest boon companion in English, or any other literature I know. To say that he is dead is almost to say that life itself is dead, or at least that all the *earthly* delight of life is dead. So there is great reason for sorrow. But the scene is not wholly sad.

Let's take it line by line. The characters come on as Pistol and the other men are departing King Henry's war in France. The Hostess, who has now married Pistol, begs to accompany them a short part of the way.

<b>Hostess.</b>	Prithee, honey-sweet husband, let me bring thee to Staines.
<b>Pistol.</b>	No, for my manly heart doth yearn. Bardolph, be blithe; Nym, rouse thy vaunting veins; Boy, bristle thy courage up; for Falstaff he is dead, And we must yearn therefore.

That's the only bit of verse in the scene, and it's verse because Pistol likes to talk in the manner of ranting old plays. He's another imitator of Marlowe's Tamburlaine, like the prince of Morocco in *The Merchant of Venice*, fond of big alliterative phrases like "vaunting veins." But the inflated rhetoric merely makes more abrupt what Pistol actually tells us, "Falstaff he is dead." The guy's gone; he's not going to appear in the play. True, we were told in an earlier scene that he was sick, but throughout the *Henry IV* plays, Falstaff had been moaning about his diseases and discomforts: they didn't stop him from joking and lying and fornicating, let alone living.

Bardolph responds with the direct simplicity of grief and loyalty:

<b>Bardolf.</b>	Would I were with him, wheresome'er he is, either in heaven or in hell.
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But that raises a frightful possibility that the Hostess quickly rejects:

<b>Hostess.</b>	Nay, sure, he's not in hell; he's in Arthur's bosom, if ever man went to Arthur's bosom.
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You must remember that in Shakespeare's day people believed in a literal Hell, that if one died unreconciled with God, one would suffer for all eternity. This is a prospect too horrible for the Hostess to contemplate about the fate of her dear friend. He must be in Heaven. But there's a funny little twist in the line. Her biblical reference is a little shaky. She's made a mistake about the parable of the rich man and Lazarus, from the Gospel of Luke:

And there was a certain beggar named Lazarus, who was laid at the gate, full of sores, and desiring to be fed with the crumbs that fell from the rich man's table. Moreover the dogs came and licked his sores. And it came to pass that the beggar died, and was carried by the angels into Abraham's bosom. The rich man also died, and was buried; and in hell he lifted up his eyes, being in torments, and seeth Abraham afar off, and Lazarus in his bosom.
---

(Luke 16.20-23)

That parable is very well known, regularly read as a Gospel lesson in church, and Abraham's bosom has thereby become a familiar phrase for Heaven. We may laugh a little, that the hostess, while asserting herself so strongly, gets it wrong. Oh well, Abraham, Arthur, they both begin with A, what does it matter?

The Hostess goes on:

<b>Hostess.</b>	'A made a finer end, and went away an it had been any chrissom child.
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Now a "chrissom child" is a newly baptized infant. Cleansed by baptism of Original Sin, too young to commit any sins on its own, such a child, if it died, would go straight to Heaven. There is no doubt about salvation here. The Hostess goes on:

<b>Hostess.</b>	'A parted even just between twelve and one, even at the turning of the tide.
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We have here two familiar images for death, midnight and the ebb tide. Midnight and the ebb tide occur regularly, naturally. They are not things to be feared. Falstaff's death is made to seem easy and gentle physically as well as spiritually. We are consoled by such a description.



The hostess continues:

**Hostess.** After I saw him fumble with the sheets, and play with flowers, and smile upon his fingers' end . . .

Falstaff was apparently delirious, hallucinating on his deathbed. The Elizabethans embroidered their sheets with colored thread. Evidently Falstaff was plucking at such colored sheet-borders, perhaps imagining he was in a garden, picking flowers, perhaps the first garden he had played in as a child. Maybe his death wasn't only easy, it was happy. That at least was my thought about that line, until two years ago, when I delivered a public lecture on the subject. The next day I got a message from my doctor, who'd heard the lecture. He told me that plucking at the sheets, or at imaginary things in the air, is a symptom of patients in the later stages of alcoholic liver disease, hepatic encephalopathy. Shakespeare is clearly drawing on some experience of watching an alcoholic die. And since Falstaff was indeed a heavy drinker, I'm afraid my doctor's tough interpretation of the lines is far more convincing than my earlier sentimental one. Even the Hostess knows that these gestures are a sign of the coming end. Let me give you her full sentence:

**Hostess.** After I saw him fumble with the sheets, and play with flowers, and smile upon his fingers' end, I knew there was but one way; for his nose was as sharp as a pen, and 'a babbled of green fields.

She knew that there was but one way, and the sharp nose is another clear medical sign. Early in the history of medicine, Hippocrates and Galen recorded the apparent sharpening of the nose as a sign of approaching death. The face seems to lose flesh so that the bone structure stands out, an effect also noticeable in cancer patients, and particularly clear when the person has been fat, as Falstaff was. As for the green fields, well, we already know the shakiness of the Hostess's hold on famous Biblical texts, but she really ought to have recognized what Falstaff was saying when he babbled of green fields:

The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.  
He maketh me to lie down in green pastures:  
He leadeth me beside the still waters.  
He restoreth my soul:  
He leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for His name's sake.  
Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,  
I will fear no evil: for thou art with me;  
Thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.

(Psalm 23)

He was trying to pray, to utter the 23rd Psalm, the great psalm of trust and faith in the Lord even at the point of death.

The Hostess continues:

**Hostess.** "How now, Sir John," quoth I, "what, man? be o' good cheer." So 'a cried out, "God! God! God!" three or four times.

Now that to me is the most mysterious line in the Hostess' narrative. *How* did Falstaff cry out "God! God! God!?" Was he still humbly praying? Was it a cry of greeting—did he imagine he saw God welcoming him into heaven? Was it a cry of terror, as he saw an angry God, like the Christ of Michelangelo's *Last Judgment*, hurling the sinners down to hell? Any of those three is possible, and we just don't know, since we are getting this account second-hand. Maybe the hostess knew, and her tone of voice in reporting his cry can be relied on, but we know that she's better at facts than at their implications. Indeed, the next thing the Hostess says is really ghastly. In response to Falstaff's cry to God, she says she replied:

**Hostess.** Now I, to comfort him, bid him a' should not think of God. I hoped there was no need to trouble himself with any such thoughts yet.

What terrible advice to give a dying man! (She "knew there was but one way.") And Elizabethans would recognize it as especially terrible advice. They were experts on deathbeds. Slight digression here. You can tell much from an age by its favorite self-help books—what topics do people try to master in their lives? The Victorians were concerned with class. Having made their money in industrial fortunes, they wanted to behave as if they were born to it. So their most popular self-help books were books of etiquette: how to behave as if you were born noble, how to give dinner parties and write letters. My generation grew up in the sixties, we were preoccupied with sex. So we made bestsellers of books on the art of intercourse, *The Joy of Sex*, how to achieve the "big 'O.'" Nowadays it's money. In my local bookstore, I see books on investing, how to navigate the shoals of the economy, *Five Ways to Get Rich*.

Well, for Shakespeare's England, it was death. The most important moment of life was the moment of dying, because all eternity depended on it. Dying was a public act, not conducted behind screens in a hospital, but in the family bed, with the family, the friends, and the neighbors gathered round. And there was plenty of printed advice available on how to prepare, how to repent, how to pray, what final temptations to ward off. There was a medieval treatise, the *Ars Moriendi*, that got into print as soon as Gutenberg invented the press and spread all over Europe in vernacular translations. There is the medieval play *Everyman*. Erasmus wrote *A Comfortable Exhortation against the Chances of Death*. Thomas More wrote a dialogue with an almost identical title. Francis Bacon wrote an essay, "On Death." A man named Lupset wrote *A Compendious and Very Fruitful Treatise Teaching the Way of Dying Well*.

The most interesting case is a book known at the time as “Parsons on resolution.” The actual title is *A booke of Christian exercise appertaining to resolution, that is, shewing how that we should resolve our selves to become Christians indeed, to live and die well*. It was published in 1582, when Shakespeare was eighteen years old. The author, Robert Parsons, was a Jesuit priest, and naturally the advice contains some matters, such as prayer to saints and instruction on purgatory, things that Catholics accepted but Protestants rejected. But Protestants thought that it was a good book, too. So an Anglican clergyman named Edmund Bunny went over it, cut out the papist parts and put Protestant stuff in those places, and republished it three years later. And over the next twenty years or so, which were the years of Shakespeare’s writing career, some fifteen new editions were published, either the Parsons Catholic version or the Bunny Protestant one. People must have been buying this book, or the printers wouldn’t have churned out so many editions. And of course, contrary to what the Hostess says to Falstaff, what all these books say is that the dying person should be thinking of God, intently, continuously. When she tells Falstaff not to trouble himself with God, most Elizabethans would be as horrified as we would be if we heard some one advising children to accept rides from strange men. And yet, and yet, we know what the Hostess is doing. She’s a kindly woman, and she wants people to be comfortable and happy, so why trouble yourself with ugly thoughts like divine judgment?

There’s one more bit of her narrative.

**Hostess.** ‘A bade me lay more clothes on his feet. I put my hand into the bed and felt them, and they were cold as any stone. Then I felt to his knees, and so upward and upward, and all was cold as any stone.

Now when I first read this play in college, I had three responses to those words. The first was a pure gut response. I found it spooky. The idea that the feet can be so cold, that they are dead, while the mind is still working, and the mouth can speak—the idea that death creeps so slowly up the body, plain frightens me.

The second was to think, I’ve heard something like that before. And indeed I had. What I had heard, or rather read, was this:

“The man who gave him the hemlock now and then looked at his feet and legs. After a while he pressed his foot hard, and asked if he could feel. He said, “No.” And then his legs, and so upward and upward, and showed us that he was cold and stiff.”

That is Plato, in *The Phaedo*, describing the death of Socrates. And I’m really not sure what to say about that coincidence. Is it merely a coincidence? Or did Shakespeare, as he invented the death of Falstaff, happen to think of Plato’s description, remember how effective it is, and just lift it? Or does he mean something by it? Is there some analogy between the wise old Greek, whose

wisdom so outraged his own city that they killed him, and Falstaff the jester who could see through the pretenses of the great men of his own time. I’m afraid I must leave you to ponder on that.

I had a third response. I’m afraid I sniggered. I thought of the Hostess putting her hand on the flesh of Falstaff’s feet, and then upward and upward, and I giggled. And then I said to myself, come on, Peter, stop being such an adolescent. This is supposed to be one of the great passages in Shakespeare and all you can think of is the Hostess’s hand on Falstaff’s private parts. Grow up, guy. So I grew up, and I became a Shakespeare scholar, and eventually I found out that I had been right to snigger. “Cold as any stone”? I found out that in Elizabethan English, the word “stone” can mean “testicle.” It is their ordinary word for that organ of the body. Holinshed reports that at the battle of Shrewsbury the earl of Douglas was wounded “in the stones.” Of course it also means “a rock.” The Hostess isn’t being intentionally obscene, and the men she’s talking to don’t respond that way. But most members of the audience would have noticed the accidental obscenity. This moving passage about a beloved character’s death ends with a bawdy joke.

The scene continues in dialogue (professor’s commentary is in brackets).

**Nym.** They say he cried out of sack.

[The dying Falstaff wanted one more mug of the strong wine he was fond of.]

**Hostess.** A, that a’ did.

**Bardolph.** And of women.

**Hostess.** Nay, that ‘a did not.

[She’s upset at that idea, that Falstaff could be asking for more sex while he was dying.]

**Boy.** Yes, that ‘a did, and said they were devils incarnate.

[Oh, that’s okay then, if he was crying out not *for* a woman but *against* women, who had led him into sin... But the Hostess doesn’t understand fancy words like “incarnate.”]

**Hostess.** 'A never could abide carnation, 'twas a color he never liked.  
**Boy.** 'A said once the devil would have him about women.

[That is, he would be damned because of his loose sex life. And the Hostess admits:]

**Hostess.** 'A did in some sort, indeed, handle women, but then he was rheumatic, and talked of the whore of Babylon.

Another unconscious pun from the Hostess, he did *handle* women—Falstaff certainly did, but she means *handle* in the sense of talk about, discuss. At one moment on the deathbed he mentioned the whore of Babylon. Why on earth would he talk about her? Well, it's one more Biblical reference that the Hostess doesn't seem to recognize:

[And the angel said] unto me,  
I will show unto thee the judgment of the great whore that sitteth upon many waters;  
With whom the kings of the earth have committed fornication,  
And the inhabitants of the earth have been made drunk with the wine of her fornication.  
So he carried me away in the spirit into the wilderness:  
And I saw a woman sit upon a scarlet-colored beast, full of the names of blasphemy, having seven heads and ten horns  
And the woman was arrayed in purple and scarlet color, and Decked with gold and precious stones and pearls,  
Having a golden cup in her hand full of abominations and filthiness of her fornication;  
And upon her forehead was a name written, MYSTERY, BABYLON THE GREAT, THE MOTHER OF HARLOTS AND ABOMINATIONS OF THE EARTH.  
(Revelation 17.1-5)

That terrifying passage has been used as a text for many sermons, hellfire and damnation sermons, sermons threatening sinners. Falstaff was clearly thinking of his sins, fearing damnation for his drunkenness and fornication.

The Boy has one more line:

**Boy.** Do you not remember, he saw a flea stick upon Bardolph's nose, and said it was a black soul burning in hell?

The joke about Bardolph's nose, repeated many times through the Henry plays, is that he too is a heavy drinker, and his nose has turned red with the alcohol.

And I love the "Do you not remember...?" It marks a change in tone, a modulation from direct grief into reminiscence. These people have something wonderful to talk about. They can sit around of an evening, chatting like this, saying "Do you remember when he said this?" "Do you remember when he did that? How funny that was! How lucky we were to know such a remarkable man!" A new feeling comes into the scene. They are no longer mourning, but in a mood both happy and sad, a mood we call bittersweet. But even that is emotionally complicated, because the particular joke the Boy recalls is not a purely merry one, it's a joke about damnation. They don't want to think about Falstaff going to Hell, but the possibility does recur.

Let me generalize about all this. What I've been doing here is entering into Shakespeare's imagination. He imagined fully the death of Falstaff. He imagined Falstaff in easy moments of illness, sleeping like "a chrissom child." He imagined Falstaff in hope and prayer, plucking at the sheets ends, hallucinating. He imagined Falstaff feeling his feet go cold. He imagined the Hostess fondling Falstaff's balls. He imagined Falstaff crying out for sack (fortified wine, his favorite drink), crying out for women (or against women—it's hard to be sure). He imagined Falstaff ranting out of the book of Revelation, seeing his fornications embodied in the wine of the scarlet woman.

He imagined a scene that was peaceful, hopeful, bawdy, silly, childish, drunken, lecherous, and terrifying, terrifying both physically and spiritually. All at once, in only forty lines. No single performance can highlight everything, but it is all there. I haven't made any of this up: I've been pointing out where it all lies in Shakespeare's words. Different performances will bring out different aspects of the abundance. And the more we ourselves know the more we can be alert to the abundance as we read him.

This is the point in the course when I lay my cards face up on the table: this man is a genius. He can write anything he wants, on a complex multifaceted scale. He's a genius on the order of Michelangelo, the Michelangelo of the Sistine Chapel ceiling.

What's on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel? Well, there are three major elements to that vast composition. Going down the center of the vault are nine narrative scenes from Genesis, from God creating light, through Adam and Eve onto Noah and the Flood. On the curve of the vault are twelve large figures, Hebrew prophets and their female classical equivalent, the Sibyls of ancient Rome. And the third principal element is twenty male figures, young nude atlantes, supporting on their shoulders the narrative scenes out of Genesis, turned and twisted in nearly every possible human posture. And what is it all about? Art historians have discussed that at length; I'm asking as an ordinary educated person who has been there, who has asked what does the whole of this amount to? I lay down on the floor of the Chapel and tried to take the whole thing in, tried to find the sense, the emphasis, the organization. And I discovered



something very curious. You can read it in at least three ways, and it makes sense in each way.

My first instinct was to go for the narrative. The scenes from Genesis are central. This is a historical epic, it's about an action, God's creation of the world and his first interactions with mankind. In that context, the prophets and sibyls fit in, they *see* these events and convey them to ordinary mortals, and the events are of course physically supported by the male nudes. But, if you shift your focus a little, the prophets and sibyls gain greater prominence. They are in fact larger than the Genesis figures, and closer to us since they are on the curve of the vault. Then the ceiling becomes a composition concerning vision, inspired vision, artistic vision, the sort of ability possessed by mystics and artists to see deeply into the truth and to record what they see. The Genesis paintings become part of their context, *what* sages and sibyls and artists can see that they convey to ordinary mortals. And you can shift once again, and focus on the male nudes. They are not larger, but there are so many of them, their powerful arms and backs and legs are at work throughout the whole composition. It becomes a painting about human energy, muscular strength, the windswept exertions of the human race that are the basis for all action and vision in the earthly world. At which point I find it impossible not to think about the sheer physical labor that Michelangelo himself exerted to paint all that, lying on a scaffold. Each reading of the whole composition makes sense, each takes in a major thing that is really there and makes coherent sense with the others.

Shakespeare is like that in his abundance and the complexity of his composition. That is why there can be so many interpretations of his plays. So many good interpretations—I don't mean the crackpot ones where people merely insert their own obsessions. I mean interpretations that stress things genuinely there, because there is so much there, artfully inter-coordinated. What speaks to you at one particular reading, what one actor or director finds, is a genuine resonance with things pouring forth from a spacious plenty.

### Essential Reading:

Shakespeare, *Henry V*.

### Supplementary Reading/Viewing:

Footnotes on *Henry V*, 2.3, from Gurr (New Cambridge edition) or Taylor (Oxford edition).

Film by Kenneth Branagh. Judi Dench is excellent in this scene.

### Questions to Consider:

1. What do you think might have happened, in the audience and to the play, if Shakespeare had decided to put the death of Falstaff on stage instead of having it described at second hand by the Hostess and her friends?
2. Why might Shakespeare have allowed Falstaff to die “with his boots on,” as it were, instead of in battle serving his prince or in some other more dramatic or heroic manner?

## Lecture Eighteen

### Henry V: The King Victorious

**Scope:** Twentieth-century response to *Henry V* has both continued an earlier celebratory tradition and matched it with a modern distrust of war and politicians. This lecture displays ways in which the play seems to support these opposed interpretations.

The lecture argues that this dualistic opposition is overly simplistic and omits a whole intermediate range of events and characters and the responses to them. This intermediate range is demonstrated by showing the great variety of soldiers that appear or are described in the play.

This lecture then argues that Henry himself plays a variety of roles, because that is what a king must do. He shows that he is a king by knowing that there is no such thing as a king.

#### Outline

- I. Twentieth-century response to *Henry V* has been double-sided.
  - A. It can be seen as celebratory and patriotic.
  - B. It can also be seen as critical and satiric exposure.
  - C. This doubleness has been clear in times of public debate over particular wars.
    1. Vietnam influenced Michael Kahn's direction of a savage presentation of *Henry V* at Stratford, Connecticut, in 1969.
    2. The Falklands war and conflict in northern Ireland influenced Kenneth Branagh's film version in 1989, which vividly illustrated the human costs of war.
- II. The play supports both readings.
  - A. The vigorous Choruses that open each act celebrate the king and his enterprise, and the Agincourt victory is highlighted as an epic achievement.
  - B. On the other hand, the play highlights the ugly and costly side of war.
    1. Henry is urged by self-interested churchmen to wage war on France.
    2. While in northern France, Henry consents to the execution of his old tavern crony, Bardolph.
    3. During the battle, he ruthlessly orders the slaughter of French prisoners who have surrendered.
    4. A common soldier offers a very inglorious and unchivalric account of death in battle.

III. Dualism neglects the variety of experience in the play.

- A. There are many different kinds of soldiers in the play.
  1. Henry speaks of a rampaging slaughterer and rapist.
  2. Henry evokes the heroism of ancestral warriors.
  3. Soldiers are knights bound in brotherhood.
  4. A soldier may be a pedant.
  5. A soldier may be afraid.
  6. A soldier may be eager for battle.
  7. A soldier may be an athlete.
  8. A soldier may be a beast.
  9. A soldier may be a fake.
- B. Henry himself plays many roles.
  1. He is an able politician and diplomat, as shown in his message to the French ambassadors in response to the Dauphin's insult.
  2. He dispenses justice (as shown in his consent to the execution of Bardolph) and mercy (as shown in his pardon of a man who has slandered him).
  3. He is a warrior and leader of men.
  4. He is a lover. While wooing the French princess, he graciously pretends to be a rube in order to put her at ease.
- C. Henry both sees that kingship is a fiction and uses it well.
  1. He deconstructs kingship into a set of stage props, as illustrated in his soliloquy on Ceremony the night before the battle of Agincourt. He realizes that kingship is a fiction, with nothing real about it except the responsibility.
  2. He reconstructs kingship by asserting his mastery of the props.

#### Essential Reading:

Shakespeare, *Henry V*.

Saccio, *Shakespeare's English Kings*, chapter 4.

#### Supplementary Reading/Viewing:

Film of *Henry V* by Kenneth Branagh or by Laurence Olivier.

Introduction to *Henry V*, Gurr (New Cambridge edition) or Taylor (Oxford edition).

Loehlin, *Henry V: Shakespeare in Performance*.

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

#### Questions to Consider:

1. Consider each of Henry's major public speeches. What role is he playing in each one? By what means? For what audience? To what end?
2. Compare Henry to any modern political leader you know well.

3. Compare the Olivier film with the Branagh film: cuts, decisions on how to play particular scenes, use of comedy, lighting, means of filming the battle, placement of climax, etc.

## Lecture Nineteen

### *Romeo and Juliet*: Shakespearean Tragedy

**Scope:** This lecture discusses the hazards to trying to devise a strict definition of tragedy. In Shakespeare's time, tragedy was a term, loosely used, to mean any story about calamity, especially a fall from a high place. This freedom from theoretical limits enabled Shakespeare to create many different kinds of tragic effect out of different kinds of stories and to leave his characters free to try to discover the meanings of their own lives.

The special characteristic of *Romeo and Juliet* lies in the derivation of a tragic story out of a situation usually used in comedy: young lovers attempting to escape the barriers put in their way by unsympathetic parents and a hostile society.

### Outline

- I. Defining Shakespearean tragedy, or tragedy in general, is an intellectually perilous and sometimes empty activity.
  - A. The word "tragedy" is used both as a term of classification and a term of evaluation, of respect or praise. This confusion does not occur with other generic labels.
  - B. Precise definitions of tragedy tend to exclude things or to measure things.
    1. Neither activity promotes dramatic and literary appreciation or understanding.
    2. We should, instead, concentrate on individual plays, i.e., tragedies, instead of trying to precisely define "tragedy."
  - C. Aristotle's discussion of tragedy, although occasionally involving evaluation, is largely a taxonomic description, offering some useful terms (fully defined in the Glossary):
    1. *peripeteia* ("reversal")
    2. *hamartia* ("error" or "failure")
    3. *anagnorisis* ("recognition")
    4. *katharsis* ("purgation" or "purification").
- II. Tragic theory in Shakespeare's time was sketchy. The word "tragedy" was applied to many stories and real-life events, simply meaning that they involved calamity and suffering, usually for people in high places.
  - A. More sophisticated tragic theory developed shortly after Shakespeare's time. Most subsequent tragic writers have felt obliged to define what they were doing. By the nineteenth century, this led to theories of a "tragic sense of life," independent of any event or literary form.



B. Shakespeare was free to try various kinds of tragic effect. It is wiser to concede this multiplicity than to try to tie his plays to a definition of an abstraction called “Shakespearean tragedy.”

1. *Titus Andronicus* is tragedy of blood revenge modeled after the works of the ancient Roman playwright Seneca.
2. *Richard II* and *Richard III* draw tragedy out of English history, offering close connections between public events and private life.
3. Shakespeare pursues connections similar to those of the English histories in his series of Roman tragedies, *Julius Caesar*, *Antony and Cleopatra*, and *Coriolanus*.
4. *Romeo and Juliet* and *Troilus and Cressida* build tragedy out of love stories, but the first is romantic and the second, satiric.
5. The four most acclaimed tragedies, *Hamlet*, *Othello*, *King Lear*, and *Macbeth*, are not very closely tied to previous models or historical events.

C. Shakespeare’s independence of any strict definition of tragedy or tragic sense of life leaves his characters free to seek for themselves the causes and significance of their suffering. One of the most moving things about them is their effort to understand their own lives.

III. *Romeo and Juliet* could have been a romantic comedy.

- A. The title characters are lovers confronting barriers erected by their parents and their society, the standard situation in Shakespearean comedy.
- B. The plot develops by a series of accidents that could have produced a happy outcome.
- C. The bourgeois setting is customarily found in comedy rather than tragedy.
  1. The Capulets and Montagues, although rich and “alike in dignity,” are not aristocrats.
  2. In seeking to marry his daughter to Count Paris, an aristocrat and kinsman of the Prince of Verona, Capulet aims at social advancement. The marriage of Viola de Lessups to Lord Wessex in the film *Shakespeare in Love* is a parallel situation.
- D. The unhappy outcome results from the impetuosity of the lovers, the stubbornness of the parents, and sheer bad luck.

#### Essential Reading:

Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*.

#### Supplementary Reading:

Leech, *Tragedy*.

Margesson, *The Origins of English Tragedy*.

#### Questions to Consider:

1. What preconceptions do you have about tragedy? How do you use the word?
2. Does the film *Shakespeare in Love* make a reasonable use of the play?

## Lecture Twenty

### **Romeo and Juliet: Public Violence and Private Bliss**

**Scope:** *Romeo and Juliet* is especially remarkable for its structure and its poetry. The story is organized around three large scenes (at the start, middle, and end) and moves with a pace whose rapidity is coordinate with the violence of the actions and emotions. By a special form of lyric poetry, Shakespeare creates a unique world for the lovers, a space separate from quarrelling Verona and dedicated to an ideal love.

#### Outline

- I. *Romeo and Juliet* manifests a deft and resilient architectural form, organized around three big scenes: one at the start (the street fight in Act 1 Scene 1), one in the middle (the duel in which Mercutio and Tybalt die in Act 3 Scene 1), and one at the end (the tomb scene in Act 5 Scene 1).
  - A. In each, an accidental encounter leads to a fight that escalates until the Prince must intervene to stop it.
  - B. The scenes are big not only in cast requirements, but also in their rapid pace.
  - C. The scenes anchor the play like pillars, but their speed is such that they are baroque pillars, like Bernini's spiral columns in St. Peter's.
  - D. The haste and violence of the play appear not only in the young men who start the fights but in older characters, women characters, and in the extraordinary speed of the plot.
  - E. The parental tyranny of Capulet (to some modern readers the most repulsive example of patriarchalism in Shakespeare) is perhaps explicable in this context of haste and violence.
- II. Within this violent context, the love of Romeo and Juliet is presented as a pure and ideal private world.
  - A. Their love is sharply differentiated from the view of love held by other characters: Mercutio, Capulet, Friar Lawrence, or the Nurse. It is also different from the conventional Petrarchan passion expressed by Romeo for Rosaline before he meets Juliet.
  - B. Their love is built by poetry. It is first expressed in a sonnet, 1.5.92–105.
    1. In John Donne's phrase, a sonnet was a "pretty room" in which lovers could be private together.
    2. In the balcony scene (2.2), love is more than a pretty room: Romeo revises the world so that "Juliet is the sun."
    3. In awaiting their wedding night (3.2), Juliet revises astronomy to turn day into night, a night uniquely expressive of not only

Romeo's beauty but also the splendor of their anticipated sexual union.

4. Romeo even turns the tomb (5.3) into a brilliantly lit banqueting hall.

III. Romeo grows in strength, and Juliet matures as she faces adversity, but their special achievement is the creation of a unique, if transitory, world.

#### Essential Reading:

Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*.

#### Supplementary Reading/Viewing:

See either the Zeffirelli or the Luhrmann film of *Romeo and Juliet*; *West Side Story*.

Evans, Introduction to *Romeo and Juliet* (New Cambridge edition).

Kahn, *Man's Estate: Masculine Identity in Shakespeare*.

Kernan, "The Plays and the Playwrights," especially section 7.

#### Questions to Consider:

1. How effective was the Broadway play and movie, *West Side Story*, in capturing the "public violence" and "private bliss" of the original? Can you find parallels between certain passages in *Romeo and Juliet* and the lyrics of *West Side Story*?
2. Review the three major scenes around which the play is constructed. Sketch out changes in them to create a romantic comedy. What does this exercise teach about dramaturgy? About Shakespeare's ability to create something unique and perhaps unexpected out of what appears to be a dramatic formula?



## Questions to Consider:

1. This play offers a chance directly to compare Shakespeare with other writers of equal stature. Most of Shakespeare's sources are minor writers, but here he is borrowing from Homer and Chaucer. Compare Achilles in Shakespeare with Achilles in Homer (the scene where Ulysses tries to persuade him in 3.3 and Homer's scene of the Embassy to Achilles in *Iliad*, Book 9, makes an especially good comparison). Or compare the scenes between the lovers with the parallel places in Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde*.
2. Assess Shakespeare's reworking of the twin sources of this play, namely, the heroic Homeric tradition and the medieval courtly love tradition. Is it an effective synthesis? What new elements does Shakespeare add?

## Lecture Twenty-Two

### *Troilus and Cressida*: Heroic Aspirations

**Scope:** This lecture continues to explore the complexity of *Troilus and Cressida* with a detailed examination of two characters, Cressida and Hector. Cressida loves Troilus and wishes to be faithful to him; circumstances also make her reliant on men and the power of men for her value. Hector is thoughtful about the values at stake in the war, and caught in some of the inner contradictions of chivalry. The play might end with a conventional tragic close, but the epilogue of Pandarus shifts the tone radically.

### Outline

- I. Cressida is one of Shakespeare's most complex women.
  - A. The characterization was a strategic problem for Shakespeare.
    1. Unless he changed the story radically, Cressida could not be deeply inhibited, strongly virtuous, or extraordinarily hard to win.
    2. Yet she could not be simply wanton either.
  - B. In *Cressida*, Shakespeare depicts the problems of women in a society where men set the standards and women are reliant on male opinion for any kind of value.
    1. Her first scene and soliloquy (1.2) reveal her self-protective wit and her genuine feelings.
    2. It is worth noting that a verse soliloquy by a female character is unusual in Shakespeare.
    3. The kissing scene (4.5) shows how women can be treated and leaves us wondering how much she cooperates with that treatment.
  - C. Cressida mingles heroic aspirations with fear and vulnerability.
    1. The love scene (3.2) shows Troilus and Cressida hesitant on the brink of fulfillment and then attempting to shape themselves into archetypes of faithful love.
    2. When faced with separation (4.2), Cressida attempts heroic resistance.
  - D. Shakespeare writes his most complex scene when Cressida yields to Diomedes (5.2).
- II. Hector is the most tragic and sympathetic of the characters in the play.
  - A. It is typical of English writers to be more sympathetic to the Trojans than to the Greeks. Hector is the only character directly to face the question, is Helen worth all this suffering?
  - B. In Act 2 Scene 2, Hector states the case for giving up Helen, then abandons this moral position for the sake of glory.

- C. Hector's very chivalry proves to be his undoing, in his mercy to fallen enemies, in his desire for honor and booty, and in his expectation that others will be as noble as he is.

III. The play could end with Troilus mourning the death of Hector and facing the now inevitable fall of Troy. Instead, Shakespeare adds a curious epilogue for Pandarus, in which he bequeaths the audience his venereal diseases.

**Essential Reading:**

Shakespeare, *Troilus and Cressida*.

**Supplementary Reading:**

Adelman, "'This Is and Is Not Cressid': The Characterization of Cressida."

Coghill, *Shakespeare's Professional Skills*, chapter 5.

Rabkin, "*Troilus and Cressida*: The Uses of the Double Plot."

**Questions to Consider:**

1. Reread the play looking just at the part of Cressida (which of course includes what is said to her as well as what she says). What are her choices and motivations?
2. How do the love story and the war story fit together? Consider similarities in situation between Hector and Troilus, between Achilles and Helen, between Ulysses and Pandarus.

## Lecture Twenty-Three

### *Julius Caesar: The Matter of Rome*

**Scope:** This lecture discusses the special place *Julius Caesar* occupies in modern culture because of its frequent assignment in schools and the special place it had for Shakespeare, both because of its timing in his playwriting career and because of the prestige ancient Rome held for the Renaissance. His chief source, Plutarch's *Lives*, was a work he handled with respect. Two scenes are used to show how Shakespeare intricately mingled public issues with private problems in this play.

### Outline

- I. *Julius Caesar* occupies a special place in the modern conception of Shakespeare because the play appears so frequently in the high school curriculum.
  - A. There are good reasons why it should be assigned to beginning readers of Shakespeare, but the experience may lead us to regard it as a play only for young people.
    1. The language is relatively straightforward.
    2. It covers a classical topic.
    3. It provides moral maxims of some educational value.
  - B. It may also lead us (erroneously) to regard it as an authentic account of ancient Rome. In fact, the dying Caesar did not say, "*Et tu, Brute.*"
- II. *Julius Caesar* marks a turning point in Shakespeare's career. It follows closely on his sustained work with English history (it was written immediately after *Henry V*) and begins his sustained engagement with ancient Rome.
  - A. Rome was a vital subject for the Elizabethans, both in their education and on the stage.
    1. For them, it was the major ancient civilization.
    2. The large body of Roman literature in Latin was available to educated Europeans.
    3. Writing commentaries on Roman literature was a major preoccupation with Europeans from the Renaissance on.
    4. Unlike the Elizabethans, we tend to think of Greece as more important because of its influence on philosophy, literature, and art.
  - B. Shakespeare tries to depict Rome with fidelity.
    1. He recognizes that ancient Roman views of some matters were different from those of his own time: suicide is an important example.

2. He removes his customary web of explicit and implicit Christian assumptions. The supernatural in *Julius Caesar* is mysterious and rarely the subject of the characters' speculation.
  3. In *Julius Caesar*, reality is political, ethical, psychological, and not theological or metaphysical.
- C. Shakespeare's specific debt for his Roman material is to Plutarch's *Lives of the Noble Grecians and Romans*, in the translation of Thomas North (1579).
1. Plutarch wrote history as a series of analytical biographies.
  2. Shakespeare stayed very close to Plutarch and his world view.
- D. Shakespeare was especially skillful in mingling private and public events, in showing how public events have private subtexts and private concerns lead to public actions.
1. One excellent example is the Lupercal procession at the opening of Act 1 Scene 2.
  2. Another example is the tent scene between Cassius and Brutus in Act 4 Scene 3.

#### Essential Reading:

Shakespeare, *Julius Caesar*.

#### Supplementary Reading/Viewing:

See BBC-TV video or Mankiewicz film.

Miola, *Shakespeare's Rome*.

Spevack, Introduction to *Julius Caesar* (New Cambridge edition).

#### Questions to Consider:

1. How do the wives of Caesar and Brutus affect our understanding of these leading characters? Consider their appearances both in public and in private.
2. What does the Ghost of Julius Caesar actually do? Compare him and his effects to the Ghost of Hamlet's father.

## Lecture Twenty-Four

### *Julius Caesar: Heroes of History*

**Scope:** The lecture discusses characterization in *Julius Caesar*. It notes that characters conceive of themselves as people in history and often speak and behave in an appropriately lofty and ceremonial fashion. The ceremonies, however, are sometimes qualified by other de-ceremonializing effects.

The lecture then proceeds to analyze the four leading characters, Caesar, Cassius, Brutus, and Antony, finding in them a complex mixture of traits that make each admirable and flawed in his own way.

#### Outline

- I. The European Renaissance did not hold a single, monolithic understanding of ancient Rome. Different lessons were drawn from events such as the assassination of Julius Caesar. The events were so well known, however, that Shakespeare endowed his characters with an awareness of their historical importance.
  - A. They conceive of themselves as characters in history, tied to the Roman past, and imagine what history will say of them.
    1. When Brutus and Cassius propose that the conspirators formally wash their hands in Caesar's blood (Act 3 Scene 1), they are ritualizing a moment that they believe will be re-enacted over the ages, either in real life or on the stage.
    2. They self-consciously speak of themselves in the third person, observing whether or not their behavior matches up to their images of themselves.
  - B. Their ceremonial behavior as historical figures is sometimes undercut by subsequent events or descriptions.
    1. To cry "Peace, freedom and liberty!" (3.1.110) while smearing one's weapons with a murdered man's blood produces an ironic shock.
    2. When Antony shakes hands with the conspirators, he de-symbolizes the blood. It is no longer nourishment for a tree of liberty, it is literal blood.
- II. Similar ambivalences appear in the characterizations, showing how skillfully Shakespeare can mix private and public personas.
  - A. Caesar's pride and defects are sharply marked; at the same time he is direct, decisive, and shrewd. He has achieved what no other man had before: his faith in himself is matched by his deeds.



- B.** Cassius has a similar energy, although he lacks Caesar's grand imagination of himself.
1. His desire for personal and political independence runs very deep, making him on the one hand testy and demanding and on the other, passionate and committed.
  2. His is the sort of personality one will find at the heart of any revolutionary movement.
- C.** Brutus has a heroic and ideal aspiration, a refusal to accept human limitation.
1. He is an impressive Stoic, rejecting passion for reason.
  2. The tent scene with Cassius (Act 4 Scene 3) is illustrative of this.
  3. Politically, he acts on principle, not passion.
  4. This equips him poorly, however, to understand how passion operates in other people, especially in mobs.
- D.** Antony is driven by loyalty to Caesar, but also by large-scale callousness.

**Essential Reading:**

Shakespeare, *Julius Caesar*.

**Supplementary Reading:**

Mack, "*Julius Caesar*."

Sterling, "'Or Else This Were a Savage Spectacle.'"

**Questions to Consider:**

1. What is the nature of heroism in the play? Note that the question is not "Who *is* the hero of this play?" That question has been debated fruitlessly: the title character dies in Act 3, the role of Brutus is not much longer than that of Cassius, Antony seems to take over at crucial moments. What is more important is, what behavior can be considered heroic and why?
2. Analyze the play to find examples of peripety, catharsis and, for each of the major characters, *anagnorosis* and *hamartia*.