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**Comedy, Tragedy, History:
The Life Drama and Vital Truth
of William Shakespeare**

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Peter Saccio is a Professor of English and the John Willard Professor of Drama and Oratory at Dartmouth College, where he has taught since 1966. He chaired the English Department from 1984 to 1988, and has won Dartmouth's J. Kenneth Huntington Memorial Award for Outstanding Teaching. He has served as visiting professor at Wesleyan University and University College London.

He holds a B.A. from Yale University and a Ph.D. from Princeton. He has written *The Court Comedies of John Lyly* (Princeton, 1969) and *Shakespeare's English Kings* (Oxford, 1977), the latter a classic in the field. He has edited Middleton's comedy *A Mad World, My Masters* for *The Complete Works of Thomas Middleton* (Oxford, 1996). He has published or delivered at conferences over twenty papers on Shakespeare and other dramatists.

On stage he has directed productions of *Twelfth Night*, *Macbeth*, and *Cymbeline*. He has devised and directed several programs of scenes from Shakespeare and from modern British drama, and served as dramaturg for the productions of his Dartmouth colleagues. He has acted the Shakespearean roles of Casca, Angelo, Bassanio, and Henry IV, and various parts in the ancient plays of Plautus and the modern plays of Harold Pinter, Tom Stoppard, and Peter Shaffer.

Lecture One: Shakespeare and Stratford

- I. Shakespeare's plays move modern audiences as they moved the original Elizabethan audience.
- II. There was debate during the Elizabethan period about the stage.
 - A. The Puritans said the stage was immoral in itself and in its effect.
 - B. Thomas Nashe argued that the stage honored English history.
- III. Shakespeare's work has made many contributions to many generations.
 - A. His works have boosted English patriotism.
 - B. He has been a source of livelihood for actors.
 - C. He has been an educational staple.
 - D. He has assumed a massive centrality in our culture, a culture hero whom each age reinterprets.
- IV. Did Shakespeare write the plays that bear his name?
 - A. Historically, there is no basis for anti-Stratfordianism.
 - B. Anti-Stratfordianism stems from false expectations.
 1. People expect the private lives of celebrities to be recorded.
 2. People expect plays to reflect the personal experiences of the author.
- V. A brief history of Shakespeare's life.
 - A. He was born in 1564 in Stratford-Upon-Avon.
 - B. He married Anne Hathaway at age 18 and had three daughters.
 - C. He started acting and writing in the London theater around 1589.
 - D. In 1594, he helped start "The Lord Chamberlain's Men."
 - E. By 1596, he is successful enough to buy property.
 - F. In 1599, the Globe Theater is built.
 - G. In 1603, The Lord Chamberlain's Men become The King's Men.
 - H. Around 1612, he retires to Stratford, dies in 1616.
 1. For the bulk of his life he was an active man of the theater.
- VI. Shakespeare's theatrical mastery is illustrated by the death of Falstaff in Henry V.
 - A. The scene demonstrates the mixture of tones, comic and tragic.
 - B. He demonstrates control by presenting the death of Falstaff by way of narration rather than showing the event itself.

Lecture Two: Shakespeare and the Elizabethan Theater

- I. The History of the early 16th century theater:
 - A. Professional theater consisted of small traveling groups who performed morality plays or variations thereof.
 1. The morality depicted the life of "everyman" (mankind) who was tempted by vices and encouraged by virtues.
 2. The morality plays became more secular and adapted stories from historical, classical, biblical and fictional sources.
 - B. Elizabethan playwrights, magpies, wrote in rhyme and blank verse.
 - C. Shakespeare, though not inventing his plots, adapted his sources in significant ways. (*Henry IV* and *Measure for Measure*).
 - D. The first professional playwrights--Kyd, Lyly, Marlowe, Peele, and Greene--created the major forms and helped establish an audience for the theater.
 - E. A social context was developed for the theater.
 1. Fear of "masteries men" prompted the patronage system.
 - a. Actors assumed positions as servants of Lords.
 - b. The relationship was fictional, yet symbiotic.
 2. Contrary to the Puritans' charge of immorality, supporters of the theater argued that plays provided entertainment that was morally valuable: the Shakespearean "lens."
- II. The features of the stage depicted a certain kind of world.
 - A. A large stage stretches out into the middle of the yard.
 1. Cheap standing room was available for the general public.
 2. The largeness of the stage provided flexibility.
 - B. There are two strong accents in the Elizabethan stage.
 1. The vertical accent includes the area underneath the stage for ghosts and devils and an area over the stage for heaven.
 - a. This goes back to the medieval heritage of the stage.
 - b. It illustrates the vertical social class system.
 2. The horizontal accent allowed many characters to appear on stage and scenes with multiple action and multiple response.
 - C. Costumes are extremely important on the Elizabethan stage, however, there is no effort to provide elaborate scenery.
 - D. Shakespearean drama stresses energetic action, with an abundance of characters and plots in each play.
 - E. "Realism" vs. "truth" in art: examples from *Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Merchant of Venice* and *King Lear*.
 - F. The Place of ideas in Shakespearean drama DD Macbeth.

Lecture Three: Shakespeare and English History: *Richard II*

- I. Shakespeare's colleagues considered history a dramatic genre equal in status to tragedy and comedy.
 - A. History is a classification based on subject matter.
 1. A historical play dramatizes the major political events in the reign of an English King.
 2. The playwright may take historical liberties out of artistic necessity if the result reflects the conception of the times.
 3. In the Elizabethan period, historical plays account for a great proportion of the theatrical fare.
 4. History became a theatrical fashion.
 - B. The popularity of the historical genre arises from several causes.
 1. Historical plays appealed to patriotism of the English.
 2. Elizabethans were convinced that history was instructive.
 3. Historical material was readily available for adaptation.
 - C. Shakespeare's history plays are distinct from other Elizabethan playwrights.
 1. The scope of his project was larger; eight of Shakespeare's works dramatized a period of history from 1399 to 1485.
 2. Shakespeare's history plays combined personal and public elements--to a degree his contemporaries never achieved.
- II. *Richard II* is a context in which to examine the people and politics of Shakespeare's history plays.
 - A. Two key people in *Richard II* are Richard and Henry Bolingbroke.
 1. Bolingbroke is a practical and shrewd politician and soldier, yet Shakespeare is ambiguous about his real intentions.
 2. The psychological interest of the play is thrust on Richard.
 - a. Richard is mostly viewed as a failing king, who throws away his moral, economic, and legal power, and most of all, his power of action.
 - b. He is a "player King" who creates roles for himself that gratify his ego without having to do any of the actual work.
 - B. Richard & Henry are in conflict over the doctrine of "divine right."
 1. All Kings and Queens are ordained by God; disobedience and rebellion are not only crimes, but grave sins.
 2. This theory is found all over the play in references, and choices; however, the play questions the doctrine.
 3. The play shows men trying to cope with an unprecedented and insoluble political problem.

Lecture Four: Kings and Commoners: *Henry IV I & 2* and *Henry V*

- I. The *Henry IV I & 2* plays dramatize the great variety of common and uncommon men who are caught up in the web of history.
 - A. Henry's struggle to hang on to the crown constitutes the chief historical narrative of the two plays.
 - B. The leading role belongs to Henry IV's son, "Hal."
 1. Hal is a legendary figure--the unpromising prince who becomes the great King.
 2. Hal's scenes focus not on public events, but on private encounters with his father and friends.
- II. Shakespeare's wealth of character is organized on the structural contrast of three groups: the King and his court, Falstaff and the tavern crew, and Hotspur and the rebels in the field.
 - A. Shakespeare arranges the scenes so that parallel actions happen in all three places. For example, each group has a different conception of time.
 1. The King uses time in a practical and calculating way.
 2. For Falstaff, time is of no consequence
 3. For Hotspur, time provides opportunities for heroism.
 - B. Each man is both a role model and a rival for Hal.
 - C. Each man sees Hal as a madcap prodigal.
- III. Kingship is shown as a human construct.
 - A. Henry only invokes divine royalty as a tool for power.
 - B. Hotspur takes on the role of challenging the fiction.
 - C. Falstaff mocks the pretensions of all the great people.
- IV. The final scene of *Henry IV Part 2* is controversial.
 - A. Those who find Hal's rejection of Falstaff a needlessly public humiliation also find kings repellent.
 - B. Those who find Hal's treatment of Falstaff a good thing also approve of preserving public order.
 - C. The final confrontation shows a conflict of values: the Protestant ethic vs. the ethic of self-fulfillment.
- V. *Henry V*:
 - A. Hal is the successful Shakespearean King--a just and great leader.
 - B. *Henry V* understands that the Kingship is a fiction and uses it well.
 1. He deconstructs kingship into a set of stage props.
 2. He reconstructs kingship in asserting his mastery of props.

Lecture Five: *Twelfth Night* and Shakespearean Comedy

- I. Shakespeare's comedy deals with romantic love: the process of courtship leading to marriage.
 - A. Love is simultaneously foolish and wonderful.
 - B. Comic action lies in overcoming obstacles in love's way.
 - 1. External obstacles (fathers, or the law) lead to a pattern of escape.
 - 2. Internal barriers (sexual antagonism, distrust) lead to a pattern of invasion.
 - C. Women often have especial insight about love. Shakespearean comedy sometimes stresses, sometimes erases gender distinctions.
- II. The expression and significance of love in *Twelfth Night*:
 - A. In most ages, love has highly formalized modes of expression.
 - B. Shakespeare connects love to Christian ideas of generosity.
 - 1. The biblical parable of the talents: we are not the owners but the stewards of our merits.
 - 2. Viola's application of this idea to Olivia.
 - 3. The steward Malvolio's self-seeking attempt at love.
- III. The resolution of the play and Shakespeare's comprehensive vision.

Lecture Six: *The Merchant of Venice* and the Reinterpretation of Shakespeare

- I. Like other romantic comedies, *The Merchant* celebrates love and generosity.
 - A. Antonio Risks his life for Bassanio.
 - B. Portia helps those in need and saves Antonio's life.
 - C. The caskets demonstrate Bassanio's choice of generosity over gain.
- II. The ungenerous Shylock is the most painful element of the play.
 - A. The characterization is founded on a three-part stereotype.
 - 1. The first part is miserliness.
 - 2. The second part is usury. Money-lending was officially condemned but allowed as a necessary evil.
 - 3. Finally, Jews were considered "non-Christian," or outsiders, and therefore potential scapegoats.
 - B. In England this stereotype had a particular purity.
 - 1. Only in England had Jews temporarily dominated finance.
 - 2. An isolated incident produced the myth that Jews kill Christian children on Good Friday.
 - 3. Jews were officially banished from 1290 to the 1660's.
 - a. No real people could be damaged by anti-Semitism.
 - b. The absence of Jews allowed the stereotype to flourish.
- III. Actors have reinterpreted the role of Shylock.
 - A. He appeared in the late 17th century as the comic villain.
 - B. He appeared in the 18th century as the serious villain of Charles Macklin.
 - C. He appeared in the early 19th century as the honest Jew of Edmund Kean.
 - D. He appeared in the late 19th century as the heroic patriarch of Henry Irving.
 - E. He appeared in 1970 as the banker-aristocrat of Laurence Olivier.
 - F. In 1989, Stratford, Ontario cuts the conversion.
- IV. Shakespeare's text develops the character beyond the stereotype.
 - A. Shylock's calculating mode of speech contrasts with genteel speech habits.
 - B. Shylock's emotions increasingly involved the audience and make us subject to his accusations.

Lecture Seven: *Hamlet* and the Perplexing World

- I. *Hamlet* always seems to be a new play.
 - A. In 1600 it was a new version of a notorious old play.
 - B. It is constructed to produce "shocks of recognition": unexpected events displace leisurely narrative or speculation.
- II. *Hamlet* is a thoughtful play.
 - A. Older characters dispense long speeches of advice.
 - B. The younger men are university students.
 1. Wittenberg was a new university specializing in Protestant humanism.
 2. Both the play and the hero manifest the intellectual doubts characteristic of Renaissance thought.
- III. Mysteries and questions about the universe are posed by the ghost.
 - A. The ghost exemplifies Shakespeare's use of contemporary ideas.
 1. Catholics suggested that ghosts came from purgatory with legitimate requests to make of living people.
 2. Protestants suggested that ghosts were devils seeking to tempt people into damnation.
 3. Skeptics suggested that ghosts were hallucinations of unsound minds.
 4. Shakespeare uses all three ideas without privileging one.
 - B. The ghost and Denmark's other problems prompt Hamlet to speculate on the causes of evil.
 1. Aristotle's theory of the tragic flaw.
 2. The medieval theory that fortune causes tragic falls.
 3. The Christian theory that God selects individuals as his agents to scourge sinners.
- IV. *Hamlet* is a tragedy of youth.
 - A. Hamlet has trouble coordinating his excellent mind and education with his passionate feelings.
 1. He admires both the stoical Horatio and the emotional Player.
 2. In one soliloquy he first rages at Claudius, then mocks his own rage.
 - B. Hamlet eventually comes to believe that God's providence governs all events.

- I. Shakespeare depicts Lear's fall from king to outcast by two chief dramatic techniques.
 - A. The first technique is repetition.
 1. There are repeated actions: banishments, abuse of fathers, mad scenes.
 2. There are repeated words in single speeches and in dialogue.
 - B. The second technique is disintegration.
 1. The first scene presents visually and verbally an ordered kingdom.
 2. By mid-play, ranks and relationships are erased, action is chaotic and dialogue is random.
- II. This process reflects an Elizabethan conception of the universe.
 - A. The universe is a battleground between strife, which produces chaos, and love, which creates and sustains orderly nature.
 - B. The first three acts show the results of love's withdrawal.
 1. Personally, both Lear and Edgar move from high rank and reason to dispossession and madness.
 2. Socially, Britain moves from an orderly realm through family discord to war, mutilation and murder.
 3. Nature as a whole moves from calm to a terrible storm.
- III. The second half of the play asks how one can go on from chaos.
 - A. One may attempt to reconstruct civilization through the legal process of a formal trial.
 1. Lear's trial of his daughters becomes a nursery quarrel.
 2. The trial asks why people do evil things: later speeches offer various answers.
 - B. One may act charitably for others.
 1. Kent and Cordelia return to help Lear.
 2. Edgar helps his blinded father Gloucester.
 - C. One may kill oneself.
 1. Gloucester is led to believe he has survived a suicidal leap.
 2. Gloucester's despair is cured--by a lie.
 - D. One may rage defiantly against the world.
 1. Lear rages against social injustice.
 2. Meeting blind Gloucester, mad Lear preaches patience.
 - E. One may simply endure.
 1. Edgar suggests that endurance leads to ripeness.
 2. Gloucester replies that many things are true.

SUGGESTED READING TO ACCOMPANY

Comedy, Tragedy, History: The Live Drama and Vital Truth of William Shakespeare

There are many useful Shakespeare editions. Paperback series such as those published by Bantam, Signet and New Penguin offer a single play per volume with annotations, brief introduction and sometimes appendices on the sources and stage history of the play. One-volume Complete Shakespeares offer the same, plus substantial prefatory material on Shakespeare and his age. Among these, the following are used in many college courses: The Riverside Shakespeare, ed. G. Blakemore Evans (Houghton Mifflin, 1974) and The Complete Works of Shakespeare, ed. David Bevington, third edition (Scott, Foresman, 1980).

Serious work on Shakespeare profits from the more substantial multi-volume Shakespeares: The New Arden Shakespeare published by Methuen from 1950 to 1982, and the New Oxford and New Cambridge editions, which started publishing in the early 1980's, are not yet complete. These three series (available in both hardcover and paperback) offer comprehensive introductions and annotations.

An overview of Shakespeare scholarship in essays by sixty modern scholars is offered by the three large volumes of William Shakespeare: His World, His Work, His Influence, ed. John Andrews (Scribner, 1985). A more detailed description of the intellectual presuppositions of Shakespeare's time appears in Julia Briggs, This Stage-Play World: English Literature and Its Background, 1580-1625 (Oxford, 1983). D.M. Palliser provides an excellent account of the social and economic history of the period in The Age of Elizabeth (Longman, 1983). The best account of Shakespeare's life is S. Schoenbaum, William Shakespeare: A Compact Documentary Life, rev. ed. (Oxford, 1987).

A full account of the original theaters and players can be found in Andrew Gurr, The Shakespearean Stage, 1574-1642, second edition (Cambridge, 1980). Jean Howard lucidly analyzes Shakespeare's dramatic techniques in Shakespeare's Art of Orchestration (Illinois, 1984). A particularly exciting discussion of the power and impact of various plays can be found in Michael Goldman, Shakespeare and the Energies of Drama (Princeton, 1972).

For readers unfamiliar with medieval history, Peter Saccio's Shakespeare's English Kings: History, Chronicle and Drama (Oxford, 1977) is a precise and amusing guide to the people and events dramatized in the ten history plays. C.L. Barber's Shakespeare's Festive Comedy (Princeton, 1959) offers a perceptive and influential approach to the comedies. The classic book on the tragedies is A.C. Bradley's Shakespearean Tragedy (1905, often reprinted).

Recent intellectual developments springing from feminism, deconstruction and various schools of psychoanalytical and political thought have challenged the traditional liberal humanist interpretation of Shakespeare. These approaches may be sampled in the vigorous essays contained in the following collections: Political Shakespeare, ed. Jonathan Dollimore and Alan Sinfield (Cornell, 1985); Alternative Shakespeares, ed. John Drakakis (Methuen, 1985); Representing the English Renaissance, ed. Stephen Greenblatt (Berkeley, 1988); The Woman's Part, ed. Carolyn R.S. Oenz (Illinois, 1980); and Representing Shakespeare: New Psychoanalytic Essays, ed. Murray Schwartz and Coppelia Kahn (Johns Hopkins, 1980).

A (Rough) Chronology of Shakespeare's Plays

The chart below attempts to suggest the general course of Shakespeare's career as a playwright by listing all his plays (except Cardenio, a lost Play) vertically according to genre and horizontally according to year of first performance. In a number of cases the years given are the result of conjecture and deduction and may be disputed by some scholars.

DATE	COMEDY	HISTORY	TRAGEDY	ROMANCE
1589-93	Comedy of Errors Taming of the Shrew	Henry VI (3 parts) Richard III	Titus Andronicus	
1594-96	Two Gentlemen of Verona Love's Labor's Lost Midsummer Night's Dream	King John Richard II	Romeo & Juliet	
1596-98	Merchant of Venice Merry Wives of Windsor Much Ado About Nothing	Henry IV (2 parts)		
1599	As You Like It	Henry V	Julius Caesar	
1600			Hamlet	
1601	Twelfth Night			
1602	Troilus & Cressida*			
1603	All's Well That Ends Well*		Othello	
1604	Measure for Measure*			
1605			King Lear	
1606			Macbeth	
1607			Antony & Cleopatra	Pericles
1608			Coriolanus	
1609			Timon of Athens	Cymbeline
1610				Winter's Tale
1611-13		Henry VIII		Tempest Two Noble Kinsman

*Modern critics have sometimes characterized these three plays separately as problem plays.

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The Soul and the City: Art, Literature and Urban Living
A History of Hitler's Empire
Literary Modernism: The Struggle for Modern History
Is Anyone Really Normal? Perspectives on Abnormal Psychology
The Old Testament: An Introduction, Parts I-II
The New Testament: An Introduction
The American Military Experience in World War II and Vietnam
Nietzsche and the Post-Modern Condition
The American Dream
The Good King: The American Presidency Since the Depression
The Mind of the Enlightenment
Can the Modern World Believe in God?
The Self Under Siege: Philosophy in the Twentieth Century
Hell, Purgatory, Paradise: Dante's Divine Comedy
No Excuses: Existentialism and the Meaning of Life, Parts I-II
Love and Vengeance: A Course in Human Emotion
The Search for a Meaningful Past: Philosophies, Theories and
Interpretations of Human History, Parts I-II
Modern British Drama
Freedom: The Philosophy of Liberation
Plato: Socrates and the Dialogues, Parts I-II