

William Shakespeare: Comedies, Histories, and Tragedies

Part III

- Lecture 25: *Hamlet*—The Abundance of the Play
- Lecture 26: *Hamlet*—The Causes of Tragedy
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- Lecture 34: *Macbeth*—“Fair Is Foul”
- Lecture 35: *Macbeth*—Musing on Murder
- Lecture 36: *Macbeth*—“Enter Two Murderers”

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



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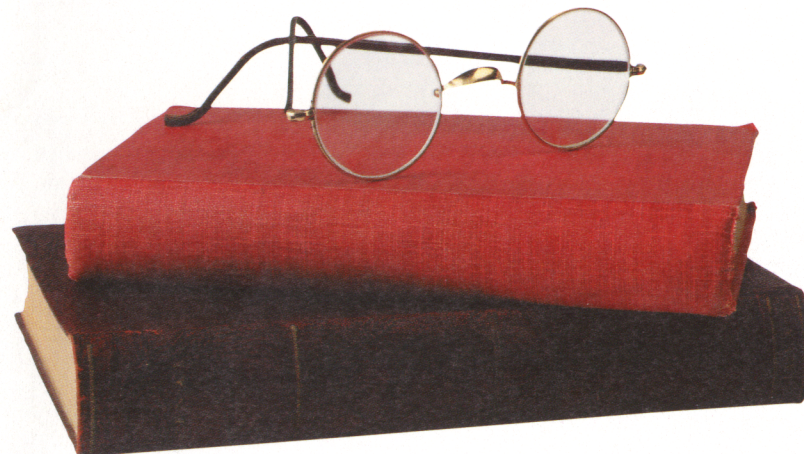
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William Shakespeare: Comedies, Histories, and Tragedies

Part III

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COURSE GUIDE

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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 Twenty-Five

Hamlet: The Abundance of the Play

Scope: This lecture begins by considering the classic status of *Hamlet*, locating that quality in its combination of familiarity and strangeness. This quality of being an "old thing made new" is sustained by the range of characters and actions, the variety of traits within the leading personage, and especially in the placement of events so that developments surprise the audience.

The lecture then explores what has been called the interrogative nature of the play, how it calls up "thoughts beyond the reaches of our souls," inquiring into the nature of death and the veracity of ghosts.

Outline

- I. It is the mark of a classic that it always seems both new and old. Shakespeare's *Hamlet* seemed new and old even when it first appeared in 1600.
 - A. The earliest written version of the story was by the monk Saxo Grammaticus about 1200. It appears in French in François de Belleforest's *Histoires Tragiques* in 1570 and reached the Elizabethan stage in the late 1580s in a play now lost, referred to by scholars as the "Ur-Hamlet," probably written by Thomas Kyd. Contemporary references to this play are derisory.
 - B. Shakespeare's version is his longest play (nearly 4,000 lines) with his longest leading role. It is so full of material that even those who know it may be surprised by some of its contents when reading or seeing it again.
 1. It contains characters of all sorts: kings, courtiers, pirates, players, gravediggers, a ghost, and many others.
 2. The action ranges from a formal court council to a scene in which two young men jump into the grave of a suicidal madwoman.
 3. The title character is a prince, a son, a nephew, a lover, a poet, a swordsman, a near-suicide, a student of philosophy, a critic of the theatre.
- II. The material of the play is often deliberately placed so as to surprise the audience.
 - A. The first appearance of the ghost interrupts what had seemed to be a speech of sustained exposition. The visual effect overtakes the narrative.
 - B. When Hamlet first sees the ghost, the same kind of ambush is arranged, but with greater impact and significance.

1. A fourteen-line academic discourse on *hamartia* is interrupted by the ghost's appearance.
 2. The ghost is undeniable, but ambiguous.
 3. The unexpected event overtakes theory.
 4. Hamlet shifts from exposition to prayer.
- C. Scenes are arranged so that the focus of the audience is split (as noted by the critic Maynard Mack).
1. The second scene of the play is an example of this.
 2. Do we look at Claudius, or at Hamlet, off to the side?
- III. Much of the play takes place in the interrogative mood: people frequently ask questions, from the opening "Who's there?" to the famous "To be or not to be: that is the question."
- A. The play questions facts and raises mysteries.
 - B. The questioning reaches its highest pitch with the appearance of the ghost in Act I.
 - C. Tragedies regularly end in death, but this tragedy questions what it is like to *be* dead.
 1. C. S. Lewis proposed that death could well be the subject of this play.
 2. In *Hamlet*, being *after* death is a central feature.

- IV. The ghost exemplifies the mysterious qualities of the play.
- A. Catholic writers of the sixteenth century suggested that ghosts came from Purgatory with legitimate requests to make of living people.
 - B. Protestant writers suggested that ghosts were demons seeking to draw the people to whom they appeared into damnation.
 - C. Skeptics suggested that ghosts were hallucinations produced by unsound minds.
 - D. Shakespeare uses all three theories without privileging one.
 1. The ghost describes its condition in mostly Catholic terms.
 2. Hamlet contemplates the possibility that the ghost is a devil (the Protestant theory).
 3. Horatio tends to think of it as a hallucination, as does Gertrude.
 4. Shakespeare uses this ghost to give Hamlet a problem and to give us the experience of encountering a ghost, thus forcing us into the same position as Hamlet.
 5. This ghost is real, ambiguous—and dangerous.

Essential Reading:

Shakespeare, *Hamlet*.

Supplementary Reading/Viewing:

See *Hamlet* in BBC video (with Derek Jacobi) or one of the films starring, respectively, Laurence Olivier, Mel Gibson, Kenneth Branagh.

Booth, "On the Value of *Hamlet*."

Mack, "The World of *Hamlet*."

Wilson, *What Happens in Hamlet*.

Questions to Consider:

1. Do you agree with C. S. Lewis that the subject of *Hamlet* could well be death? Count the number of deaths and consider both the ways these characters died and the reactions of the remaining characters to these deaths. What insights does this exercise yield?
2. How effective is the ghost in startling twentieth-century viewers, as compared to those in Shakespeare's time? If your answer is "very effective," why do you say so? If your answer is "not very effective," suggest another way for *Hamlet* to be roused to action early in the play.

Lecture Twenty-Six

Hamlet: The Causes of Tragedy

Scope: The characters in *Hamlet* are remarkably thoughtful. Indeed, Hamlet himself is the only Shakespearean hero whose university we know. The lecture explores the Renaissance linkage of education, the classics, and the theater. It then proceeds to analyze Hamlet's own exploration of the causes of tragedy: Aristotle's theory of tragic flaw, Boethius' theory of fortune, and Isaiah's theory of divine ministers.

Outline

- I. *Hamlet* is an intellectual and epistemological play distinguished by its thoughtful and reflective speeches.
 - A. Older characters—Polonius and Claudius—give long speeches of advice.
 - B. Younger characters—Hamlet, Horatio, Rosencrantz, Guildenstern—are university students.
- II. *Hamlet* manifests interests in education, in the classics, and in the theater, sometimes linking the three: Hamlet evidently saw the Players enact a play on a classical subject at Wittenberg.
 - A. Wittenberg was one of the new universities of the Renaissance, founded by Frederick the Wise, Elector of Saxony, in 1502. It was particularly concerned with humanism and with Protestantism.
 1. Martin Luther took a degree at this university.
 2. It is also the university of the fictional character Doctor Faustus.
 - B. Shakespeare's play seems particularly to have interested a university audience in its own time: it was performed at Oxford and Cambridge and earned the praise of a Cambridge don, Gabriel Harvey.
- III. The range of Hamlet's mind and education is clear in his efforts to explain the causes of evil.
 - A. In Act 1 Scene 4, he explores Aristotle's theory of the tragic flaw (*hamartia*). We need to ask whether Shakespeare construct his own tragedies on the basis of this theory.
 - B. In Act 2 Scene 2, Hamlet's request for a speech on the fall of Troy leads to a speech on Boethius' theory (propounded in the early sixth century A.D.) that Fortune is the cause of tragic falls.
 1. Invoking Troy leads us back to the archetypal tragic story.
 2. Kenneth Branagh's casting of John Gielgud and Judi Dench as Priam and Hecuba in his movie of *Hamlet* supports that sense of going back to older tragic models.

- C. In Act 3 Scene 4, Hamlet invokes the prophetic theory, to be found in Isaiah, that God selects human agents to serve as scourges and ministers dealing with evil on earth.
 1. King Richard III is an example of the former.
 2. Richmond, future King Henry, is an example of the latter.
 3. Hamlet combines prophet and minister in one person.
- IV. Hamlet's wide-ranging search for the origins of tragedy has been followed by many critics seeking the reasons for Hamlet's own troubles.
 - A. Goethe suggested that Hamlet was too delicate, too sensitive.
 - B. Coleridge thought that Hamlet was constitutionally given to thought and indisposed to action.
 - C. The critic Kitto suggested that Hamlet was too shocked by his father's death and mother's rapid remarriage to his uncle to do anything.
 - D. Freud held that Hamlet was unable to revenge himself on his uncle because Claudius has carried out his own (Hamlet's) Oedipal fantasy.

Essential Reading:

Shakespeare, *Hamlet*.

Supplementary Reading:

Edwards, Introduction to *Hamlet* (New Cambridge edition).

Goldman, *Shakespeare and the Energies of Drama*, chapter 6.

Questions to Consider:

1. Consider the analyses of Hamlet in Paragraph IV of the outline. Which one(s) do you agree with? Explain your reasons. Can you come up with any reason for Hamlet's troubles not mentioned in the lecture?
2. Why is Hamlet's status as a university (drop-out) student significant?

Lecture Twenty-Seven

Hamlet: The Protestant Hero

Scope: This lecture first discusses the king and the queen and the variety of interpretation that they may provoke. It then turns to Hamlet himself and describes him as an embodiment of the variety and problems of young manhood. Hamlet is especially linked with certain ideals of the Renaissance and certain problems arising from the Protestant rejection of earthly authorities.

Outline

- I. Claudius has been played in a variety of ways, from the repulsive king of Basil Sydney in Laurence Olivier's film to the able and affable king of Patrick Stewart in the BBC-TV videotape.
 - A. However he is played, his guilt, although not necessarily obvious at first, becomes clear, and may be tragic and moving in the prayer scene.
 - B. Claudius shows us the picture of the usurper, guilty of the "oldest primal curse" of fratricide, and what he does to himself because of this.
- II. The extent of Gertrude's awareness of what is going on in Elsinore is not clear in the script.
 - A. Her knowledge may be clarified by performances such as that given by Glenn Close in the duel scene of Zeffirelli's film and Julie Christie in the closet scene of Branagh's film.
 - B. The part of Gertrude is really underwritten.
- III. Hamlet's tragedy is the tragedy of youth. He is trying to cope with problems not of his creation.
 - A. He contrasts with the middle-aged Macbeth and the old Lear.
 - B. He has trouble coordinating his excellent mind and education with his passionate feelings and impulses.
 - C. He admires both the stoical Horatio and the emotional Player.
 - D. His feelings about Ophelia veer from love to profound mistrust.
 1. In the grave scene, he professes his love.
 2. But earlier, when he is suspicious of her, he actually insults her.
 - E. In one soliloquy he first rages at Claudius and then mocks his own rage.
- IV. Hamlet embodies Protestant doubts and anxieties, the isolated soul without the clear guides provided by the Catholic Middle Ages.
 - A. His soliloquy ("what a piece of work is man") shows an awareness of medieval humanistic doctrine, yet he can't assent to it.

- B. Upon his return from the sea voyage, however, he shows a belief in the divine governance of the world ("There is special providence in the fall of a sparrow").
 1. Hamlet stops trying to control things from this juncture forward.
 2. Since God governs all things, we do not need to look for explanation in theories (e.g., Aristotle, Boethius, Isaiah).
 3. Rather, "readiness is all," and Hamlet is now ready to act.

Essential Reading:

Shakespeare, *Hamlet*.

Supplementary Reading:

Kitto, *Form and Meaning in Drama*, chapter 9.

Lewis, "Hamlet—The Prince or the Poem."

Rose, "*Hamlet*—the 'Mona Lisa' of Literature."

Questions to Consider:

1. In line with this lecture's title, assess Hamlet as a "Protestant hero." Why is it important to make this distinction, especially since there is no overt theology or religion in the play? Can Hamlet be considered a hero in any other context?
2. The lecture also points up the fact that Hamlet is a young "hero" whose doubts and impetuosity war with each other. One observer said that the play could be summed up by two maxims: "Look before you leap" and "he who hesitates is lost." Identify key junctures in the play where Hamlet "looks" and where he "leaps." What are the consequences of these actions at these points? What might have happened if he reversed the actions?

Lecture Twenty-Eight

Othello: The Design of the Tragedy

Scope: Just as Shakespeare's comedies are different one from the other (while sharing certain generic qualities), so too his tragedies vary in their issues and characterizations. *Othello* provides an excellent example to explore this premise, because it is different in so many ways from the other great tragedies. In fact, there is some basis for considering *Othello* to be two plays in one: a romantic comedy in the beginning and a tragedy at the end. None of the other three plays under consideration could be considered as such. We see Shakespeare at work here with his usual abundant genius, transforming genre to achieve dramatic effect.

Outline

- I. *Othello* achieves its unique effect in ways different from the other Shakespearean tragedies.
 - A. *Othello* lacks the sense of large metaphysical forces: the ghost of *Hamlet*, the supernatural prophecies of *Macbeth*, the frequent speculations about the gods that occur in *King Lear*.
 - B. *Othello* deals more with private life than do the other tragedies. In *Romeo and Juliet*, the death of the lovers has a direct impact on the civil order of a city, Verona; in *Hamlet*, *Macbeth*, and *King Lear*, the welfare of kingdoms is at stake. Although *Othello* begins with great historical conflict between the Christian state of Venice and the Muslim empire of the Turks, that issue evaporates before the end of Act 2.
 - C. The value of the play depends on characterization, psychology, psychic interplay, and plot construction.
 - D. The design of the play places the tragic deed in a different location.
 1. In *Hamlet*, *Macbeth*, and *King Lear*, fatal events happen early and the characters must reflect on them.
 2. In *Othello*, nothing fatal occurs until the last act. Thus the characters have little time to reflect; they can only express their shock and horror.
 3. They are helpless to do anything about it or explain it.
 - E. The tragic facts prove to be utterly destructive.
 1. In *Othello*, the stakes are lower—only the lives and happiness and commitment of the central couple—but those are altogether annihilated.
 2. Unlike the central characters of the other tragedies, *Othello* and *Desdemona* are degraded as well as destroyed.

- II. In order to create the tragic effects of the play, Shakespeare must first lead the audience to feel the value and preciousness of the love between *Desdemona* and *Othello*.
 - A. The first two acts of the play constitute a romantic comedy.
 1. Shakespearean comedy assumes that romantic love between a man and a woman is good, natural, irrational in its choices, justifies temporary indecorum, and leads to marriage.
 2. In *Othello*, the lovers are an unlikely pair, differing in age, race, background, and experience. They are also already married.
 3. They encounter the usual obstacles of comedy: a crotchety father, Brabantio; a ridiculous rival lover, Roderigo; and a villain, Iago.
 4. Their situation is investigated and blessed by a good duke, and nature itself appears to cooperate in blessing their union.
 - B. In the first scenes, *Othello* and *Desdemona* survive vilification.
 1. These two characters are introduced in a bad light (cf., the Iago-Roderigo scene opening Act I).
 2. Iago describes *Othello* as repulsive in character, appearance, and behavior.
 3. But when he appears, *Othello* speaks and behaves in a way that demonstrates the descriptions to be almost wholly false.
 4. Brabantio describes his daughter as a shy girl who has been bewitched, but *Desdemona* proves to be a self-possessed young woman who deliberately chose *Othello* as her mate.
 - C. Although there is no literal wedding scene, the arrival and reunion of *Othello* and *Desdemona* on Cyprus after the sea voyage constitutes an equivalent celebration.
 1. Iago plays the role of the cynic who cracks dirty jokes at weddings.
 2. Cassio's speeches constitute an *epithalamium*, a wedding song celebrating the lovers and their union.

Essential Reading:

Shakespeare, *Othello*.

Supplementary Reading/Viewing:

See video with Olivier.

Sanders, Introduction to *Othello* (New Cambridge edition).

Questions to Consider:

1. Compare *Othello* and *Desdemona* with *Romeo and Juliet* as central characters in a tragi-comedy involving lovers in terms of the "public violence, private bliss" model of Lecture Twenty.
2. A recent version of *Othello* reversed the race of the two central characters, with a white *Othello* and black *Desdemona*. What differences might this

make in audience perception or reaction to the fatal working out of the plot? Is the theme of the play general enough to admit of still other character reversals based on age, gender, or some other factor? Or would this just ruin an excellent drama? Do you think that we, as late twentieth-century viewers, are able to overcome our own biases on some of these issues in order to appreciate the play in an alternative version?

Lecture Twenty-Nine

Othello: "O Villainy!"

Scope: As mentioned in the last lecture, and as suggested by the title, the role of Iago is a central one to this play. His villainy is somewhat hard to handle, since his motive is hard to pin down, and Shakespeare doesn't really give us any help at the shocking end of the play. This lecture will advance some of the theories put forth to explain Iago and lead us to consider the nature of evil.

Outline

- I. Iago proposes to destroy the happiness achieved by Othello and Desdemona. Why he does this is problematic.
 - A. He adduces some five motives for his schemes, but they are not dwelt upon consistently:
 1. Othello has deprived him of a promotion in favor of Cassio.
 2. Othello has possibly cuckolded Iago.
 3. He fears that Cassio has also cuckolded him.
 4. He seems to admit a desire for Desdemona, but this is not really clear.
 5. He admits that Cassio makes him feel ugly
 - B. In the final scene Shakespeare ostentatiously refuses to explain Iago.
 - C. As critic Bernard Spivack points out, Iago may be a Renaissance embodiment of a character from medieval drama, the Vice of the morality play, a tempter who takes pleasure in deceit for its own sake and has a special relationship with the audience.
 1. Is Iago a "demi-devil?" He uses much language and imagery of Hell and the devil.
 2. In the final act, Othello looks at Iago's feet, expecting to see cloven hooves.
 - D. Modern psychoanalysis suggests that Iago is motivated by repressed homosexuality: he destroys Othello and Cassio because he resents their attractiveness to him, displacing his love for them onto Desdemona, and then punishing her for it.
 1. The language with which he describes Cassio suggests sexual desire.
 2. The poisoning of Othello's mind is a seduction climaxing in a quasi-marital vow.

- II.** The Vice theory and the psychoanalytic theory are abstractions. Neither catches the full experience of Iago's hatred.
- A.** Shakespeare's business as a dramatist is to capture the texture of living, not the explanations people offer in intellectual analysis.
 - B.** Promiscuous hatred and envy do exist. In this case, they transcend any specific motives Iago offers for his actions.
 - C.** Shakespeare allows his characters to probe the meaning of their suffering.
 - 1.** In the case of Iago, this involves probing why he is inflicting suffering on other people.
 - 2.** As Coleridge said, Iago is "the motive-hunting of motiveless malignity."
- III.** Iago believes that the secret of life lies in self-knowledge, self-love, and self-control. This is well illustrated in his dialogue with Roderigo in the last sixty lines of Act 1 Scene 2.
- A.** The view has sound Elizabethan basis but omits any suggestion of spiritual life or grace. His language in many passages debases human life.
 - 1.** He places his emphasis on his own will.
 - 2.** He denies any spiritual operation in such relationships as love, heroism, or self-sacrifice.
 - 3.** He denies everything that makes a human being anything other than a calculating animal.
 - B.** Iago is envious of those who live more idealistically.
 - 1.** Iago really does possess an irrational hatred and envy.
 - 2.** He therefore tries to "enmesh them all."
 - 3.** He is really entirely self-centered and cannot stand others who are not.

Essential Reading:
Shakespeare, *Othello*.

Questions to Consider:

- 1.** Evaluate the five possible motives given in paragraph I.A. that might have impelled Iago to carry out his actions. Are any or all of them compelling?
- 2.** Have we encountered any other villains like Iago elsewhere in Shakespeare? If so, where? Support your conclusion with specific examples of the behavior and psychology of the other character(s).

Lecture Thirty

Othello: "The Noble Moor"

Scope: As we discussed in Lecture Twenty-Eight, *Othello* is different from the other great tragedies in many ways. Therefore, it is not surprising that the lead character is also different from the other tragic protagonists. In this lecture, we will first compare Othello with Hamlet to note key differences in character and then consider what negative things critics have said about Othello in an attempt to determine the aptness of his sobriquet of "the noble Moor."

Outline

- I.** Othello is a man of action and achievement.
 - A.** In many ways he is the opposite of Hamlet.
 - 1.** Hamlet is a young university student; Othello, a middle-aged soldier.
 - 2.** Hamlet is European; Othello is African.
 - 3.** Hamlet is a failure at love; Othello is happily married.
 - 4.** Hamlet is not free, but rather caught in a situation not of his own creation, subject to his birth as a prince and the actions of his parents and his uncle. Othello, although born a prince in Africa, has pursued a career of his own choosing and can show his own accomplishments. He is free.
 - B.** Early in the play, Othello behaves with unfailing resourcefulness.
 - 1.** In Act 1 Scene 3, he handles Brabantio and the Senate with courteous firmness.
 - 2.** In Act 2 Scene 3, he handles Cassio with both affection and professional judgment.
 - 3.** It is his characteristic action in both Act 1 and Act 2 to quell disorder.
 - C.** His imposing quality appears in his speech, the "Othello music." The critic G. Wilson Knight has described this stately, brilliant, picturesque, and exotic mode of expression as typified by strong verbs, the imperative mode of address, and imagery, as exemplified by his famous "Pontic sea" speech in Act 3 Scene 3.
 - D.** The heroic authority of this figure is reinforced by his color.
 - 1.** There is the visual importance of blackness on the stage. It makes Othello separate, free, and commanding.
 - 2.** The racial entanglements of blackness are particularly conflicting for modern audiences.
 - 3.** Is Shakespeare saying that Othello is tricked because he is black? If so, then the play is racist.

4. If Othello thinks he is inferior to the white Europeans around him, we have missed the self-confidence of the character. He has not suffered the dehumanization of subsequent race slavery.
- E. A particular mark of his heroism is his capacity for personal commitment: to his profession as warrior and then to his love for Desdemona.

II. This heroic figure suffers unusual degradation.

- A. The degradation is both physical and verbal. In Act 4 Scene 1, he sprawls on the floor in an epileptic fit, and his stately language turns into animalistic spluttering.
- B. Critics degrade him by finding him full of flaws.
1. Except for Coriolanus, he is the only Shakespearean tragic hero whom people have thought stupid.
 2. In fact, while he may lack Hamlet's intellectual subtlety, he is not stupid.
 3. We may be irritated that he is taken in by Iago's lies.
 4. Unlike other deceptions in Shakespeare, which work quickly, Act 3 Scene 3 of Othello dramatizes this deception in agonizingly extensive detail.
- C. His most serious mistake may be not in believing the lies told by his trusted subaltern, but that he lets them corrupt his mind and emotions. His speech at 3.3.260 shows him moving from love to indifference to murderous vengeance, a transition that happens in other plays with white protagonists.

III. In Act 5, Othello attempts to handle his revenge with the disinterested quality of a judge.

- A. He imagines himself a judge acting merely for "the cause," but his emotions overwhelm this attempted detachment and he kills Desdemona in a rage.
- B. He ends the play, as he had started, as a judge and defender of civilization, but now the enemy to be defeated is not the Turks or civil riot, but himself.
- C. His suicide is therefore the last act of heroism of the "noble Moor."

Essential Reading:

Shakespeare, *Othello*.

Questions to Consider:

1. Consider the issue of Othello's blackness. Is this metaphor? Is Shakespeare sending a subtle racial message (consider both positive and negative aspects of any such "message")? Is it possible for modern listeners, especially Americans, to view the play unhindered by the realities of racial history occurring after Shakespeare's time?
2. Do you think it is plausible that a character with Othello's obvious sense of self could let innuendo drive him to his crime? How many other parallels in other literature can you find of the jealous husband (or wife) slowly succumbing to suggestion, resulting in such a tragic end? Are these other works any more plausible? Why or why not?

Lecture Thirty-One

King Lear: "This Is the Worst"

Scope: *King Lear* is a towering work, a tragedy in any sense of the word, a moving—even brutal—experience to read or to watch. It is a complex play, with double plots, intrigue, psychological depth, physical and emotional horror. It is a play of disintegration, of coming apart, socially, psychologically, emotionally, physically. In this first of three lectures, we will focus on this theme of disintegration.

Outline

- I. *King Lear* has proved to be the most painful of Shakespeare's tragedies for our time. *Hamlet* was considered to be the greatest of the tragedies in the nineteenth century; *Lear* is considered to be the greatest in the twentieth century.
 - A. It is painful in terms of physical atrocities: blinding, madness, exposure of old men to storms, murders.
 - B. It is emotionally painful in terms of verbal and emotional exchanges: bargaining for love, cursing people to sterility, rebuking helpless people, feelings of shame.
- II. The chief dramatic techniques by which the play brings people from positions of power and prosperity to the condition of "poor, bare, forked animals" are repetition and disintegration.
 - A. In contrast to the variety of *Hamlet*, everything that happens in the opening scenes of *King Lear* happens several times: banishments, abuse of fathers, multiple mad scenes. There is a full double plot. The language is full of repetition.
 - B. An ordered kingdom, with an enthroned king commanding obedience from his hierarchically ordered subjects and family, is reduced to a collection of poorly clad or naked people in a storm speaking random dialogue.
- III. The disintegration is most vividly shown on a personal level in Edgar's soliloquy "I have heard myself proclaimed" (2.3).
 - A. He has lost his social position and his inheritance, and is pursued as a criminal. He adopts nakedness, mutilation, and madness as a disguise.
 - B. There are numerous thematic elements here:
 1. Loss of civilized trappings
 2. Reduction of a character to a bestial level
 3. Madness, forcing unwilling and scarcely clad humans to give alms to their fellows

4. Identity (e.g., Edgar has been disowned by his father, Gloucester. As Tom o'Bedlam, he is no longer Edgar).
- IV. The implications of this disintegration are most vividly shown on social and cosmic levels in Lear's speech "O most small fault" (1.4.265–271), which reflects an Elizabethan conception of the universe. This speech can be compared with Othello's speech in the last lecture.
- A. The Elizabethans thought of the universe as a battleground between strife, which produces chaos, and love, which creates and sustains orderly nature.
 1. Once love is withdrawn, life and the universe move toward chaos.
 2. The storms are good symbols of strife entering the world.
 - B. In the first three acts of *King Lear*, the withdrawal of love produces personal, social, and cosmic chaos. Both Lear and Edgar go through the same transitions.

Essential Reading:

Shakespeare, *King Lear*.

Supplementary Reading/Viewing:

See videotape of *King Lear* (the one directed by Michael Elliott and starring Laurence Olivier is better than the BBC version).

Goldman, *Shakespeare and the Energies of Drama*, chapter 7.

Questions to Consider:

1. Consider the use of repetition in *King Lear*. Is so much of it necessary? What would be the effect without the double plots, mad scenes, or other thematically echoing scenes?
2. Compare Lear to Othello in terms of psychological disintegration, specifically, in their attempts to control a crumbling universe (whether personal or public).

Lecture Thirty-Two

King Lear: Wisdom through Suffering

Scope: The title of this lecture derives from the *Agamemnon* of Aeschylus. There is immense suffering in both plays and from this comes wisdom for the characters (and for the spectators as well). As the theme of Lecture Thirty-One was “disintegration,” the theme of this lecture is “coping,” particularly coping that leads to personal insight and growth on the part of the characters.

Outline

- I. Since atrocities recur in *King Lear*, a frequent action of the play is coping, that is, people’s effort to deal emotionally and intellectually with disaster.
 - A. Gloucester’s response to the supposed schemes of Edgar in Act 1 Scene 2 offers a typical example of coping techniques: rage, denial, and attempted explanation. Lear has the same reactions to Cordelia in the first scene.
 - B. Act 4 offers “malice of the gods” as a reason for the suffering.
 1. This coping mechanism relies on an astrological explanation.
 2. Edmund demolishes this weak argument and places responsibility on human nature itself.
 3. Gloucester then advances another possible explanation: the gods who kill men for sport.
 - C. In Act 5, Edgar offers an explanation—justice of the gods is being visited on the sufferers because of Gloucester’s adultery that resulted in the birth of Edmund.
- II. Gloucester moves through various further stages of response as the plot unfolds.
 - A. In Act 2, as Lear’s relationship with his daughters deteriorates, he tries to compromise, to “have all well betwixt you.”
 - B. In Act 3, he tries secret action and defiance. He shows himself to be on Lear’s side against his (Lear’s) wicked daughters. He takes his actions secretly, but is betrayed by Edmund and is blinded.
 - C. In Act 4, he collapses and seeks to die.
- III. Edgar’s movement is one of growth.
 - A. He experiences complete abasement as Tom o’Bedlam.
 - B. He kills the two men who curiously mirror his own condition, his half-brother Edmund and the steward Oswald. He thus becomes those things against which he later fights.

- C. He emerges as a heroic knight and presumably the next king of Britain in the final act. His progress appears to be a surrealistic version of the education of Prince Hal in the *Henry IV* plays.

- IV. Lear manifests a remarkable capacity for taking in new experience.
 - A. He recognizes his own responsibility for mistreating Cordelia by the end of Act 1.
 - B. Amid his anger and cursing in Act 2, he also recognizes the need for patience and the need to grow morally.
 - C. He comes to empathize with a kind of suffering he had not known about before: he prays for the “poor naked wretches” (3.4.28–36) in a plea for distributive justice.
 - D. He finds a fundamental embodiment of the human condition in mad Tom o’Bedlam.

Essential Reading:

Shakespeare, *King Lear*.

Supplementary Reading:

Danby, *Shakespeare’s Doctrine of Nature*.

Halio, Introduction to *King Lear* (New Cambridge edition).

Howard, *Shakespeare’s Art of Orchestration* (references to *King Lear*).

Questions to Consider:

1. Are there other coping mechanisms in this play that were not discussed in the lecture? Identify them and give examples (Act and Scene) where they occur.
2. Compare the growth of Edgar with that of Prince Hal. What are the similarities and differences in their “apprenticeship” for kingship?

Lecture Thirty-Three

King Lear: “Then We Go On”

Scope: In this concluding lecture of the triptych on *King Lear*, we return to the theme of disintegration, but this time with the emphasis on integration—or perhaps better, re-integration—in the face of chaos. By the midpoint of the play, the characters have, to borrow a phrase from Beckett, fallen “far from help.” The second half of *King Lear* offers some six possible ways to forge on in the face of adversity. As an unparalleled play of the human condition, *King Lear* provides us with the full panoply of situations, emotions, and lessons.

Outline

- I. The second half of the play asks, with increasing intensity, how we can go on from chaos. Six ways appear to be suggested.
 - A. One may attempt to reconstruct a just civilization through the formal process of a legal trial.
 1. Lear’s attempted trial of Goneril and Regan (represented only by wooden household stools) in Act 3 Scene 6 becomes a mad parody of a nursery quarrel.
 2. The trial eventually asks the question “*unde malum?*”; that is, whence comes evil? Or why are people callous and cruel and do evil things? Various answers (e.g., the gods, inexorable dumb forces, the stars, etc.) are suggested in later scenes. Love and hate are presented as first causes.
 - B. One may act charitably to others. Act IV is full of helping, acts of charity and forgiveness.
 1. Kent and Cordelia return to help Lear.
 2. Edgar helps his blinded father, Gloucester.
 - C. One may kill oneself.
 1. Blind Gloucester attempts suicide from what he thinks is the Dover cliff in Act 4 Scene 6. This is the weirdest scene in Shakespeare. The Bard exploits the conventions of the bare Elizabethan stage to make this scene work.
 2. His despair is cured—by a combination of shock treatment and blatant deception.
 - D. One may rage defiantly against the world.
 1. Lear rages madly against “love,” which he insists on portraying in terms of debased sexuality.
 2. He rages against “justice,” which he insists on portraying as hypocrisy and tyranny.
 3. Lear rages against social injustice in Act 4 Scene 6.

4. Lear reduces man to an animal who lusts and punishes—and weeps. The blind Gloucester’s sobbing causes Lear to recognize and pity him and to preach patience on “this great stage of fools” just as a preacher might take the primal birth cry of humanity as his text.
- E. One may come to self-recognition (*anagnorisis*): “I am a very foolish fond old man.”
- F. One may simply endure.
 1. Edgar suggests in Act 5 Scene 2 that endurance leads to ripeness. (“What? In ill thoughts again? Men must endure their going hence, even as their coming hither. Ripeness is all.”)
 2. To this, Gloucester replies “And that’s true, too,” indicating that this is just one of many truths.
 3. All the older versions of the Lear story have both Lear and Cordelia surviving their travails and being restored in the end.
 4. Shakespeare’s version is full of “false dawns”—good is done and justice partly vindicated, but the ending is tragic.

- II. The last act suggests that there are more than six ways. It keeps producing more truths that must be endured.
 - A. What does Lear see on the lips of Cordelia just before he dies? This is the play’s final mystery.
 - B. Like a distant sentry, Lear reports from the margins of our existence.

Essential Reading:

Shakespeare, *King Lear*.

Questions to Consider:

1. Count up the instances of *anagnorisis* in this play. To whom do they occur and where in the plot do they happen? How does this help to drive the action?
2. What does Shakespeare achieve by altering the conventional ending of the older Lear stories mentioned above? Is the ending fully satisfying or perhaps better, cathartic, in the Aristotelian sense?

Lecture Thirty-Four

Macbeth: “Fair Is Foul”

Scope: In the final three lectures of this series, we turn to *Macbeth*. We will see some of the themes discussed in the other three great tragedies (for example, the order of the universe, human political and social order, the nature of virtue and of good and evil). There are also questions of religious significance (for example, free will versus predestination) embedded in the play, as we would expect in the post-Reformation world in which Shakespeare worked.

Outline

- I. *Macbeth* is a tragedy that can readily be understood as affirming an ultimately orderly and beneficent universe.
 - A. Terrible deeds occur, but the protagonist is a bad man who is ultimately destroyed by better men, as his wife is tortured and driven to death by her own guilt. Their behavior appears to be unnatural both in the sense of being wicked and in the sense of being foreign to them. Evil is something alien and perverse.
 1. Lady Macbeth’s distortion of her own nature is clear in her invocation to “murdering ministers” in Act 1 Scene 5.
 2. Macbeth indicates the terrible price he is willing to pay for his own comfort in his greeting to the witches in Act 4 Scene 1.
 3. Both of them declare their willingness to perform the extreme, Herod-like act of tyranny: the murder of children.
 - B. The murder of Duncan, a sanctified king, is clearly marked as a hideous act, producing chaos in nature (a fierce storm, the cannibalism of the royal horses) and in the state until the proper order is restored when Duncan’s son Malcolm wins the crown.
 1. Malcolm declares that his final victory manifests divine providence, “the grace of Grace.” But Malcolm’s own line will be replaced by the Stuarts, as Shakespeare and his audience well knew.
 2. Macbeth’s tyranny is counterbalanced by the excellent rule of the English king, Edward the Confessor, praised in Act 4 Scene 3.
- II. This orthodox reading of *Macbeth*, although defensible, neglects features of the play that are less optimistic.
 - A. The final description of the Macbeths as “this dead butcher and his fiendlike queen” is understandable but far from satisfactory.
 - B. From the battle against rebels described in Act 1 to the final praise for Young Siward, Scotland is a land in which savage butchery regularly occurs and inspires praise and admiration.
 - C. Macduff is the hero who replaces Macbeth as the loyal warrior fighting for his king, but Macduff is responsible for as much blood as Macbeth is, and not just on the battlefield—he is unintentionally responsible for the death of his own mother and his own children.
 - D. Thus, the forces of virtue are, without realizing it, as destructive as Macbeth’s. Echoes and parallels between the opening and closing of the play underline this.
 - E. There is no marriage at the end.
 1. The sacred dynasties are male and mutilated by the end.
 2. The masculine virtues of courage and honor exemplified by the better men who defeat Macbeth lack continuity without the female principle of nurturance.
 - F. Malcolm tries too hard to civilize and tame the force of tragedy, to “recuperate” these cruel and bloody events in a cruel and bloody country for some providential order.
- III. Crucial to our understanding of the nature and governance of the universe in which *Macbeth* takes place is the question of free will.
 - A. Does Macbeth choose to kill Duncan, or does the prophecy of the witches mean that he has no choice in the matter?
 - B. On this issue, the play engages the chief theological dispute of Reformation Europe: the conflict between free will and predestination.
 - C. Who are the “weird sisters?”
 1. Are they, in effect, fates, and is their prediction for Macbeth a destiny he cannot escape?
 2. Or are they temptresses who do not and cannot overcome Macbeth’s free will?
 - D. The possibility of predestined, immutable damnation—a possibility that Macbeth may embody in this play—was the most terrifying of all in the mind of Reformation Europe.

Essential Reading:

Shakespeare, *Macbeth*.

Supplementary Reading:

Bradley, *Shakespearean Tragedy*, lectures 9 and 10.

Hunter, *Shakespeare and the Mystery of God’s Judgments*, chapter 7.

Questions to Consider:

1. *Macbeth* can be read on many levels. Consider it as a history play and compare it with Shakespeare's others in that genre. Can you find common themes in Shakespeare's handling of such topics as the nature of kingship, liege loyalty, and what we might call today "problems of succession?"
2. Why do you think Macbeth killed his honored guest? You can frame your answer in terms of the "free will versus predestination" argument adduced in the lecture or in any other context (e.g., his wife pushed him into it).

Lecture Thirty-Five

Macbeth: Musing on Murder

Scope: In this lecture, we attempt to go inside of Macbeth's mind to hear him, as it were, contemplate his action and motives as he delivers a soliloquy or interior monologue. By using this technique, Shakespeare is able to develop numerous perspectives for his audience to consider as the play progresses.

Outline

- I. Macbeth's soliloquy in Act 1 Scene 7 ("If it were done") is Shakespeare's fullest development of interior monologue.
 - A. Soliloquies in Shakespeare's earlier plays tend to take the form of asides aimed straight at the audience; however, in the fully developed approach of the later plays, a man alone doesn't address the audience, but merely muses to himself. We happen to overhear him.
 - B. Although Macbeth is a villain like Richard III and Edmund, he is not, like them, an ironist entertaining us with sardonic wit. Instead he is "rapt" in his own thoughts.
 - C. He thinks associatively, not logically. He may not be fully conscious of the process by which he moves from one idea or emotion to another.
 1. Ian McKellan in playing Macbeth overrode the full stops and took his pauses in the middle of sentences.
 2. This is the most effective performance of this passage that the professor has seen.
- II. Macbeth is at first reluctant directly to confront the idea of murdering Duncan.
 - A. The soliloquy opens with an ambiguous generalization: is he making a moral or a pragmatic judgment?
 - B. "Assassination" is an exotic and euphemistic word for murder.
 - C. Macbeth does not refer to Duncan by name.
- III. The phrase "bank and shoal [or school] of time" sets up three different contexts in which to evaluate the proposed murder.
 - A. The first is risky physical action by a body of water.
 - B. The next is teaching in a lecture hall (time is an arena wherein we learn lessons).
 - C. Finally, there is passing judgment in a law court (time is a forum in which we are judged, perhaps for all eternity, a thought that Macbeth wishes to avoid).

- IV. Macbeth's inner argument can be seen also in both secular and religious terms.
- A. Macbeth argues against murder in term of earthly sanctions (reasoning, in effect, that "what goes around, comes around").
 - B. However, the words "chalice" and "host" suggest a religious, supernatural condemnation and punishment for murder.
 - C. Macbeth also invokes the double, actually triple, trust in which King Duncan is held:
 - 1. He is Macbeth's king, kinsman, and guest.
 - 2. The sanctions are ultimately divine.
 - 3. There is a strong web of barely unconscious associations in Macbeth's thoughts here at this juncture.
- V. The observation that Duncan's "virtues will plead like angels trumpet-tongued against the deep damnation of his taking-off" suggests a full scale Last Judgment.
- A. In Bernard of Clairvaux's allegory of the Four Daughters of God, the virtues that "plead" before God's throne are Justice, Truth, Mercy, and Peace.
 - B. The ultimate result of their pleading was the birth of a Redeemer, Christ.
 - C. The Redeemer will grow from baby to judge.
 - D. Macbeth, in this amazing baroque passage, has vividly imaged forth a universal tempest of divine wrath that will be unleashed against him should he commit the enormity of murder, especially the murder of the Lord's anointed, who is also his guest and relative.
 - E. Against this, Macbeth finds that only his vaulting human ambition spurs him on. He knows, perhaps somewhat inchoately, that his attempt to "jump" eternity is futile from the start. He is cut off amid this train of thought by the arrival of Lady Macbeth, who will prove to be the "spur" of his vaulting ambition.
 - F. By this abrupt close of this remarkable speech, we know more about Macbeth and what is going on in his mind than Macbeth himself consciously knows.
 - G. Macbeth may not fully understand all the implications of what he has said, but he has experienced their emotional effect.

Supplementary Reading:

The detailed notes on Macbeth's soliloquy in the Arden edition edited by Kenneth Muir or the New Cambridge edition edited by A. R. Braunmuller.

It is useful also to look up all the words used in this speech in the *Oxford English Dictionary* (complete version).

Questions to Consider:

- 1. Given all the arguments against murder that Macbeth comes up with in his soliloquy, why doesn't he—or can't he—talk himself out of the evil deed?
- 2. Can we instructively compare Macbeth to Hamlet in his introspection and hesitancy? If so, to whom or what can we compare Lady Macbeth?

Essential Reading:

Shakespeare, *Macbeth*.

Lecture Thirty-Six

Macbeth: "Enter Two Murderers"

Scope: In this concluding lecture on *Macbeth* (and the concluding lecture of the series), we will continue the psychological probing begun in the last lecture. This time we will expand our scope to include Lady Macbeth, since her case is every bit as interesting, complex, and compelling as her husband's and perhaps even more so. We will explore the sexual undercurrents and overtones of their relationship, as well as look into the realm of "imagination" as we analyze this most searching of all of Shakespeare's portrayals of human self-destructiveness.

Outline

- I. It is the unusual achievement of this play that we are brought into deep sympathy with two murderers while remaining fully aware of the horror of their crimes. The focus is on the Macbeths. Their victims appear in only a few scenes.
 - A. This is not a modern story in which we can sympathize because the evildoers have themselves been mistreated prior to their crime.
 1. We are not given that kind of psychological motivation for them, and their crime is in fact unnecessary.
 2. If the weird sisters' prophecy is unconditional—at one point Macbeth thinks it is so—why does Macbeth have to do anything at all?
 - B. They are not very able murderers.
 1. Lady Macbeth desires to kill, but cannot.
 2. Macbeth can kill in battle, but needs elaborate gearing up in order to kill Duncan (whose murder we don't actually see).
 3. Macbeth commits no further murders thereafter, but relies on hired thugs.
 4. Both Macbeths suffer enormous guilt over their act.
- II. Only by a strange sexual cooperation can the Macbeths achieve their crime.
 - A. Lady Macbeth imagines power and then suppresses her human and womanly faculties to act on her desire.
 - B. Macbeth is driven by imagination of the crime itself, yet his imagination is also "strong against the deed."
 1. In Act 1 Scene 3, he responds to the witches' prophecy by thinking of murder.
 2. In Act 2 Scene 1 (the "dagger" scene), he drives himself to the deed by imagining it as a theatrical scene. This imagining draws

him on; he is emotionally both excited—and repelled—by these imaginings.

- C. Lady Macbeth suppresses Macbeth's moral and pragmatic objections to the crime by making him think of the deed as manly.
 1. Here she knows she has a strong handle on her husband's emotions. She suggests that he would be a coward not to kill Duncan.
 2. Lady Macbeth's persuasion in Act 1 Scene 7 opposes males to females. Macbeth at first demurs, saying that too much aggression is not manly, but devilish.
 - D. Macbeth thus arrives at two motives aside from (and maybe overshadowing) his ambition:
 1. The imaginative appeal of the crime (the "glamour of evil").
 2. Lady Macbeth's appeal to his manliness.
- III. *Macbeth* is Shakespeare's most searching portrayal of human self-destructiveness. We watch as Macbeth goes from a high pitch of emotion and imagination to a state of emotional and imaginative deadness after his crime.
 - A. He achieves no self-recognition; instead, he condemns life for its tedium and futility. As a dramatist, Shakespeare doesn't tell us whether this condemnation is right.
 - B. He loses his ability to respond emotionally to events.
 - C. Lady Macbeth undergoes a reverse process as the result of psychological self-mutilation.
 1. She starts out unimaginative and then becomes extremely imaginative, as (perhaps significantly) only in her sleep she is tortured by the sense of self-pollution that the crime has brought.
 2. She achieves a terrible self-recognition (*anagnorisis*).

Essential Reading:

Shakespeare, *Macbeth*.

Supplementary Reading:

Stephen Booth, *King Lear, Macbeth, Indefinition and Tragedy*.

Questions to Consider:

1. Who "wears the pants" in the Macbeth household? How does Lady Macbeth play on her husband's psychosexual makeup to overcome his objections to the murder of Duncan? Although we didn't do so in the course of the lectures, can you construct a Freudian interpretation of this play? A feminist critique?
2. Having now read and discussed them, can you say that one of Shakespeare's "big four" tragedies is his greatest play? Why or why not?