



William Shakespeare: Comedies, Histories, and Tragedies

Part I

- Lecture 1: Shakespeare Then and Now
- Lecture 2: The Nature of Shakespeare's Plays
- Lecture 3: *Twelfth Night*—Shakespearean Comedy
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- Lecture 5: *The Taming of the Shrew*—Getting Married in the 1590s
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- Lecture 10: *Measure for Measure*—Justice and Comedy
- Lecture 11: *Richard III*—Shakespearean History
- Lecture 12: *Richard III*—The Villain's Career

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William Shakespeare:
Comedies, Histories, and Tragedies, Part I

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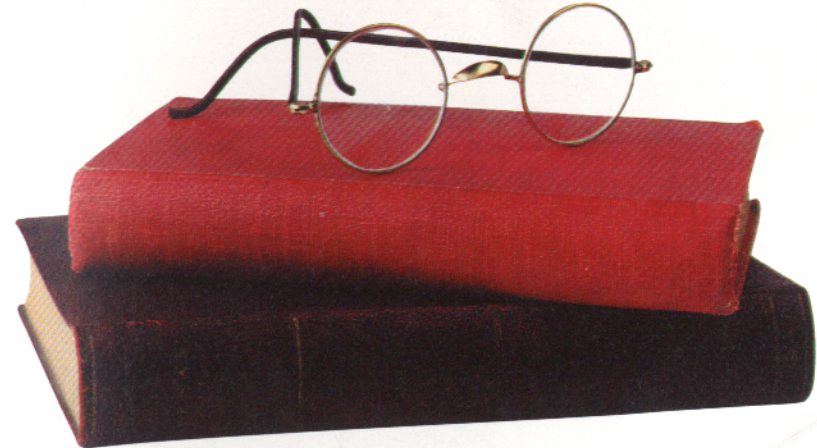
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William Shakespeare: Comedies, Histories, and Tragedies

Part I

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William Shakespeare: Comedies, Histories, Tragedies

Scope:

In thirty-six half-hour lectures, *William Shakespeare: Comedies, Histories, 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 One

Shakespeare Then and Now

Scope: Shakespeare's plays moved audiences in his own time and have proved enormously stimulating and useful to subsequent generations. This lecture describes how many people have found Shakespeare valuable for many different purposes over the years, reinterpreting him variously, even to the point of denying his authorship of the plays that have come down to us under his name.

Outline

- I. Shakespeare's plays move modern audiences just as they moved people in their own time.
 - A. Shakespeare was an extremely prolific playwright, composing 38 surviving plays as well as 154 sonnets and several other poems.
 - B. In about the year 1601, the scholar Gabriel Harvey said *Hamlet* pleased "the wiser sort."
 - C. Several years earlier, the hack writer Thomas Nashe had described Shakespeare's effect on his audiences.
 1. Puritans said plays were pretense and provided bad examples of immoral behavior.
 2. Nashe countered that the plays honored history and provided good examples of valor and heroism.
- II. Shakespeare's plays have enriched many generations of readers and listeners.
 - A. They have encouraged patriotism.
 - B. They have provided a livelihood for actors; e.g., following the Puritans' closure of England's theaters between 1642 and 1660.
 - C. They have become important in school and university curricula.
 - D. They have assumed centrality in the culture of the English-speaking world—indeed, in all European-based cultures.
 1. John Dryden and Samuel Johnson found Shakespeare to be the greatest modern writer.
 2. Matthew Arnold and Ralph Waldo Emerson found him to be semi-divine.
 - E. Different generations have interpreted him according to their own interests.
 1. The most influential scholarship of the 1940s and 1950s saw Shakespeare as a conservative figure who upheld the "Elizabethan World Picture."

2. More recent critics interpret Shakespeare as an advocate of liberal or even radical positions in favor of underprivileged classes and feminism.
3. Shakespeare is a “culture hero”: a mythical figure, a founder of the society, a lawgiver, a prophet. Each age must reinterpret such a figure according to its own needs.

III. The most extreme reinterpretation is anti-Stratfordianism, which argues that someone other than Shakespeare wrote the plays attributed to him.

- A. There is no factual basis for such arguments.
- B. Anti-Stratfordianism stems from false expectations.
 1. People expect great playwrights to be celebrities whose lives are recorded in detail.
 2. People expect plays about aristocrats to be written by an aristocrat.
 3. People expect plays with learned allusions to have been written by a university graduate.

IV. Anti-Stratfordianism is an extreme version of a natural response to Shakespeare’s abundance: the desire to reconceptualize him to meet the expectations, interests, or fancies of the present.

Essential Reading:

Schoenbaum, *William Shakespeare: A Compact Documentary Life*. If a briefer account is preferable, most one-volume complete Shakespeares include the basic facts in the introduction.

Supplementary Reading:

Schoenbaum, *Shakespeare’s Lives*, Part 6: “Deviations.”

Taylor, *Reinventing Shakespeare*.

Questions to Consider:

1. Discuss the sorts of things that readers and audiences nowadays expect of a person who is labeled a “great writer.”
2. Do stage performances run the risk of immorality? Explore the issues involved.

Lecture Two

The Nature of Shakespeare’s Plays

Scope: This lecture considers Shakespeare in his context as a theatrical professional. It explores the various ways in which his plays may be considered “abundant” or “multifarious.”

The plays have many structural elements, and their plots derive from many sources. The nature of the stage itself invited presentation of individual lives in broad social and metaphysical contexts. In particular, the plays show private lives in public places and imagination within realistic contexts. Shakespeare combines comic effects with tragic effects in a way that defies normal generic boundaries.

Outline

- I. Shakespeare was a professional man of the theater. His dramatic genius could flourish because he lived at a time when theater itself flourished. He was by no means a solitary genius.
- II. Shakespeare’s plays are abundant in their contents.
 - A. They have five acts and many scenes, lines, characters, and plots.
 - B. The plots are derived from diverse sources.
 1. Originality lay less in one’s invention of stories than in his treatment and development of existing stories.
 2. *Measure for Measure*, for instance, was based on a basic plot that had been often retold. Shakespeare gave the familiar story a new twist, and therein lay his genius.
 - C. The size of the stage in Shakespeare’s time invited both epic and intimate effects.
 - D. The stage features known as the heavens and the hell provided a potential supernatural context.
 - E. The size of the stage invites setting personal lives in a wide social context.
 1. For instance, the large stages of Shakespeare’s time allowed the depiction of eavesdropping.
 2. There is a case of double eavesdropping in *Troilus and Cressida*, in which a single event means five different things to three different sets of characters.
- III. Shakespeare keeps both the private and the public in interplay.
 - A. He presents the title character of *Richard II* in both his private and public roles.

- B. Shakespeare found brilliant ways to make the complex inner self speak. For instance, he invented the modern soliloquy.
 - C. *Romeo and Juliet* offers another example of this dichotomy between public and private identities. Romeo's desire to be altogether private in his love for Juliet is thwarted by his public identity as a Capulet.
 - D. Despite the centrality of the feelings, motivations, and desires of Shakespeare's characters, we are continually aware that their lives are intertwined with the condition of the societies in which they live.
- IV. Shakespeare keeps the down-to-earth and the imaginative in interplay.
- A. In *Much Ado About Nothing*, Beatrice refers at once to the pain her mother suffered in giving birth to her and to the fantastic vision of a star dancing over the scene of her birth.
 - B. Cleopatra's dream of Antony romanticizes her dead lover but also refers to qualities that Antony genuinely had.
- V. Hemmings and Condell first collected Shakespeare's plays under the title *Mr. William Shakespeare's Comedies, Histories and Tragedies*.
- A. Nevertheless, Shakespeare strains at the boundaries of generic definition.
 - B. Shakespeare's tragedies and comedies are quite different from those of ancient Greece. There is no ancient Greek analogue to Shakespeare's history plays.

Essential Reading:

- Shakespeare, *Troilus and Cressida*, Act 5, scene 2.
 _____, *Richard II*, Act 3, scene 2.
 _____, *Romeo and Juliet*, Act 3, scene 1.
 _____, *Antony and Cleopatra*, Act 5, scene 2.

Supplementary Reading:

Beckerman, *Shakespeare at the Globe*.

Questions to Consider:

1. Compare the characteristic form and structure of a Shakespeare play with a play of another period, ancient or modern. What is gained or lost by the "abundance" of the former as opposed to the more disciplined focus of the latter?
2. Do the multifarious contents of a Shakespearean play make it unreasonably difficult to grasp?

Lecture Three

Twelfth Night: Shakespearean Comedy

Scope: This lecture looks at the elements of Shakespearean comedy and the world of romantic love that is the special province of these plays. Working from this foundation, we will look at how Shakespeare both uses—and contests—the literary conventions of the genre and the social conventions of his time in *Twelfth Night*. One such convention was the use of male actors to play the female roles and, in this play, one of the women characters (Olivia) plays a man, providing additional opportunities for insights into the nature of love, Shakespeare-style.

Outline

- I. The basic pattern in Shakespearean comedy is the pattern of desire and fulfillment. It centers on the human desire for romantic love, which moves through courtship to marriage.
 - A. This comedic pattern is as basic as the tragic pattern of decline and fall.
 - B. Shakespeare has helped to establish modern Western ideas about courtship and marriage.
 - C. The plots of comedies concern overcoming the barriers to the fulfillment of desire.
 1. In *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *As You Like It*, and *The Merchant of Venice*, these obstacles to desire-fulfillment are external to the characters; in *Much Ado About Nothing* and *The Taming of the Shrew*, they are internal to the characters. These obstacles generate the major plot patterns of the plays.
 2. The external barriers lead to an action of escape from the place where the barriers rule; internal barriers lead to an action of invasion into the deadlocked situation.
- II. Shakespeare especially perceives that love is both foolish, prompting us into behavior that looks silly to the rest of the world, and wonderful, a profound and character-changing experience.
 - A. Romantic comedies are thus both funny and moving.
 - B. Foolish behavior arises particularly because societies invent highly artificial codes of conduct and speech for lovers. Courtship involves a highly stylized and ritualized set of behaviors.
 1. Early twentieth-century Americans courted with restraint, formal visits, and chaperones.
 2. Late twentieth-century American lovers converse in psychobabble.

3. Late sixteenth-century English lovers courted in ballads, formal speeches of praise drawing classical mythology from Ovid, and sonnets drawing stylized descriptions from Petrarch.

III. The main plot of *Twelfth Night* illustrates and contests these sixteenth-century conventions.

- A. Orsino in 1.1 praises Olivia and compares himself to the hunter Actaeon, the main character in a story from Ovid's Greek mythology. Orsino describes himself as a stag pursued by hounds representing his unsatisfied desires.
- B. Acting at Orsino's behest, Cesario (Viola in male disguise) approaches Olivia with a formal speech of praise, but Olivia rejects the praise and mocks the method.
- C. Speaking more directly, Cesario addresses Olivia with masculine appreciation *and* feminine insight.
- D. Cesario rebukes Olivia for cloistering herself from human relationships. According to the parable of the talents in the Gospel of Matthew, we do not own our possessions, merits, virtues, and other natural gifts and abilities. Instead, we hold them in trust from God and must put them to work in the world. The movement from self-absorption to generosity and reciprocal interaction with others is a basic measure of character in Shakespeare, especially for lovers.

Essential Reading:

Shakespeare, *Twelfth Night*.

Supplementary Reading/Viewing:

See the film of *Twelfth Night*, directed by Trevor Nunn, or the BBC-TV videotape.

Warren and Wells, Introduction to *Twelfth Night* (Oxford edition).

Hawkins, "The Two Worlds of Shakespearean Comedy."

Questions to Consider:

1. During the play, we see Orsino, Cesario, and Malvolio court Olivia, and Olivia court Cesario and Sebastian. Compare and contrast modes of courtship within the play.
2. What varying tones do you find in the play? Is it purely comic? Are there moments of melancholy, anger, and other feelings that qualify the comedy? How does this affect our experience as we read or see the play?

Lecture Four

Twelfth Night: Malvolio in Love

Scope: In this discussion of *Twelfth Night*, we take a closer look at the characters of the play. This enables us to contrast the young lovers with the one character who is clearly outside their circle, yet would like to be in it. That character is Malvolio (whose very name gives us a hint of his true nature). Malvolio is also placed in contrast with a group of lesser characters who plot—and achieve—revenge as he plots for the hand of Olivia. We will see that this is a comedy with a bite, which does not necessarily resolve itself into the characteristic "happy" ending of Shakespearean romantic comedy in general.

Outline

- I. In his soliloquy in Act 4 Scene 3, Sebastian acknowledges the bizarre quality of events in Illyria, and he argues for Olivia's sanity nonetheless. The real point of the speech lies, however, in his eager embrace of the good things of the world: the sun, the air, the Countess.
 - A. This is a vital part of the view of life in Shakespearean comedy.
 - B. The scene of Sebastian in the sun contrasts directly with that of Malvolio confined to the darkhouse, which represents his inability and unwillingness to see beyond himself.
- II. In a great Elizabethan country house, the upper servants were significant people, perhaps members of the lesser gentry themselves.
 - A. Malvolio is a person of consequence, conscientious in his job as estate manager.
 - B. His concern for the estate contrasts with Sir Toby's merry-making.
 1. This is one of the instances, recurring in Shakespeare, of opposition between festival and duty, Carnival and Lent, merry-making and Puritanism.
 2. *Twelfth Night*, or Epiphany (January 6), is the festive occasion that follows the solemnity of Christmas.
 - C. Malvolio has the Puritan desire for power and the Puritan repressiveness but not the Puritan religious zeal or devotion. He is negatively virtuous; he wants to do away with all festivity.
- III. Malvolio's concern with decorum and order is especially repressive because it coexists with the indecorum in his soul, his wish to rise above his place by marrying Olivia.

- A. Shakespeare does not consider it wrong to desire a desirable woman, but Malvolio wants her not for herself but for the worldly position he would achieve through her.
- B. Worldly position is not wrong either, except that Malvolio wants it only to exert trivial power over others. His fantasy of the marriage to Olivia in 2.5 consists entirely of tinpot tyranny.

IV. The plot of Toby, Maria, Andrew, Feste, and Fabian to punish Malvolio for his repressiveness and threats is a precisely measured piece of comic revenge.

- A. Their revenge is exact and just. They tyrannize over him and make him appear to be mad.
- B. The darkhouse is a symbol of Malvolio's self-ignorance and egomania.
- C. At some point, however, we begin to feel sorry for Malvolio.
 - 1. The comic revenge turns slightly sour as we perceive his genuine suffering.
 - 2. His fate is exact and just, but few if any of us can endure such strict justice.
- D. At the end, Malvolio achieves some dignity in his blank-verse appeal to Olivia for some explanation of why he has been abused.

V. Malvolio refuses to acknowledge his faults, and he rejects Fabian's peace-making overtures.

- A. Shakespeare's inclusion of one unreconciled person who still wants revenge in the otherwise happy and harmonious ending is a characteristic mark of his comprehensiveness.
- B. Malvolio's refusal to be reconciled dilutes our pleasure slightly at the end of the play. Shakespeare thereby anchors the play in real life.

character, actions, and downfall. Is one more sympathetic than the other? More realistic? More justified in his actions?

Essential Reading:

Shakespeare, *Twelfth Night*.

Supplementary Reading:

Barber, *Shakespeare's Festive Comedy*, chapter 10.

Leggatt, *Shakespeare's Comedy of Love*, chapter 9.

Questions to Consider:

1. Malvolio is a somewhat problematic character for a Shakespeare comedy. Is his punishment, stimulated by revenge, condign? Why do you think Shakespeare fails to redeem him at the end of the play?
2. After listening to the lectures on *The Merchant of Venice* (Lectures Seven and Eight), compare and contrast Malvolio and Shylock in terms of their

Lecture Five

***The Taming of the Shrew:* Getting Married in the 1590s**

Scope: This lecture suggests that *The Taming of the Shrew* is especially foreign to modern tastes in appearing to preach a doctrine of male supremacy in marriage. It considers various Elizabethan customs about courtship and their rationales. It discusses the most overt doctrinal statement about marriage in the play (Kate's final 44-line address to the wedding reception), and it describes various ways in which this speech has been handled in twentieth-century productions.

Outline

- I. *The Taming of the Shrew* presents problems about both doctrine and action.
- II. The play is realistic in its survey of courtship practices of the 1590, though many of these practices appear odd or even offensive to the modern reader.
 - A. Propertied parents often arranged marriages for their children.
 1. Dowries and dowers were expected as we now expect college degrees, for economic security. The source of wealth for young people of the upper classes lay in the family, not in working at a career.
 2. In individual cases, arranged marriages might succeed or fail.
 - B. Some preachers and moralists in late sixteenth-century England discouraged arranged marriage and argued for more consideration of personal affection.
 - C. Romancers and poets could elevate personal affection among young couples to an absolute.
 - D. In *Shrew*, the arranged marriage of Baptista's daughter Kate with Petruchio works better than the romantic one of his other daughter Bianca with Lucentio.
- III. Kate closes the play with a 44-line speech in which she emphatically agrees with the doctrine of male supremacy in marriage.
 - A. Actresses have played the speech for irony. This can be done either crudely or elegantly.
 - B. Actresses can contradict the speech with gestures.
 - C. Difficulties arise when the literal meaning of the speech is undercut or ignored.
 - D. The doctrine of male supremacy requires careful statement.

- E. *Shrew* exemplifies the usefulness of old plays in reminding us that people have not always behaved or thought as we do today.
- F. Kate's speech may be done sincerely but framed to acknowledge a variety of views.
 1. In Andrei Serban's production of *Shrew*, Kate recites the speech slowly and uncertainly, as if discovering something new.
 2. In the epilogue of the Serban production, the actors appear in their ordinary clothes and embrace each other in ways that suggest a multiplicity of relationships among them. Thus Serban supplements Shakespeare's portrayal of the "full stream of the world" by suggesting that heterosexual union with female submission, as depicted in the play, is not the only relationship possible.

Essential Reading:

Shakespeare, *The Taming of the Shrew*.

Supplementary Reading/Viewing:

See Zeffirelli film with Burton-Taylor or ACT video directed by Ball. Cook, *Making a Match: Courtship in Shakespeare and His Society*. Kahn, "The Taming of the Shrew: Shakespeare's Mirror of Marriage." Saccio, "Shrewd and Kindly Farce."

Questions to Consider:

1. How does Bianca either reflect or contrast with Kate?
2. Is Kate straightforward or ironic in her long final speech?

Lecture Six

The Taming of the Shrew: Kate Plays the Game

Scope: Some modern critics, feminist and otherwise, have expressed objections to the mode of the play's action: farce. Tranio exemplifies the disguise and trickery that Renaissance comedy inherited from ancient Roman farce. Gremio and the Pedant are stock figures out of Italian *Commedia dell'Arte*. Petruchio and his servants display the physical knockabout that is characteristic of farce in all ages. The verbal wit of the play is often farcical. In contrast to the lyricism of *Twelfth Night* and *As You Like It*, the wit of *The Taming of the Shrew* comes near to wisecracking. The funny speeches are quick retorts and grotesque catalogues. The name of this game is farce and this lecture examines how, above all, Kate plays the game and is tamed by farcical means, by being carried off from her own wedding, and having her clothes and food and bed thrown about, her words flatly contradicted or outrageously reinterpreted.

Outline

- I. In *The Taming of the Shrew*, an early comedy, Shakespeare adventurously combines farce with romance. The romantic thread lies in Kate's discovery of herself and of love for her husband. The bulk of the action, though, is farce.
 - A. The play has many farcical elements and characters.
 1. Tranio displays the trickery and disguising inherited from ancient Roman farce.
 2. Grumio is a pantaloon out of the Italian *Commedia dell'Arte*.
 3. Petruchio and his servants engage in slapstick.
 4. The verbal wit consists of wisecracks and grotesque catalogues.
 - B. The script invites farcical invention from directors and actors.
- II. Farce has a poor reputation with critics, and it is often described negatively.
 - A. Robert Heilman has averred that farces typically depict limited personalities that operate in mechanical fashion.
 1. Those having this sort of personality cannot feel or think deeply, and they are not moved by scruple.
 2. According to Heilman, farce represents a selective anesthetizing of the person.
 - B. Such a mode of critical description could be applied to tragedy or any other genre with equally devastating effect. Characters in many of Shakespeare's tragedies show personality traits that Heilman attributes to characters in comedic farces: they rush to extremes, they fail to pause or reflect on their actions (or do so faultily), they lack a sense of humor about their problems.

- III. Farce deserves a positive description. In *The Shrew*, farce celebrates the virtues of energy, ingenuity, and resilience.
 - A. These virtues are especially demonstrated by the male characters arriving in Padua: Petruchio, Lucentio, and Tranio.
 1. Petruchio's speeches exemplify energy.
 2. Ingenuity is exemplified by the suitors' use of unconventional means to attain their ends.
 3. Both Petruchio and Tranio illustrate resilience in their stubbornness and adaptability, and in their ability to endure repeated setbacks.
 - B. Kate also has verbal and physical energy and determination, but at the start she suffers from compulsiveness and destructiveness. Over time she grows in farcical range.
 - C. Petruchio teaches her to play, thus releasing her energies more fully.
- IV. Play—game or pastime—is the dominating activity and metaphor of *The Shrew*.
 - A. At first Kate's understandable anger prevented her from playing games, and she has not met any men worth her respect. She is "curst," and thus she cannot play and is not fully human.
 - B. There are faint suggestions in the second and third acts of her interest in Petruchio.
 - C. The development of her mind is more carefully traced in the fourth and fifth acts.
 1. She becomes sympathetic with the victims of Petruchio's temper-tantrums, such as Grumio and the other servants.
 2. She is perplexed by Petruchio's claim that he acts out of love.
 3. She resorts to anger and insists on obvious facts.
 4. In 4.5, the scene of the sun and the moon, she realizes that Petruchio is playing games. She starts playing with him, and she quickly learns to keep up with his rule-changing, to exaggerate, and to mock.
 5. Games have a cathartic effect. They release Kate from her compulsiveness and her insistence on literal fact.
- V. Since the story of the shrew is a play enacted by the anonymous lord's players for the tinker Christopher Sly, it is all a game.
 - A. Theater is Shakespeare's great game, in which he persuades audiences that the sun is the moon and that a thirteen-year-old boy is a nubile virgin named Kate or Bianca.
 - B. Such games may be therapeutic. Once Kate loses her anger, she becomes a very effective *farceuse*.

Essential Reading:

Questions to Consider:

1. In view of the (often) negative view of farce expressed by critics, how can we explain its enduring appeal across time, language and even culture?
2. The basic premise of this play has been adapted, with greater or lesser effect, into Broadway musicals (*Kiss Me Kate*), westerns, television sit-coms and even updated versions of the Bard's play set in contemporary times. You are a producer/director for a new movie version. Which contemporary actress-comedienne would cast for Kate? How would you direct her to bring out the farcical elements discussed in this lecture?

Lecture Seven

The Merchant of Venice: Courting the Heiress

Scope: This lecture addresses the unlikeliness of the stories in *The Merchant of Venice*, and it attempts to find the significance of fairy-tale plots for human experience. It discusses the possible motives for Portia's father's will, and it differentiates among Portia's suitors by their behavior and especially by their rhetoric. It examines the character of Bassanio, arguing that, although he may look like a fortune-hunter, he also displays generosity and heroism.

Outline

- I. *The Merchant of Venice* is a fairy tale.
 - A. Winning the hand of a princess by a lottery is unrealistic.
 - B. Borrowing money on collateral of a pound of flesh is unrealistic.
 - C. Shakespeare frequently used unlikely plots.
 1. The purpose of art is not realism.
 2. Characters and events may be true to life without being realistic on the surface.
 - D. Portia's father's will displays a genuine concern of fathers.
- II. The casket plot contrasts the three suitors.
 - A. The prince of Morocco is a man of heroic exploit and reputation.
 1. His rhetoric imitates that of Marlowe's Tamburlaine.
 2. His love is merely the desire to have what every other man desires.
 - B. The prince of Arragon is a snob.
 1. He assumes that he deserves Portia.
 2. Shakespeare is suspicious of desert, especially in matters of the heart.
 3. Like Morocco, Arragon essentially chooses himself rather than Portia.
 - C. Bassanio is a problematic hero since the plot does not allow him to do anything heroic.
 1. This is a difficulty that recurs in high comedy, which tends to stress not the manly and heroic values of courage and strength, but the more womanly values of wit, grace, and civilized behavior. Thus, the leading protagonists of high comedy tend to be women.
 2. Bassanio has been described as a fortune-hunter out to gain Portia's money in order to repay his debts.
 3. Shakespeare describes Bassanio as a knight on a romantic quest.
 4. He displays generosity in small matters.

- D. Bassanio's heroism emerges in his choice.
1. The song that precedes his choice distinguishes between desire ("fancy") and love.
 2. Bassanio is aware of this distinction.
 3. The casket labels reveal the risk in love.
 4. Bassanio's great generosity is to leave the choice to Portia.

Essential Reading:

Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice*.

Supplementary Reading/Viewing:

See BBC-TV videotape of *The Merchant of Venice*.

Coghill, "The Basis of Shakespearean Comedy."

Barber, *Shakespeare's Festive Comedy*, chapter 7.

Danson, *The Harmonies of "The Merchant of Venice."*

Questions to Consider:

1. How much do we know about Portia? How does she handle her difficult situation?
2. Compare the suitors with lovers elsewhere in Shakespearean comedy—Orsino, Orlando, Benedick.

Lecture Eight

The Merchant of Venice: Shylock

Scope: Shylock may be considered simply as a fairy-tale villain. This lecture explores the tripartite stereotype that forms a backbone for the character, and the historical circumstances under which he could appear in English plays. It then proceeds to discuss the ways in which Shylock has been performed by great actors from the seventeenth century to the present. It concludes with a detailed examination of the most famous speech in the part, discussing both its vengeful logic and the degree to which it implicates all of us.

Outline

- I. Shylock may be merely a villain, a character contrasting with the generosity of Antonio, Portia, and Bassanio.
 - A. The character of Shylock is founded on a three-part stereotype.
 1. He is a miser.
 2. He is a usurer; money lending at interest was officially condemned but tolerated as a necessary evil.
 3. He is a Jew at a time when Jews were thought of simply as "other," as non-Christian, as scapegoats.
 - B. In England this stereotype had a special purity.
 1. Only in England did Jews dominate finance, albeit temporarily. They were a major source of Crown revenue.
 2. The belief that the Jews killed Christian children—the "blood libel"—originated in England.
 3. Jews were banished from England between 1290 and the 1660s.
 4. No real people could be damaged by English anti-Semitism, since very few Jews lived in England during Shakespeare's time.
 5. The stereotype of the Jewish usurer and murderer could flourish in the absence of experience.
- II. Actors have reinterpreted the role of Shylock over time.
 - A. We do not know how Richard Burbage played Shylock in 1596.
 - B. In the late seventeenth century, Shylock was a comic villain.
 - C. In the eighteenth century, Charles Macklin made Shylock a serious villain.
 - D. In the Romantic period, Edmund Kean made him an honest villain, marked by directness and honesty.
 - E. In the Victorian period, Henry Irving made him a heroic patriarch, marked by dignity and heroic pride.

- F. In 1970, Laurence Olivier made him a banker-aristocrat of the industrial age.

III. Shakespeare develops the character beyond stereotype.

- A. “Hath not a Jew eyes?” is both a cruel piece of exaggerated and vengeful illogic and an overwhelming outpouring of painful feeling. Revenge is not an automatic, physiological reaction, as bleeding is when pricked or laughing is when tickled.
- B. Shylock points out that Jews resemble Christians both in their humanity and—at times—their inhumanity.
- C. Shylock contains the faults of us all.

Essential Reading:

Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice*.

Supplementary Reading/Viewing:

See BBC-TV videotape of *The Merchant of Venice*.

Gross, *Shylock: Four Hundred Years in the Life of a Legend*.

Shapiro, *Shakespeare and the Jews*.

Questions to Consider:

1. Compare Shylock’s mode of speech with that of Bassanio or Antonio.
2. Shylock does villainous things and yet we feel enormously sympathetic to him at times. Is Shylock a coherent characterization? Consider especially the passage with Tubal at the end of 3.1.

Lecture Nine

Measure for Measure: Sex in Society

Scope: *Measure for Measure* might appear at first glance to be a conventional comedy, but in fact the plot is unusually intricate and it is one of only two Shakespearean plays showing a brothel. There are other differences, which this and the subsequent lecture will essay.

Outline

- I. Like other Shakespearean comedies, *Measure for Measure* ends with four couples on the point of marriage, but the means by which they arrive at this point are unusual.
 - A. The play derives from an old folktale (“the unjust judge”) in which a woman tries to save a man (her husband or brother or father) from execution by begging the judge for a pardon. There are various endings to this scenario.
 - B. In this case, the judge, Angelo, acting for the absent duke of Vienna, offers to pardon the young fornicator, Claudio, only if his religious sister, Isabella, will sleep with him (Angelo).
 - C. When Claudio begs Isabella to comply with Angelo’s demand, she rejects his plea.
 1. But the disguised duke intervenes, arranging an assignation in which Angelo’s rejected fiancée Mariana will substitute for Isabella in Angelo’s bed.
 2. Although he believes he had slept with Isabella, Angelo nonetheless orders the execution of Claudio.
 - D. When Angelo is accused of injustice in the last act, after many confusions and revelations, the play can end happily with four unions: Claudio and Julietta, Angelo and Mariana, Lucio and Kate Keepdown, the duke and Isabella.
- II. The play differs from standard Shakespearean romantic comedy in many ways other than its peculiar plot.
 - A. The characters cannot be romantic or lighthearted; they are far too troubled by the power of lust, the abuse of authority, and the threat of dishonor and death.
 - B. The actions occur in stifling and claustrophobic places, and the jokes are gallows humor.
 - C. Instead of being a source of life and pleasure, sex is a source of death and pain. It brings people to hatred of themselves and lack of charity to others.

1. Unusually for Shakespeare, the play deals extensively with a brothel and with syphilis.
2. At 1.2.108–110, Claudio compares the workings of sexual desire to those of rat poison.
3. At 3.1.137–148, the threat to Isabella’s chastity leads her to denounce her brother Claudio as a bastard.
4. In his soliloquy at the end of 2.2, in one of Shakespeare’s great speeches of personal awareness, deserving of a close reading, Angelo is filled with self-loathing upon the discovery of sexual desire.

Essential Reading:

Shakespeare, *Measure for Measure*.

Questions to Consider:

1. Trace the motif of “fairness” in the play as covered in this lecture. Is the duke fair to Angelo by placing him in a position of tempting power? Is Angelo fair to Claudio—both at the beginning and the end of the play? Is Claudio fair to Isabella? Is Isabella fair to Claudio? What other endings could you envision for this play?
2. Compare Shakespeare’s treatment of sex in this play to any of the other comedies covered in this course of lectures. What reasons can you adduce for the negative “spin” he puts on sexual desire in *Measure for Measure*?

Lecture Ten

Measure for Measure: Justice and Comedy

Scope: We might term *Measure for Measure* a “problem” play, not in the sense that it is problematical (although as noted in Lecture Nine, it is unusual for a Shakespeare comedy), but rather that it deals with some weighty problems: sin, mercy, law, sexual probity (or lack thereof) and more. It is also a play about authority and the problems of authority. This lecture will explore these issues and will consider, at the end, the “problem” of the genre of dramatic quality against which this play strains.

Outline

- I. The title of the play recalls a passage in the Sermon on the Mount (The Gospel according to Matthew, chapter 7).
 - A. In this Gospel account, Jesus warns his followers that people will be judged by the standards by which they themselves judge others.
 - B. Isabella points out to Angelo at 2.2.113–126 that human beings are inclined to abuse authority and judgment.
- II. The particular law central to the plot makes fornication a capital crime.
 - A. It is normal in Shakespearean comedy for law to form an obstacle to the happiness of young lovers.
 1. In *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, a young woman must marry the man her father selects, or die or enter a convent.
 2. In *The Merchant of Venice*, Portia must marry the man who correctly solves the lottery devised in her late father’s will.
 - B. Such laws are not realistic but they set up revealing dramatic situations.
 - C. The fornication law in *Measure for Measure*, however, although not historically accurate, is nonetheless realistic. Concerned people in Shakespeare’s London seriously advocated the death penalty for fornication.
- III. The play explores the way in which various authority figures attempt to cope with the teeming and often gross sexuality of Vienna. Although authority may err, the play never doubts that authority is necessary.
 - A. Angelo’s prescription is “repress,” a Puritan formula that allows little room for the urges and weakness of human nature.
 - B. Isabella’s prescription is “withdraw,” a monastic formula that may work for gifted individuals but not for society at large.
 - C. The duke’s prescription is “forgive and marry,” a formula that leads him into disguise and manipulation of other people’s lives.

IV. The final problem of this problem comedy is that comedy itself may be a problem.

- A. Patterns of comedy may not be adequate to the stresses of the human condition.
- B. Some of the marriages at the end of the play seem contrived and unpromising.
- C. *Measure for Measure* is a provocative experiment testing whether standard theatrical patterns can satisfactorily contain the difficulties of the human condition.

Essential Reading:

Shakespeare, *Measure for Measure*.

Supplementary Reading:

Dollimore, "Transgression and Surveillance in *Measure for Measure*."

Hunter, *Shakespeare and the Comedy of Forgiveness*, chapter 6.

Questions to Consider:

- 1. Compare and contrast Angelo and Isabella in matters of justice and mercy, life and death.
- 2. Is the ending of the play satisfactory? By what standard?

Lecture Eleven

Richard III: Shakespearean History

Scope: This lecture describes the genre of history plays—a category not very familiar to us but important and popular in Shakespeare's time. It considers the extent to which histories needed accuracy, and the social value of history in the theater. It surveys Shakespeare's achievement in this genre, where he was especially ambitious and especially able to combine the public narrative with understanding of the private personalities of the characters. The lecture concludes by considering the particular weight of historical truth in *Richard III*.

Outline

- I. "History" is not a usual term for a dramatic genre like "comedy" and "tragedy."
 - A. The First Folio uses it as a category, but it was not a consistent Elizabethan usage.
 - B. Shakespeare took liberties with facts, but within limits.
 - 1. He seeks to reflect accurately the conditions of the time of which he writes.
 - 2. Thus major events, such as the outcomes of significant battles, must not be altered.
 - C. The boundaries of genre that distinguish Shakespeare's plays are porous.
 - 1. For instance, many of his tragedies have historical subject matter.
 - 2. Shakespeare's histories are defined as such by the nature of their subject matter.
- II. There was much historical writing in Shakespeare's England.
 - A. There were historical works in prose, narrative poems, and plays. (We know of some seventy historical plays, of which some thirty-five are extant.)
 - 1. History was patriotic. Patriotism was felt especially intensely by Elizabethan Englishmen in the wake of the repulse of the Spanish Armada in 1588.
 - 2. History could carry lessons. It provided heroes and villains to be upheld as either positive or negative models of behavior.
 - 3. History was a resource for playwrights in need of new plots.
 - B. Shakespeare's work in historical drama was unusual.
 - 1. He rewrote plays of the Queen's men.
 - 2. He wrote eight plays on a continuous stretch of English history (the years between 1399 and 1485), though not in chronological order.

Lecture Twelve

Richard III: The Villain's Career

Scope: This lecture considers the shape of Richard's career and the play. Despite the length and detail of the play, a firm structure dominates, a structure of repetition, parallelism, and retribution that arises from Shakespeare's inventive handling of his sources. Yet the play is animated by a villain who amuses us, who confides in us, who shares with us his sense of superiority over his victims.

Richard eventually loses control over us; his crimes become too great for us to identify with him. Shakespeare attempts to give him in his final night a conscience, an inner voice. Shakespeare takes his first steps in developing a genuinely subjective soliloquy.

Outline

- I. Shakespeare builds a firm structure from fifteen years of medieval history, 1471 to 1485.
 - A. The play opens with the victory of Richard's oldest brother, Edward IV, and his firm establishment upon the throne of England in 1471.
 - B. It then compresses the events of some dozen years into a few scenes, arriving quickly at Edward's death in 1483.
 - C. The short reign of the boy-king Edward V is dramatized in greater detail.
 - D. The final two acts cover the reign of Richard III.
 - E. The chief actions during the play are the conspiracy of Richard and his allies, and the lamentations of those whom he displaces and leaves bereft.
- II. The structural firmness of *Richard III* is evident in its symmetrical balancing of scenes and in its pattern of retribution.
 - A. The two courting scenes (Richard's courtship of Anne, and his later courtship of Elizabeth Woodbridge for the hand of his niece, Elizabeth of York) parallel each other, the second having been invented out of the first.
 1. The first courtship marks Richard's extraordinary power and skill, especially in twisting Anne's words back against her.
 2. The second courtship marks his loss of skill. This time Elizabeth assumes rhetorical dominance over Richard. The scene shows how thoroughly Richard has lost his control over other people.

These plays examine the decline and fall of the House of Plantagenet. The "Lancastrian Tetralogy" consists of *Richard II*, *Henry IV 1-2*, and *Henry V*, and the "Yorkist Tetralogy" consists of *Henry VI 1-3* and *Richard III*.

3. Other Elizabethan playwrights examined historical topics. Christopher Marlowe wrote one English history play. Ben Jonson wrote several plays based on Roman history, but they lack Shakespeare's sense of the variety of character and the fullness of human experience.
4. Shakespeare's plays stressed both public events and private passions.
5. His history plays were vital preparation for his tragedies.

III. *Richard III* carries especial historical weight.

- A. It is the final play of the cycle considered in historical order.
- B. It is concerned to get in as much historical detail as possible. Shakespeare wants to give the play historical weight and fullness, to "get it right."
- C. It leads into the Tudor era, in which Shakespeare was writing.

Essential Reading:

Shakespeare, *Richard III*.

Saccio, *Shakespeare's English Kings*, chapter 1, appendix, genealogies.

Supplementary Reading/Viewing:

See a video of *Richard III*, preferably the Olivier film.

Lindenberger, *Historical Drama*.

Questions to Consider:

1. Discuss the value of modern plays and films based on historical fact; e.g., Bolt's *A Man for All Seasons*, the BBC-TV series on various English monarchs, Christopher Burns' TV documentaries on American history.
2. How much, and in what ways, does it matter that the facts be correct in a historical play?

- B. The two nightmare scenes parallel each other, the second (Richard's nightmare before the battle of Bosworth) being invented out of the first (Clarence's nightmare in the Tower the night before his death).
1. The first establishes the ultimate frame of moral reference for the play.
 2. The second brings that frame to bear on Richard. Shakespeare turns the scenes that advance the story into a moral structure.
- C. There is a second, more rigid form of structural firmness in the play: a pattern of retribution. The curses of Queen Margaret of Anjou in Act 1 are balanced by her gloating in Act 4.

III. Richard is a star part of great audience appeal.

- A. We enjoy his role-playing, his wit, and his histrionic skill.
1. He attains the crown by playing a series of parts, thereby deceiving and entangling the other characters.
 2. Often he warns the audience of what role he will play, then comments in soliloquy upon his performance afterward.
- B. He confides in us, so that we share his triumphs over others.
1. In Shakespeare's later plays, soliloquy becomes a more internalized, more subjective monologue of self-exploration.
 2. In *Richard III*, however, soliloquy is a means by which Richard describes and presents himself directly to the audience. We admire his intelligence and cunning, and we become in a sense co-conspirators with him.
- C. He may act out for us desires (such as brother-hatred) to which we ourselves would dare not yield.

IV. Richard eventually loses his hold over us.

- A. We cannot tolerate his murder of the two innocent princes, though we might be less outraged by his murder of his brother, the guilty Clarence.
- B. His blunt announcement of Anne's death and, late in the play, his odious silencing of his mother's rebukes likewise win him no sympathy.
- C. It is a testimony to Shakespeare's richness that he can evoke in us several different emotional responses to Richard during the course of the play.

V. Shakespeare tries to give Richard an interior self in his nightmare speech.

- A. He develops a conscience and acknowledges himself as a murderer.
- B. In this soliloquy, Richard unveils for the first time the inner workings of the self, rather than simply to present already formulated ideas and plans to us.

Essential Reading:

Shakespeare, *Richard III*.

Saccio, *Shakespeare's English Kings*, chapter 7.

Supplementary Reading:

Hammond, Introduction to *Richard III* (Arden edition).

Sher, *The Year of the King*.

Questions to Consider:

1. At what moment do our feelings change about Richard? Consider closely his treatment of the princes, his treatment of Buckingham, and his treatment of the women in 4.4.
2. Compare the different handling of Richard in Olivier's film, Ian McKellan's film, and the BBC-TV version.