

Shakespeare's Tragedies

Part I

Professor Clare R. Kinney



THE TEACHING COMPANY ®

PUBLISHED BY:

THE TEACHING COMPANY
4151 Lafayette Center Drive, Suite 100
Chantilly, Virginia 20151-1232
1-800-TEACH-12
Fax—703-378-3819
www.teach12.com

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ISBN 978-1-59803-309-0

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Professor Kinney's many scholarly articles include essays on Shakespeare, Christopher Marlowe, Edmund Spenser, Philip Sidney, Lady Mary Wroth, Chaucer, the Gawain poet, and other Renaissance and medieval authors; she has also written on the teaching of earlier English literature. Her book, *Strategies of Poetic Narrative: Chaucer, Spenser, Milton, Eliot*, was published by Cambridge University Press in 1992. An occasional actress, she has participated in staged readings of lesser-known plays by Shakespeare's contemporaries at the reconstructed Blackfriars Theatre in Staunton, Virginia, and she has directed student performances of scenes from Shakespeare in her lecture courses. Professor Kinney has received a Distinguished Faculty Award from the Z Society of the University of Virginia. In 2007 she was the recipient of a University of Virginia All-University Teaching Award.

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Shakespeare's Tragedies

Scope:

This course will explore Shakespeare's six mature tragedies: *Hamlet*, *Othello*, *King Lear*, *Macbeth*, *Antony and Cleopatra*, and *Coriolanus*. (Because the course focus is on the period from 1600 to 1608, in which Shakespeare produced his most compelling tragic dramas, and because it does not address "tragedies of fate," *Romeo and Juliet* is omitted.) The course goals are as follows: to offer an introduction to tragedy as a literary genre and to outline the main characteristics of Shakespearean tragedy; to acquaint students with themes that Shakespeare almost obsessively revisits and reconfigures across the span of the major tragedies; to historicize the plays by suggesting some ways in which they might speak to the anxieties and preoccupations of the playwright's 17th-century audience; to offer detailed and thought-provoking explorations of individual plays on their own terms; and to illustrate the power and audacity of Shakespeare's poetry and stagecraft.

These lectures suggest that Shakespeare's tragedies repeatedly address tensions between the will and desires of the individual and the constraints emanating from his or her society. The plays are consistently interested in the relationship between public and private life and in the emotional fissures within what one might anachronistically call dysfunctional families. Throughout the course, we will examine the different kinds of power under negotiation in Shakespeare's tragic universes: political power, erotic power, the power of language and the imagination, and the power of theater itself ("the play's the thing / Wherein I'll catch the conscience of the king!"). The lectures will also explore the larger philosophical and theological questions raised by Shakespeare's characters when they ask what non-human forces control their universe. Is there providence in the fall of a sparrow, as Hamlet declares—or do the gods kill us for their sport, as the despairing Earl of Gloucester suggests in *King Lear*?

The course will have a lot to say about tragic agency: lectures will consider who does or does not get to make significant choices in the imaginative space of these plays—and who does or does not get to reflect upon their actions. We will also ponder the slippery borderline between action and transgression. We might think of transgression as being coterminous with *tragic* action, and we will keep revisiting the question of what constitutes transgression in Shakespeare's works—what does it mean to overstep the boundaries of permitted action, to challenge the norms of one's society, to put oneself beyond the pale? And why have audiences found the dramatization of that moment of transgression (and its consequences) so consistently fascinating across the centuries? The course will also ask whether women can figure as tragic protagonists in Shakespearean drama (all but one of these plays are named after male heroes): several of the lectures will explore the role played by female transgression in the imaginative economy of the tragedies.

The course is bracketed by three "framing lectures": two preliminary ones setting out literary and historical contexts for reading the plays and a concluding presentation that ends by glancing at what happened when Shakespeare, at the very end of his career, went on to write "beyond tragedy." Of the remaining 21 lectures, the three or four units devoted to each particular play will offer multiple angles of approach to the conflicts it dramatizes and the questions it raises (at times drawing connections with other works addressed in the course). The three presentations on *Macbeth*, for example, include a lecture whose starting point is an exploration of the play's resonant allusions to contemporary controversies and to the uneasy rule of England's new (and Scottish) ruler, James I; a lecture focusing on the play's gender politics and, in particular, its dramatization of competing definitions of heroic manhood; and a lecture focusing on the poetic language and plot action that links Macbeth's desire to control the future (and his preoccupation with royal and dynastic succession) to the lives and deaths of children in the tragedy. All of the lectures on individual plays will balance larger thematic considerations with careful attention to the nuances of the astonishing language in which Shakespeare's tragic protagonists give voice to their

alienation and estrangement from ordinary experience—in which, one might say, they speak the unspeakable.

In the earliest surviving analysis of the workings of tragedy, Aristotle's *Poetics*, tragedy is defined not only by its content but by its effect upon an audience: Aristotle speaks of the pity and fear it should evoke and the *catharsis* or purgation it should produce. It is a critical commonplace that the suffering of the tragic protagonist is rendered significant by the special insight or vision it allows him or her to achieve, and these lectures will regularly consider what kind of “tragic knowledge” Shakespeare's protagonists articulate *in extremis*. But they will also look carefully at the larger understanding and emotional engagement experienced by the audiences of these dramas: this course will persist in asking what kind of significance *we*, in the 21st century, might wrest out of Shakespeare's tragic spectacles.

Lecture One

Defining Tragedy

Scope:

Tragic drama, the art of rendering suffering significant, has always been highly valued in Western culture. This lecture explores its persistent popularity, looking at both pre-Shakespearean discussions of tragedy (such as those of Aristotle and Sir Philip Sidney) and more recent theorizations of this literary genre. An introductory survey of some of the issues Shakespeare repeatedly addresses in his six mature tragedies explores the nature of tragic transgression (and critiques the rather reductive notion of the “tragic flaw”). This discussion touches on Shakespeare’s particular interest in exploring complicated relationships between the tragic protagonist and his or her family and community; it also introduces the concept of *tragic knowledge*. The lecture concludes with some remarks on the particular challenges and satisfactions offered by Shakespeare’s language and idiom.

Outline

- I. For more than 2,400 years, writers and audiences in the West have been fascinated with watching reenactments of terrible human suffering and, in particular, the painful experience of someone whom we label a *tragic protagonist*.
 - A. The earliest discussion of tragedy is to be found in Aristotle’s *Poetics* in the 4th century B.C.E.
 1. Aristotle suggests that tragic drama will be written in elevated language and will deal with a self-contained action.
 2. Its plot will involve dramatic reversals and climactic recognition, or *anagnorisis*, and it will evoke particular emotions (pity and fear) in its audience.
 3. Tragic protagonists are usually elevated by rank and/or ability over most other people and fall victim to *hamartia*: an “error in action” rather than pathological vice.
 4. *Hamartia* is often mistranslated as “tragic flaw”; this is reductive because the crisis of a tragic protagonist is the product of an extreme combination of internal *and* external forces.
 5. Aristotle doesn’t only speak of tragic content: his notion of *catharsis* (the purging of certain emotions evoked by the play) also focuses on the response it creates in an audience.
 - B. Medieval notions of tragedy are often not applied to drama but to narratives in general.
 1. Geoffrey Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales* offers a definition of tragedy that primarily emphasizes a fall from greatness to wretchedness.
 2. This medieval definition suggests a Christian moral: the reader is encouraged to scorn transient, earthly pleasures and glories.
 - C. In Renaissance England, Sir Philip Sidney’s *Defence of Poetry* offers a somewhat different definition of tragedy.
 1. Sidney suggests that tragedy is a didactic form that lays bare the corruption that rulers and statesmen may attempt to conceal.
 2. He argues that art, in mirroring nature, can move people to virtuous action with its stirring or admonitory examples.
 3. Although Sidney’s discussion of tragedy uses quasi-Aristotelian notions of the particular effects it can create, it also echoes the medieval notion that tragedy shows the fragility of earthly splendors.
- II. *Tragedy* is not a stable term; it is always being renegotiated. There has, however, been a certain critical consensus about what constitutes Shakespearean tragedy.

- A. The experiences of Shakespeare’s tragic protagonists—or the consequences of choices they have made—estrangle them from ordinary existence.
 - B. The fall of the tragic protagonist is likely to have reverberations within a whole community.
 - C. Tragic protagonists generally draw from their suffering a kind of insight that allows them to find some universalizing and higher significance in their experience.
 - 1. This often speaks to our own attempts to come to terms with the existence of human evil (and addresses our doubt that a benign higher power would permit it to flourish).
 - 2. Tragedy’s particular eminence as a literary genre stems from the value traditionally granted to works of art that attempt to extract some kind of meaning out of human suffering.
 - D. It should be recognized, however, that Shakespeare’s contemporaries did not themselves define tragedy in this way: it is later writers who suggest that suffering is redeemed in his work because it is made to *signify*.
 - E. It is sometimes questionable whether complete understanding is achieved by the characters who participate in a play’s tragic action; such understanding may need to be retrospectively constructed by the work’s audience.
- III. Between 1600 and 1608, Shakespeare wrote the works generally thought of as his major tragedies: *Hamlet*, *Othello*, *King Lear*, *Macbeth*, *Antony and Cleopatra*, and *Coriolanus*. Other Shakespearean tragedies do not belong so obviously in this grouping.
- A. The early play *Titus Andronicus* is more akin to bloody melodrama.
 - B. The much loved *Romeo and Juliet* might be defined as a *tragedy of fate*, whose young protagonists are largely victims of external forces rather than adults grappling with impossible choices.
 - C. The dispersed dramatic focus of *Julius Caesar* makes it more akin to a history play.
- IV. Certain themes and problems regularly recur in the mature tragedies.
- A. These works explore tensions between the will and desires of the individual and the constraints emanating from his or her society—the relationship between public and private life.
 - B. Shakespearean tragedies frequently anatomize the workings of power (political power, erotic power, the power of language and the imagination, the power of theater itself).
 - C. The major characters often question the workings of the metaphysical forces that ostensibly shape their cosmos.
 - D. Shakespearean tragedies are generally family matters and, therefore, much concerned with divided loyalties.
 - E. Shakespearean tragedies raise questions about agency: about who does or does not get to act and to reflect upon their actions in the imaginative space of these plays.
 - 1. They also explore the borderline between action and transgression and invite us to ponder the moments at which characters overstep a moral or social or cultural boundary.
 - 2. They raise questions concerning the gendering of experience and action and the seeming monopoly held by male characters on the most elevated tragic experience.
 - F. They regularly offer variations on the theme of *tragic knowledge*.
- V. There are certain points a reader of these plays should bear in mind.
- A. Shakespeare’s language is challenging and complex, but he does not write in Old English. In order to deal with his astonishing vocabulary and often compressed syntax, it is important to read the plays in a good edition with detailed notes and glosses.

- B.** Readers should not be put off by the fact that these plays are largely written in blank verse: poetic language can render complex experience in a way that appeals both to the intellect and to the emotions.

Essential Reading:

McDonald, discussion of Shakespearean tragedy in *The Bedford Companion to Shakespeare: An Introduction with Documents*, pp. 85–90.

Supplementary Reading:

Briggs, *This Stage-Play World: Texts and Contexts, 1580–1625*.

De Grazia, “Shakespeare and the Craft of Language,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare*, Margaret de Grazia and Stanley Wells, eds.

Poole, *Tragedy: A Very Short Introduction*.

Questions to Consider:

1. Do modern plays described as tragedies seem to have the same preoccupations as Shakespearean tragedy? (You might consider such works as Arthur Miller’s *Death of a Salesman* or Eugene O’Neill’s *Long Day’s Journey into Night*.)
2. Do you think tragic drama should be morally edifying in the ways that Philip Sidney suggests?

Lecture One—Transcript

Defining Tragedy

Let's imagine you've gone to the theater to see Shakespeare's *King Lear*. In the course of the play, you've seen an old man driven to madness by the cruelty of two of his daughters, a young man reduced to a filthy homeless beggar by the treachery of his own brother, and an old man having his eyes gouged out—onstage, no less—because his son has betrayed him to his enemies. And that's just a conservative summary of the play's horrors. At the very end of the play, the author turns the screw again. One of the villains, Edmund, has ordered the murder of Lear's loving daughter, Cordelia, almost on a whim, and Edmund's last minute repentance comes too late to save her. The old king enters, carrying his dead daughter, crazed with grief. As the other people onstage, stunned by this new atrocity, try to make sense of what is happening, Lear cradles his child and says: "No, no, no life. Why should a dog, a horse, a rat have life, And thou no breath at all? Thou'lt come no more. Never, never, never, never, never." An unanswerable question, an unspeakable grief—language to tear your very heart out. Why are you, the audience member, putting yourself through this? Why aren't you doing something more restful, like watching a rerun of *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*?

Let me introduce myself. My name is Clare Kinney and I'm a professor of English literature at the University of Virginia. I've just given you a very small taste of one of the Shakespearian tragedies I'm going to be discussing in this course and this opening lecture will try to give you some sense of the larger issues I'll address in relation to Shakespeare's tragic drama. But, first of all, an anecdote. Some years ago I was teaching an advanced seminar on Shakespeare. My students had just read the play *As You Like It* along with a provocative essay in which a contemporary scholar offered a rather unusual interpretation of the work. We were discussing the claims of that essay when a student, a young man who was also a drama major, spoke up: "I can see that this guy is making some really smart points," he said, "but I've acted in *As You Like It*, and you know, it just didn't play like that."

I have always remembered his remark. It reminds me of two things. First, that no one account of something as rich and complex as a Shakespeare play is ever going to contain it, is ever going to sum it up, fix its meaning, and second, that these plays aren't just texts on a page. They have a whole dimension of performance that has its own claims. Every time you see a Shakespeare play acted—whether it's by the local high school or whether it's by the Royal Shakespeare Company—you'll see, in some sense, a different version of that play.

What does this have to do with what I'm offering you? I'm certainly not trying to say that my 24 lectures aren't worth listening to. I hope to offer interpretations or mappings of these plays that will interest you and excite you. I'm going to do my darndest to make Shakespeare's language come alive for you. But, at the same time, I'm not claiming to give you the final word on the plays. I hope that in your own reading, you'll find there is room for your insights, your own discoveries, and that if you go to see any of them in performance at any time, you'll find yourself re-imagining them in yet more ways. Because, if there's one truly wonderful thing about Shakespeare, it is his capacity to keep surprising his audience. There's no "been there, done that," got the t-shirt with these plays. I'll offer you one journey through their complexities, but there will always be territory left to explore.

Since this course is about Shakespearian tragedy, we might want to start by asking, what is this 2,400-year-old fascination in the writers and audiences in the west with watching re-enactments of terrible human suffering, and, in particular, the painful experience of someone whom we label a tragic protagonist?

The earliest discussion of tragedy is to be found in Aristotle's *Poetics* around the 4th century B.C. Aristotle's account of tragedy was based on the drama of ancient Athens at that time—the work of Sophocles, Euripides, and Aeschylus, plays like *Oedipus Rex* or *Medea*. He defines tragedy as a self-contained action of a certain grandeur and scope, written in a language that is more elevated, more

concentrated, than colloquial speech. Its plot will involve dramatic reversals. Shakespearian examples would be Hamlet thinking he's killed Claudius and finding he's killed Polonius. Laertes thinking he's set things up to kill Hamlet in the duel scene and being killed by his own poisoned weapon. Its protagonist will experience some kind of climactic moment of recognition or anagnorisis, and it will evoke certain emotions in the audience. Aristotle labels them pity and fear, even as it brings about the purgation—the Greek word is *catharsis*—of those emotions. Its heroes are usually elevated by rank or ability over most other people without being paragons of perfect virtue, but their fall or suffering is the result of what Aristotle terms *hamartia*—an error in action—rather than pathological vice or depravity.

I'd particularly like to emphasize that it is more useful to think in terms of an error in action than to use a phrase that may be familiar to you, the tragic flaw. The tragic flaw sound bite has dogged discussions of tragedy, ever since a critic called A.C. Bradley mistranslated the Aristotelian term *hamartia*. If you discuss tragedy only in terms of the character flaws of one individual, you may ignore his or her relationship to the social forces and cultural practices of the larger world in which he or she must act. The particular crisis of a tragic protagonist is the product of an extreme combination of internal and external forces. And, it isn't always an ostensible flaw that is their undoing; in a difficult and corrupt world, they can be undone by qualities that might be considered virtues.

Aristotle speaks not only of the ideal content of tragedy, but of the effect it should have on its audience. It should evoke pity and fear. It shouldn't simply upset and disgust. It should create a kind of empathy between audience and characters and particularly between audience and tragic protagonist. There but for the grace of god go I. And his notion of *catharsis* suggests that the audience will be changed by the experience, will undergo some kind of purgation of the emotions that have been aroused by the play, will have their own assumptions about human experience modified by the play.

Keep thinking about this double scenario. What happens to the people in the play? What happens to us as we experience the play? Do we necessarily feel the same things as the play's protagonist? Is our vision completely continuous with his or hers? Does that character necessarily learn the same things we learn from seeing the action as a whole?

Tragedy in performance does not reappear in Europe until the 16th century. Before this, in medieval Europe, the term tragedy is often used not to describe drama, but to describe a certain kind of narrative. In Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, written in the late 14th century, one of Chaucer's pilgrims, the monk, relates a series of stories, which he describes as tragedies, and he defines tragedy as follows. I'm translating from the original Middle English text: "To speak of tragedy is to speak of a certain story—as old books remind us—of one who was in a position of great prosperity and who has fallen from high degree into misery and ends wretchedly." The monk's short tales involve biblical, mythological figures, as well as people from history and they suggest that, for medieval readers, tragedy is simply the story of a fall from greatness to wretchedness. This version of tragedy focuses on human beings' vulnerability to the caprices of fortune and this kind of tragedy suggests the Christian moral that one should scorn transient, earthly pleasures and glories, and trust in higher things: the rewards of virtue in the afterlife.

Let's move on a couple of hundred years. Although 16th-century writers were aware of Aristotle's ideas, their theories of tragedy were even more influenced by the plays of a Roman writer, Seneca. Some centuries after Aristotle, the Romans wrote tragic dramas in partial imitation of the Greeks, and those written by Seneca were frequently read and translated in 16th- and 17th-century England. Seneca's works are highly rhetorical, full of moral speeches, and preoccupied with death and revenge, but it is not clear whether Seneca's plays were meant for public performance or just for private reading.

When the English writer Philip Sidney defines tragedy in his *Defense of Poesy*, written around 1581, published 1595, he speaks of the:

high and excellent Tragedy, that openeth the greatest wounds, and showeth forth the ulcers that are covered with tissue. That maketh kings fear to be tyrants. That, with stirring the effects of

admiration and commiseration, teacheth the uncertainty of this world, and upon how weak foundations gilded roofs are builded.

Sidney's ideas show a mix of influences. He calls tragedy a high and excellent form. This recalls Aristotle's idea that its action must be of a special magnitude. He suggests its horrors are justified because it exposes hidden vice; it is a didactic form. It discloses the corruption that rulers and statesmen may attempt to conceal. His image is one of ulcerated skin masked by tissue, which for Sidney does not mean Kleenex, but rich cloth of any kind. Tragedy, says Sidney, makes kings fear to be tyrants. He follows the suggestion we often see in educational treatises of the Renaissance that, in mirroring nature, art can move people to virtuous action with its stirring or admonitory examples. Finally, he suggests that tragedy, in provoking admiration, which in Sidney's usage means wonder, not respect, and commiseration, "teacheth the uncertainty of this world, and upon how weak foundations gilded roofs are builded." His remark starts out with an approximation of Aristotle's theory of tragic effect. Admiration and commiseration are somewhat equivalent to terror and pity. But, he ends on a more medieval note; tragedy shows the fragility of earthly splendors. This is more like Chaucer's formula.

Now these are some of the ways in which tragedy had been defined before Shakespeare wrote his major plays. As you can see, tragedy is not a stable term. It's always being renegotiated. Later on, thinkers like Hegel and Nietzsche and Brecht will offer new definitions. And Shakespeare himself never writes a theory of tragedy, he just writes tragedies. We don't know if he ever read Aristotle or, for that matter, Sidney. Although, many commentators have, in their turn, constructed their theories of what constitutes Shakespearian tragedy. I'm going to give you a provisional list of some of the commonplaces about Shakespearian tragedy.

One: Shakespeare's tragic heroes tend to be elevated by rank and/or ability above the common herd. They are princes or warriors. Notice the gender assumptions here—the idea that the tragic protagonist is, in fact, a tragic hero, not a tragic heroine. I'll be coming back to this issue. They often exist in a state of alienation from their own society. Their experiences or the consequences of choices they have made tend to create their estrangement from ordinary human beings. Three: The fall of the tragic protagonist tends to have a larger significance. It's not just one person coming to grief, but may have reverberations within a whole community. Four: Tragic protagonists generally reach some kind of recognition of the problematic choices they have made or the destructive actions they have engaged in. They may claw out of their pain and horror a kind of insight, which allows them to find some universalizing and higher significance in their experience and suffering. This not only links their individual passions to a larger notion of the human condition, but gives us a vision of a world where significance or wonder or even a meaningful terror can be won from the chaos of life.

Finding meaning in what is horrible or fearful—this last is a particularly tempting vision for audiences at any time. The last hundred years have given us the spectacle of a world, which is still for many people, one of hideous cruelty. Think of the victims of ethnic cleansing. Think of the genocide in Rwanda. Think of 9/11 and the ongoing violence in the Middle East. Going further back, think of the victims of Hitler or Stalin or Pol Pot or the literally millions of soldiers who died in the trenches in World War I. One might well be tempted to ask, if there is a God, what kind of God could allow these horrors to happen? Come to think of that, what kind of human beings could allow these horrors to happen? Given that we seem to be stuck in a nasty, brutal, ignoble little world, it is not surprising that people have tended to value works of art, which attempt to extract some kind of meaning out of human suffering.

But, be aware that Shakespeare's contemporaries don't speak of this kind of agenda. It is later writers who have insisted that death and suffering are transcended in Renaissance tragedy because a particular vision of human nobility escapes or survives or transcends the horror of the action. These commentators would argue that the art of the tragic dramatist is to be cherished because it puts human suffering into words and makes it signify. We may wish to ask if this insight is achieved by the characters who

participate in the tragic action of a particular play or whether it is retrospectively constructed by us, the audience.

Now, I've just outlined for you the commonplaces, which recur again and again in discussions of Shakespearian tragedy. I offer them as a starting point, not a tidy crystallized definition. And I invite you to test them out quite ruthlessly against our readings.

And now, a word about just what exactly we're going to be reading. This course will explore the six major tragedies Shakespeare wrote between 1600 and 1608: *Hamlet*, *Othello*, *King Lear*, *Macbeth*, *Antony and Cleopatra*, and *Coriolanus*. During this stage of his career, Shakespeare seems to focus with a particular intensity upon profound human dilemmas, upon the difficulties of enacting choice and moral agency in a corrupt world, in exploring certain experiences, which test the very limits of language. I should admit here that I am being selective in my focus. These are not the only tragedies Shakespeare wrote. We have, for example, the very early *Titus Andronicus*, the bloodiest play he ever composed, a kind of 16th-century slasher movie, and also, of course, another earlier play, the much-loved *Romeo and Juliet*. Why am I ignoring *Romeo and Juliet*? Not because it is not a fine and moving drama, but, as a tragedy, it doesn't quite fit with the works Shakespeare was to write later in his life. Its star-crossed lovers are largely the victims of forces external to themselves—the caprices of fortune and circumstance. They are very young people, who love impulsively, not adults wrestling with impossible choices or agonizing over their actions.

Another earlier tragedy, which I find difficult to put in the same box as the tragedies I'll discuss, is *Julius Caesar*. Its complicated engagement with Roman history disperses the focus of tragic attention. Caesar, its nominal protagonist, dies in Act 2. The dilemmas of Brutus, his deeply ethical assassin, get a fair bit of attention, but must share center stage with the machinations of Cassius and with the political maneuvering of Mark Antony and Octavius. The historical vision it offers is shot through with tragedy, but not defined by tragedy. Furthermore, even as it ends, the seeds of a new conflict are germinating between the victorious survivors. Shakespeare will return to the aftermath of this play to write a work in which, I shall argue, tragedy rather more conclusively stakes its own claims over history. That play, which we'll be exploring later in this course, is *Antony and Cleopatra*.

So, let me offer a brief summary of what we'll be looking at in the plays written between 1600 and 1608. In considering the very particular universes Shakespeare creates, I'll be stressing the importance of state and social politics in these plays. Tensions they explore between the will and desires of the individual and the constraints emanating from his or her society, the relationship between public and private life. Shakespearian tragedy involves complicated negotiations of power and we'll consider the different kinds of power under investigation: political power, erotic power, the power of language and the imagination, the power of theater itself. "The play's the thing wherein I'll catch the conscience of the king." There's also the little matter of the ways in which Shakespeare's characters imagine powers beyond humanity. Is there providence in the fall of a sparrow, as Hamlet declares, or do the gods kill us for their sport, as the Earl of Gloucester despairingly remarks in *King Lear*?

Shakespearian tragedies are family matters and I'll be thinking about the pressures of kinship. Protagonists are differently positioned in the familial structure. Hamlet and Coriolanus are defined primarily as sons; Macbeth and Othello as husbands; King Lear as a father, and the tragedies of *Hamlet*, *Othello*, and *Lear* offer us some telling accounts of father/daughter relations.

I'll have a lot to say about agency, about who does or does not get to act and to reflect upon their actions in the imaginative space of these plays, and I'll be looking in great detail at the fine borderline between action and transgression. We might indeed think of transgression as being coterminous with tragic action. What constitutes transgression in these plays, what does it mean in different worlds and different contexts to overstep the boundaries of permitted action, to challenge the norms of one's society, to put oneself beyond the pale? Why do we find that moment so compelling?

This may be linked to questions concerning gendered action in the plays. The four major tragedies go by the names of their heroes—Hamlet, Othello, Lear, and Macbeth. Cleopatra shares double billing with Antony. Can women be tragic heroines? Can their experience be represented as tragic? This will oblige us to investigate what constitutes or defines the kind of action we call tragedy. If women aren't usually the tragic protagonists, what do we make of the fact that their actions—or what are perceived as their transgressions—often seem to trigger the tragic action: Gertrude's marriage to her dead husband's brother in *Hamlet*; Desdemona's elopement with an alien general in *Othello*; Lady Macbeth's spurring Macbeth on to murder; Cordelia refusing to play her father's game at the start of *King Lear*? Finally, we'll consider that whole business of tragic knowledge and insight won out of suffering that I've mentioned before. What kind of significance do Shakespeare's protagonists find in their own suffering?

These are some of the main issues I'll be addressing, but to conclude, a few words about the business of reading Shakespeare. From time to time, my own English majors come and sort of whine to me a bit about the difficulty of Shakespeare's Old English. This is Old English: "Hwaet, we gardena in geardagum Theodcyninga thrym gefrunon." That's the beginning of *Beowulf*; it's not what Shakespeare writes. Then, we have Middle English: "Whan that Aprille with his shoures soote / The droghte of Marche hath perced to the roote." That's the very beginning of Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*. It's not what Shakespeare writes.

Let me just give you a little taste of what Shakespeare does write and invite you as I pronounce what is officially Modern English. Just listen and note mentally any words of which you don't recognize the meaning.

"Tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow creeps in this petty pace from day to day to the last syllable of recorded time. And all our yesterdays have guided fools the way to dusty death. Out, out, brief candle. Life's but a walking shadow. A poor player that struts and frets his hour upon the stage and then is heard no more. It is a tale told by an idiot full of sound and fury, signifying nothing."

That soliloquy of Macbeth's, in fact, doesn't contain a single word that isn't in common use today. Now, I did cheat a bit. We have to admit that Shakespeare uses some words, which are now archaic or whose nuances have shifted somewhat. He also has a vocabulary about three times as large as the most articulate of us. The lexicon of his complete works is about 25,000 words. His syntax is occasionally more compressed or elliptical than ours. He is very culturally literate and his range of illusion is daunting, which is why it's important that you read a good edition with glosses and footnotes. Shakespeare also, of course, writes plays, which are largely, although by no means wholly, written in poetry, in blank verse—unrhymed verse in the five beat lines we call iambic pentameter.

Many people have what I call fear of poetry. My own English majors will say things like, I really love literature except that I don't like poetry. Poetic seems to mean, for these people, extra words, hidden meanings, superfluous ornament, frills, static—things that make life difficult for the 21st-century reader. My definition of poetic language is rather different. It's language under pressure, often bound by certain patterns or rhythms, which don't hamper communication so much as discipline it. Shakespeare's poetic language, I'd maintain, is one whose apparent ornaments and superfluities can actually offer the most economic, most precise way of saying something or conveying a complex effect that appeals both to the intellect and to the emotions. Macbeth could have said life's a bitch and then we die. But, his poor player, his tale told by an idiot, is a far more suggestive way of conveying what he wants to say about existence.

One final piece of advice: As you read the plays, remember that play texts are not like poems or novels. They have the extra dimension of performance, which allows directors and actors to make interventions in the text, to reinterpret it and represent it in different ways. I'll be addressing performance issues from time to time in my lectures, but you should also keep thinking about the problems and possibilities opened up by performance. The different ways a scene might be played. The way the literal embodiment of the action can inflect meaning.

I've talked in this lecture about how we might define tragedy and what seem to be some of the particular preoccupations of Shakespearian tragedy. I have not yet addressed the very specific historical context in which Shakespeare was writing his plays. My second lecture will focus upon the experiments in writing tragic drama that were taking place in the late 16th century when Shakespeare's career began and that offered him his own literary springboards. I'll also glance at the social and political history of the early 17th century when the major tragedies were written, both the big issues of the day and the more everyday preoccupations of Shakespeare's audience. Shakespeare's tragedies often unfold in geographically distant places or are set in a far off past, but they are often shaped and inflected by matters surprisingly close to home, but more on that subject next time.

Lecture Two

Shakespearean Tragedy in Context

Scope:

After a concise introduction to performance conditions and attitudes toward the theater in Shakespeare's England, this lecture will explore two different contexts for thinking about Shakespearean tragedy. It first offers an overview of some of the tragic drama written for the Elizabethan stage prior to Shakespeare's composition of *Hamlet*, paying particular attention to the innovations of Christopher Marlowe in such plays as *Tamburlaine* and *Doctor Faustus* and to Thomas Kyd's highly influential treatment of revenge in *The Spanish Tragedy*. It then offers some remarks on the reign of King James I (during which all but one of Shakespeare's major tragedies were written). The tragedies written by Shakespeare and his contemporaries feature many corrupt power brokers, and the characters who populate these plays have little confidence that their universe is controlled by benign metaphysical forces. Such works seem to speak to the preoccupations and anxieties of the playwright's own historical moment.

Outline

- I. Shakespeare's tragedies were acted in an era when performance conditions (and attitudes toward theater as an art form) differed significantly from those of our own day.
 - A. Shakespeare wrote at the very beginning of the invention of the English theater as we know it; the first permanent theaters were built from 1576 onward outside the official boundaries of the city of London.
 - B. Theaters aroused criticism from their very inception.
 1. They were places that encouraged the mingling of different classes and where the players challenged notions of "natural" hierarchy by impersonating kings and nobles.
 2. Women's parts were played by young boys until the late 17th century, and critics were suspicious of the blurring of gender distinctions this produced.
 3. The works we now consider high art were viewed by some of Shakespeare's contemporaries as popular entertainment at best and a source of social and moral corruption at worst. Philip Stubbes's *Anatomy of Abuses* (1583) offers a particularly sustained and virulent denunciation of the London stage.
 - C. Plays were acted in the afternoons by natural light in the public theaters; the private, enclosed playhouses attracted a wealthier clientele.
 - D. A large part of London's population attended the theater regularly, and companies had very large repertoires.
- II. Before Shakespeare wrote his major tragedies, there had already been some significant recent experiments in this genre.
 - A. Thomas Sackville's and Thomas Norton's *Gorboduc* is written in imitation of the Latin plays of Seneca and creates a precedent for the writing of political tragedy; its plot about the unhappy consequences of the division of a kingdom anticipates that of *King Lear*.
 - B. Christopher Marlowe's *Tamburlaine* and *Doctor Faustus* are particularly striking and influential Elizabethan tragedies.
 1. Marlowe creates protagonists who characteristically set their will in opposition to existing norms and hierarchies.
 2. Even when orthodox morality is reasserted, as in the fall of Faustus, the aesthetic interest of the play tends to lie in the speeches of the tragic protagonist.

3. Marlowe's brilliant deployment of poetic language sets a precedent for what might be achieved with English blank verse; Shakespeare builds upon his linguistic experiments.
- C. Thomas Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy* started a fashion for revenge tragedies.
1. The heroes of revenge tragedies attempt to enforce justice by their own actions in a world in which public and political institutions are corrupt.
 2. Revenge tragedies deploy graphic on-stage violence, and the destruction of evil also involves much slaughter of the innocent.
 3. The plot of *The Spanish Tragedy* anticipates that of *Hamlet*; its protagonist feigns lunacy, and it features a striking play within the play that the hero uses for his own purposes.
- III. Shakespeare wrote nearly all of his tragedies during the reign of James I of England; his plays are, to some extent, shaped by his historical moment.
- A. Both Shakespearean and non-Shakespearean Jacobean tragedy is often concerned with corruption in high places and the destructive effects of power; in this, it seems to echo particular anxieties of the period.
 - B. James I clashed regularly with Parliament over questions of royal prerogative; his court was perceived as being significantly more lax and debauched than that of his predecessor, Elizabeth I.
 - C. Social and economic problems (such as galloping inflation) increased during James's reign.
 - D. An expanded access to education among men of lower rank threw into clearer light the limits of the autocratic political system.
 - E. The notion that worldly existence was merely the gateway to the higher reality of the afterlife had been attenuated by a new secularism and skepticism.
- IV. The tragedies of this period tend to have multiple agendas.
- A. Their authors may not only consider the painful experiences of an individual in spiritual or metaphysical terms but also interrogate the manmade forces and structures that promote inhumane behavior.
 - B. Metaphysical questions tend to get transformed into political questions. Revenge tragedies may encourage their audiences to ask what sociopolitical circumstances and forces might provoke an individual to act outside the law and to ignore the strictures of religion.

Essential Reading:

McDonald, "Performances, Playhouses and Players," in *The Bedford Companion to Shakespeare: An Introduction with Documents*, pp. 109–127.

Supplementary Reading:

Kerrigan, *Revenge Tragedy: Aeschylus to Armageddon*, chapter 1.

Kyd, *The Spanish Tragedy*.

Lockyer, *James VI and I*, chapter 4.

Marlowe, *Tamburlaine* and *Doctor Faustus*.

Questions to Consider:

1. In what ways might the new skepticism in religious and philosophical thought evident in the late 16th

and early 17th centuries have fostered the writing of tragedy?

2. Revenge plots are still popular in contemporary plays, novels, and films. How might their presentation in our own culture differ from their treatment in the drama of Shakespeare's day?

Lecture Two—Transcript

Shakespearean Tragedy in Context

In this lecture, I'd like to offer a few historical contexts for thinking about Shakespearean tragedy. I shall first offer some background about the performance conditions and attitudes towards theatrical performance in late 16th- and early 17th-century England when Shakespeare wrote his plays. I shall then go on to discuss some of the tragedies that were being written for the Elizabethan stage a little before Shakespeare's composition of *Hamlet*. And finally, I shall offer some remarks on the reign of King James I, who ruled from 1603 to 1625, the period in which all but one of Shakespeare's major tragedies were written. I shall suggest how the playwright's work might speak to the preoccupations and anxieties of his own historical moment.

Shakespeare lived from 1564–1616. His plays were written roughly between 1590 and 1613. He writes at the very beginning of the invention of the English theater as we know it. That is, when plays are first being written in large numbers as secular and commercial entertainment. In 1576, James Burbage builds the first permanent theater building in England. The 1580s and 1590s saw the construction of several more. In 1598, the Globe Theatre was built and eventually became the permanent home of Shakespeare's company. All the theaters were built outside what were then the official administrative boundaries of the city of London. This was not a high-class area. It was full of the kind of places that wanted to be beyond the limits of the city ordinances—the brothels, and the pits for bear and bull baiting and cock fights. All the kinds of places that annoyed the good solid merchants because they drew their apprentices and workpeople away from the business of the day.

Theatres were from the start a cause of controversy and contention. They were places where the divisions of a society, which was much more hierarchical than ours, were put in question. Nobles, trades people, and the roughest laborers rubbed shoulders in the audience. Playacting itself challenged notions of hierarchy. Players, actors, didn't fit in with the class system, but were, in fact, dangerously adept at impersonating all kinds of people. These people, these actors, these people of dubious status could imitate kings and lords and generals, and they thus, by their very actions, challenged the notion that nobility or courage was something inherent or inherited and mainly or indeed only to be associated with high birth. These people could perform nobility. The stage was also a place where gender distinctions became blurred. In England, until the late 17th century, there were no professional actresses. Young boys played all the women's roles.

All of these things provoked several writers to denounce the whole phenomenon of the popular theater. What we now think of as high art was seen by a fair number of Shakespeare's contemporaries as a source of social and moral corruption. Philip Stubbes, a radical Protestant critic of the stage, wrote a lengthy treatise called *The Anatomy of Abuses* in 1583. In it, he denounced the theaters and all those who acted in them. Stubbes is particularly paranoid about men playing women's parts. He writes: "Our apparel was given us as a sign distinctive to discern between sex and sex, and therefore one to wear the apparel of another sex is to participate with the same and to adulterate the verities of his own kind." Men playing women, he argues, might as well "be called hermaphrodites, monsters of both kinds, half women, half men."

Originally, theaters were more like amphitheaters. They were open to the sky and had no artificial lighting. Plays were performed in the afternoons. A stage thrust out into the middle of the theater building, which was usually polygonal in shape. The audience either stood in the pit in front of and around the stage, or if they paid more, could sit in the galleries on the sides of the building. Later, we get the private indoor theaters. These are much more expensive to attend. A particular famous one of these was the Blackfriars Theatre, which would eventually be used by Shakespeare's own company, The King's Men, and, in fact, not very far from where I teach at the University of Virginia in Charlottesville, just over the mountains in Stanton, there is a wonderful reconstruction of the Blackfriars Theatre. One important thing to bear in mind is that a person doesn't have to be literate in order to be able to

understand and enjoy the action of a play. So, it isn't just the educated people who were found at the open-air theaters.

The theater companies played every day, except the major church holidays. Well, they couldn't play in bad weather, of course and the theaters were closed during times of plague epidemic for fear that people massed together would help spread contagion, and plague epidemics are a reality at this time. There were violent outbreaks of Bubonic Plague in 1592, 1594, and 1603, which closed the theaters. The companies had very large repertoires; plays were learned, rehearsed, and performed in swift succession, and 10 days would be a very long run for a new play. London, at this time, has a population of about 200,000 people, and surviving records from the Globe Theatre indicate that that theater was able to hold about 3,000 people. And people went to theater a lot, so a fast turnover of plays was needed. We know, again from surviving records, that in the season of 1594 to 1595, the company known as the Lord Admiral's Men performed 38 plays, 21 of them newly written, which means a new play would have been added every two weeks or so.

Plays weren't thought to belong to high culture, to literature at all. Many hundreds of them were churned out between the 1580s and 1642. After 1642, the theaters were closed for almost two decades as a result of the more puritanical parliamentarians coming to power in the English Civil War. To be a playwright was not an elevated profession; it wasn't initially perceived as being an artist. Indeed, when the poet Ben Jonson, who also wrote plays, published his complete works in the early 17th century, many of his readers were amazed that he included his plays among them, as if they were the same kind of artistic objects as his lyric poetry. Shakespeare's work, which we tend to oh so respectfully as monumentally High Culture, with capital letters, was originally part of the popular culture of his time—entertainment for ordinary, even sub-literate folks.

As I mentioned in my previous lecture, Shakespeare writes his major tragedies between 1600 and 1608. But, let's first look at some of the tragedies produced by other playwrights between 1558, when Queen Elizabeth I came to the throne, and the writing of *Hamlet* in 1601—the forerunners, as it were, of Shakespearean tragedy.

In 1562, Thomas Sackville and Thomas Norton write *Gorboduc*. This play was written before even the first permanent theater was built by Burbage, but we do have evidence that it was performed at court before Queen Elizabeth. We can see in it certain features that we take for granted in Shakespearean drama, but which were new at the time. It has a five-act structure, a design which is derived from the classical Latin plays of the Roman author Seneca, who was much admired by Shakespeare's contemporaries and it's written in blank verse—that is, in the unrhymed verse lines in the particular rhythm we call iambic pentameter.

Iambic pentameter is a fancy way of saying that the line consists of five groups of two syllables in which the poetic stress is put on the second syllable. The sound is basically dedum dedum dedum dedum dedum. "Thou knowst the mask of night is on my face," says Juliet to Romeo, in perfect iambic pentameter. Now, it would be really boring if every single line in a verse drama had that precise rhythm. It functions as a kind of template on which rhythmical variations are made. At any rate, this is the verse form in which Shakespeare writes the greater part of his tragedies and I'll have a little more to say about it later.

But, going back to Sackville and Norton's play *Gorboduc*. *Gorboduc* is a political tragedy set in ancient Britain. It concerns the unhappy results of King Gorboduc's ignoring his counselor's advice and deciding to divide his kingdom between his two sons, an act which results in his own death, and also in the murder of one brother by the other, civil war, and a whole scale rebellion of the nobility. It sounds pretty exciting, but as all the physical action occurs offstage and is reported by messengers, and as the play is written in really, really boring verse, it is not. However, it does create a precedent in English drama for the writing of political tragedy and it shows that Elizabethan playwrights were interested from the very start in such questions as the proper actions of a king, the limits of his powers, and the conflict between the will of the

individual and the duty he owes to his state. Shakespeare himself will write a tragic drama centered upon the unhappy consequences of the division of a kingdom. He'll call it *King Lear*.

Now, in 1588, we have a huge popular hit in the form of two plays: *Tamburlaine* and its sequel, *Tamburlaine Part 2*, by Christopher Marlowe. Marlowe, who is an exact contemporary of Shakespeare's—they were born the same year, 1564—was a brilliant, unorthodox, highly gifted writer who came to an untimely end in a tavern brawl at the age of 30. In the interim, he had almost certainly been employed as a spy by Queen Elizabeth's ministers, and historians have theorized that his ostensibly accidental death may actually have been a political assassination. Marlowe, in fact, was already in trouble at the time of his death for his alleged atheism and for his radical opinions and for his tendency to make such rash public statements as, "All they that love not tobacco and boys are fools." If you've ever seen the movie *Shakespeare in Love*, you may have seen a rather splendid bravura performance by Rupert Everett as Christopher Marlowe.

Marlowe's *Tamburlaine* presents the rise to power of a hero of humble origin, a shepherd who ends up conquering most of Asia Minor. His campaigns are carried out with great brutality, and the blood and guts are not banished offstage. The play is full of spectacle, climaxing when Tamburlaine enters in triumph in a chariot pulled by the kings he has conquered and whipping them on, calling them pampered jades of Asia. Tamburlaine takes his destiny in his own hands, claims a godlike power to enforce his will upon the world. He says, "I hold the fates bound fast in iron chains. And with my hand turn Fortune's wheel about." Although the limits of his will become clear at the end of *Tamburlaine Part 2* when he faces his own mortality, the plays give more room to his rise than his fall. They thus challenge, to some extent, the medieval notion of tragedy as being largely focused upon the fall of people from high places. Nor is it Tamburlaine's pride which destroys or limits him at the end, so much as the simple fact that he's mortal, subject to time—that he's not immune to death.

In a later play, *Doctor Faustus*, 1592, Marlowe again shows us a low-born individual setting up his will against all norms and hierarchies, a man who wishes to fashion himself according to his own desires. Tamburlaine challenged the pagan fates. Faustus challenges the Christian world order and God himself. Faustus is a scholar who is frustrated by the notion of any kind of limit, including the limits of his own humanity. He has excelled in all intellectual disciplines. "Yet art thou still but Faustus and a man," he laments and commits the ultimate transgression of selling his soul to Satan for superhuman powers and knowledge. But, he can't escape the limits of his humanity. Indeed, in his final speech, spoken as the minutes tick relentlessly away from the last hour before the devil will claim him and he will be damned forever, he begs God to let him enter again a system of limitations. "Impose some end on my incessant pain. Let Faustus live in hell a thousand years, a hundred thousand and at last be saved."

After Faustus has been torn to pieces by devils, the play's chorus offers us a more conventional moral, which points to the errors of human overreaching, the destructiveness of humanity transgressing its proper limits. "Faustus is gone, regard his hellish fall, whose fiendful fortune may exhort the wise only to wonder at unlawful things." But, this concluding reassertion of orthodox morality remains in tension with the more powerful and evocative language of the aspiring and suffering Faustus. In the last hour of his life, for example, as he waits for the devil to come and drag him to hell, Faustus's agony is articulated in astonishing poetry. Even before he is literally in hell, his language offers us proof that hell is a state of mind, and it might be that, because of the resonance of his speeches, Marlowe's protagonist triumphs poetically, if not morally. The kind of challenge his desires offer to the status quo aren't completely defused or recontained by the final moralizing commentary of the chorus.

In both *Tamburlaine* and *Doctor Faustus*, a significant amount of the heroic action lies in the hero's language. Marlowe's often singled out for showing just what can be done with the blank verse line. Indeed, Marlowe's brilliant manipulation of the flexible rhythms of iambic pentameter, far more coruscating than the drab verse of *Gorboduc*, sets a fashion that prevailed for the next 50 years among English playwrights. Shakespeare would build upon Marlowe's experiments in blank verse.

Now, just to let you hear the way Marlowe's contemporaries had been writing verse drama, here's an excerpt from a play called *Cambyses* written by Thomas Preston in 1561 about a tyrannical Persian ruler. The hero-villain has just received his death wound:

“Out, alas! What shall I do? My life is finished. Wounded I am by sudden chance, my blood is minished. I feel myself a-dying now; of life bereft am I. And Death hath caught me with his dart; for want of blood I spy [expire]. Thus gasping here on ground I lie; for nothing do I care. A just reward for my misdeeds my death doth plain declare.”

As you can hear, it's horrible, clunky bombast, and it's written in a rather unfortunate seven-beat line that lends itself to poetic anticlimax. Here, by contrast, is Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus*, greeting the famous beauty, Helen of Troy, who has been summoned by the devil to satisfy his desires, dreaming of the power that magic may offer him:

“Was this the face that launched a thousand ships and burnt the topless towers of Ilium? Sweet Helen, make me immortal with a kiss. Her lips suck forth my soul, see where it flies. Come Helen come, give me my soul again. Here will I dwell, for heaven be in these lips, and all is dross that is not Helena.”

Marlowe's blank verse captures the flexible rhythms of ordinary speech, even as it gives it a formal ordering that exploits the poetic possibilities of language.

Another popular, influential play of the late 16th century was *The Spanish Tragedy* by Thomas Kyd, 1587. It starts a fashion for what we call revenge tragedies—plays which show individuals trying to enforce justice by their own actions in a world whose public and political institutions are corrupt. The hero is Hieronimo, whose son is assassinated by some highborn villains. After plunging into madness, he emerges from it to devise a plan in which, undercover of presenting a theatrical entertainment, he will turn mock deaths into real ones and kill off his enemies. When this succeeds and the stage is littered with corpses, he bites off his tongue so he can't be interrogated. Every act of violence, including the tongue chewing-off, takes place onstage, in contrast to *Gorboduc* and also to the tragedies of classical antiquity, where death and destruction were always reported by messengers. Hieronimo's one-man campaign against evil takes down most of the good characters as well; everyone is infected by the corruption of the court. A character desperate for revenge and on the verge of madness uses theater for his own purposes and brings a train of destruction in his wake. Does this remind you of anything? It has often been suggested that Kyd's play influenced Shakespeare's composition of *Hamlet*.

I've tried to suggest some of the concerns, some of the master plots for tragedy already popular by the time Shakespeare writes *Hamlet*. We should also note the actual historical context in which Shakespeare writes his tragedies. Queen Elizabeth I of England died in 1603. All the major tragedies, except *Hamlet*, appeared after her death. Elizabeth had never married. She had wanted her own independence and that of her country, had cleverly insisted she was married to England alone, and she was succeeded by James I, her second cousin, who was already King James VI of Scotland and would rule as James I of England from 1603–1625. So, we've moved from the Elizabethan world to what historians call the Jacobean period, just as Shakespeare himself turns from the comedies and histories of his earlier career to writing his chief tragedies. Jacobean is a word that is simply derived from the Latin word for James, Jacobus.

Both Shakespearian and non-Shakespearian Jacobean tragedy is very dark indeed, preoccupied with the notion of corruption in high places and the destructive effects of power. Shakespeare's major tragedies are set in spaces that are geographically distant or in the far off past, whether they are in contemporary Venice and Cyprus, or pre-Christian Britain, or 11th-century Scotland, or ancient Rome. But, wherever and whenever they unfold, they may well gesture towards contemporary British preoccupations and anxieties.

To some extent, the plays of this time seem to reflect the changes in England between two reigns. Elizabeth I was a successful and popular monarch, although her reign was darkened at the end when the

unmarried and childless queen neared her death and refused until the very last moment to designate her successor, which created a good deal of anxiety and fear that her demise would be followed by a political crisis. It may not be coincidental that *Hamlet*, written at the very end of her reign, is very much concerned with issues of inheritance, of succession, and of with the passing on of the kingdom.

James I was not a popular king and his reign saw a series of clashes between the monarch and the parliament, which would eventually climax, a generation after his death, in the English Civil War. The new king was much less skilled in manipulating the nobles and parliament than Elizabeth had been. He insisted on the absolute power of the monarch, the divine right of kings, while being less than sensitive to the moral obligation of kings. His court was significantly more corrupt than Elizabeth's and he conspicuously promoted the interest of his own favorite courtiers. He sold off public offices and sold off trade monopolies. He even sold off knighthoods quite blatantly. Meanwhile, England was suffering from galloping inflation, and while education was spreading to the middle classes, there was little sense of a meritocracy where the educated offspring of non-noble families could get a foothold in public life, or could get public office. There was a lot of unrewarded ability around, a lot of educated discontent.

The expansions of the Renaissance, the broader circulation of learning, the expanded geography disclosed by the voyages of discovery, even new possibilities for high living and refined existence, all these only threw into clearer light the limits of the autocratic political system, as well as other metaphysical limits. This is still a world of easy death. Many women die young from childbirth and many other people die young from disease. Plague epidemics, I've already mentioned, are regular. The medieval notion that this life is merely the gateway to the higher reality of the afterlife had been attenuated by a new secularism, a new interest in individual human action in the here and now. But, if this life was all there might be, then its limitations and uncertainties were, for many able men, all the more dispiriting.

Which brings us back to the notion of tragedy as a mode in which the problems of evil and injustice and the mysteries of the human condition, in general, could be reexamined—where one might try to find significance in suffering and put it in some larger pattern. At the same time, the writer of tragic drama might not only raise questions about how to make sense of the sufferings of the individual in spiritual or metaphysical terms. He might also ask questions about what we should make of the man-made forces and structures, which promote people's inhumanity to one another.

Renaissance tragedy shows a good deal of interest in the inadequacy of human institutions to enforce justice. Some of these plays hammer away at the manner in which public structures seem to come into conflict with the desires or happiness of the individual. They explore the hypocrisies, which blind whole societies to the discrepancies between the ways they profess to live and their actual actions.

To put it another way, the metaphysical questions tragedy takes up, such as, what is the morality of individual revenge, have an interesting tendency to turn into political questions. If a society's laws forbid murder, if a society's religion insists that vengeance belongs to God and not to man and that thou shalt not kill, what are the forces at work within such a society that could bring someone to feel that acting outside the law and ignoring the structures of religious belief is not only a moral obligation, but the only possible course of action?

Which brings us, of course, to *Hamlet*. But, a word before we start actually exploring this play: I'm hoping that you will read the plays yourselves before you listen to my lectures. You'll get far more out of my presentations that way. Some of you may have studied some of these plays in high school or elsewhere. I would like you to start your readings by trying to clear your head of all preconceptions you may have about them. Read like a virgin. Rediscover them. These works are infinitely susceptible to re-reading. I've been finding out new things about them for decades. I won't, incidentally, be offering you nice, tidy interpretations of them; I will be much more interested in laying out their complexities, raising lots of questions about them, and leaving space for you to ponder them further—and now, onward to *Hamlet!*

Lecture Three

Hamlet I—“Stand and unfold yourself”

Scope:

Hamlet begins with a sentry’s command to “Stand and unfold [identify, disclose] yourself.” This lecture addresses the work’s fascination with secrets, with disclosure—and with things that cannot be put into words. It will discuss Hamlet’s own “self-unfolding” in his first soliloquy; the first two acts’ “unfolding” of the multiple family dramas that introduce us to the hero’s foils, Fortinbras and Laertes; and the “unfolding” of the Ghost’s terrible secret history to the prince.

The Ghost presents Hamlet with the impossible command to avenge his father without tainting his mind in the process. A concluding meditation on the play’s emphasis on the power of memory will address Shakespeare’s interest in anatomizing parent/child relations in a world in which a father can seek to control his son’s actions even from beyond the grave.

Outline

- I. The sentry’s command to “Stand and unfold yourself” in the first scene of *Hamlet* offers a suggestive point of entry into the play.
 - A. To “unfold yourself” means to disclose your identity but also to tell your story.
 - B. The last thing Hamlet will do before he dies is ask Horatio to relate his story properly to those who survive him.
 - C. The play is full of people demanding that other people “unfold themselves,” and the Ghost wishes to “unfold” to Hamlet the story of his murder.
- II. At the same time, the play is pervaded by a sense of things untold and untellable.
 - A. Hamlet insists he has grief within him that “passes show.”
 - B. The Ghost suggests that he could tell Hamlet horrors about the afterlife that he is withholding.
 - C. We ourselves might ask whether the mysteries of this play can ever be fully unfolded.
- III. The play’s beginning also offers some unfolding of recent political history.
 - A. We learn from Horatio about “young Fortinbras,” nephew of the king of Norway, and his desire to avenge his father (killed by Hamlet’s father).
 - B. Fortinbras, although hardly ever on stage, becomes a foil or double for “young Hamlet,” who has also lost his father.
 - C. Neither Fortinbras nor Hamlet seems to have automatically succeeded his father to the throne: Denmark is an “elective” monarchy.
- IV. The second scene of *Hamlet* discloses the anxieties and resentments underpinning the relations between Hamlet and his mother and stepfather.
 - A. Claudius attempts to play substitute father to Hamlet while keeping him under surveillance.
 - B. Gertrude criticizes the extremity of Hamlet’s mourning for his father and is criticized in her turn for implying that he is merely “acting out” his grief.
 - C. Hamlet’s first soliloquy reveals the deeper reasons behind his alienation and world-weariness.
 1. We see his horror at his mother’s speedy (and, technically, incestuous) remarriage to his uncle.
 2. He makes clear his personal loathing for Claudius.

3. He perceives his mother's sexuality as a kind of animal lust.
 4. But his emotional energy is entirely focused on the marriage of Gertrude and Claudius; he shows no resentment that he is not king.
- V. Our introduction to Polonius and his children offers another scene in which family and political relations converge and a woman's actions provoke anxiety.
- A. Laertes and Polonius, like Hamlet, want to "police" the sexuality of a kinswoman; they assume that Hamlet's intentions toward Ophelia may be dishonorable.
 - B. Polonius's unfeeling treatment of Ophelia suggests that he is mainly interested in the market value of her virginity.
 - C. Although Hamlet may walk "with a larger tether" than Ophelia is permitted, it seems that the older generations seek to control the actions of *all* the younger people in this play.
- VI. The earlier scenes between parents and children climax in Hamlet's encounter with his father's ghost.
- A. The status of the Ghost is complicated by its references to purgatory (whose existence was denied by English Protestant doctrine).
 - B. Both the presence of the Ghost and the tale it tells expand upon Marcellus's remark that "something is rotten in the state of Denmark."
 - C. The Ghost's "unfolding" of the murder done by Claudius pours metaphorical poison in Hamlet's ear, just as Claudius poured poison in the living King Hamlet's ear.
 - D. The Ghost's specific command that, in avenging his father, Hamlet neither "taint" his mind nor act against his mother places the prince in an impossible position.
 1. Hamlet's mind has already been "tainted" by the Ghost's history.
 2. Hamlet remains obsessed with Gertrude's actions.
 - E. The Ghost's command to "remember me" leads Hamlet to imagine erasing his previous identity and subordinating his soul to the commands of his dead father.
 - F. Hamlet's overwhelming revulsion at what he must do may arise from the fact that despite his distaste for merely "seeming," he must now mask and dissimulate his horrible knowledge.

Essential Reading:

Shakespeare, *Hamlet*.

Supplementary Reading:

Greenblatt, *Hamlet in Purgatory*, chapter 5.

Questions to Consider:

1. Polonius's speech of advice to Laertes is well known and often quoted. How might our attitude toward Polonius's apparently sage counsel be complicated by the scene at the start of Act 2, in which he sends his servant Reynaldo to spy upon his son?
2. Just before the Ghost materializes in 1.4., Hamlet ponders the Danish national character and moves on to some larger philosophical observations. Why might Shakespeare have chosen to give him this speech at this particular moment in the play?

Lecture Three—Transcript

Hamlet I—“Stand and unfold yourself”

Beginnings are always important and Shakespeare is particularly skilled at quietly planting the seeds of later developments, as well as creating a certain mood or tone through his use of language within the first few scenes of his plays. I’m going to start my discussion of *Hamlet* by looking at the very first words of Act 1, scene 1. We’re on the ramparts of the castle of Elsinore with two edgy sentries. We can tell they’re edgy because the relieving sentry, Bernardo, challenges Francisco, the man already on guard, instead of the other way round. “Who’s there?” says Bernardo and Francisco replies, “Nay, answer me. Stand and unfold yourself.” Unfold yourself—it means to disclose your identity, but also, to tell your story. Later on, when Hamlet encounters his father’s ghost, the spirit commands him to “lend thy serious hearing to what I shall unfold.”

I’d like to emphasize the importance of unfolding in this play. In fact, the last thing its hero will do as he dies is to ask his friend Horatio to relate, to unfold his story properly to those who survive him. Act 1 is full of demands for people to unfold themselves or to unfold information. The soldier Marcellus wants to know why Denmark is in a state of military alert. Queen Gertrude wants to know why Hamlet persists in mourning his father, refuses to temper his grief. Ophelia’s father, Polonius, wants to know what exactly has been going on between her and Hamlet. Everyone who sees the ghost asks it to tell them what it is and what it wants. Horatio later wants Hamlet to tell him and Marcellus what the ghost had to say for itself, and the ghost, of course, wishes to unfold to Hamlet just what it is that is rotten in the state of Denmark.

But, all these requests to unfold are accompanied from the start by a sense of things untold and untellable. Well before the ghost’s appearance fills the sentries on the ramparts with foreboding, just as Bernardo takes over sentry duty from Francisco, Francisco says, “For this relief much thanks. ’Tis bitter cold and I am sick at heart.” We’re not going to see any more of Francisco and we don’t know why he is sick at heart, but his words point to a malaise that hovers over everybody in the play. And, of course, we’ll soon be meeting somebody else who’s sick at heart—Hamlet, who insists that he has grief within him that “passes show,” that can’t really be made fully and authentically public. Secrets abound. A few scenes later, the ghost will tell Hamlet that if he were to relate the secrets of his experience in the afterlife, he “could a tale unfold whose lightest word would harrow up thy soul,” would horrify his son’s soul, and then proceeds not to tell that tale. So, we must also ask, can the secrets of this play ever be fully unfolded?

What the first scene does offer is some unfolding of recent political history. We learn from Horatio that Denmark is full of war preparations because of a previous war in which the dead King Hamlet defeated and killed Fortinbras, king of Norway, and won a portion of his lands from him. Now, young Fortinbras, Norway’s son, who is bold and reckless—he’s described as hot and full—is mustering an army, intent on avenging his father and winning the territory back by force. It’s interesting that young Fortinbras is invoked here, because the same phrasing is used to describe Prince Hamlet himself when he’s mentioned for the first time. Horatio says, “Let us impart what we have seen tonight, unto young Hamlet.” Young Fortinbras, young Hamlet—both of them young men with dead fathers.

Fortinbras only actually appears on stage twice in the whole play, and he and Hamlet never exchange a word, but he’s a lurking off-stage presence, and as another son with a motive for revenge, a sort of double to Hamlet. We will see King Claudius sending ambassadors to the current king of Norway, whom we learn is Fortinbras’s uncle, telling him to clamp down on Fortinbras’s military ambitions. So, Fortinbras, like Hamlet, is the son of a dead king, a young man whose uncle has succeeded his father to the throne. You’ll notice, incidentally, that nobody in Denmark is going around saying, why isn’t young Hamlet king? The medieval chronicle history from which the plot of this play ultimately derives concerns a Denmark in the very distant past. At that time, Denmark was an elective monarchy and the son of the preceding monarch didn’t necessarily inherit the throne. Nonetheless, Claudius’s current actions are

dubious, in so far as he's also married his dead brother's wife, which in Shakespeare's time was technically an incestuous marriage.

Act 1, scene 2 slides from state politics into family dynamics and, in particular, parents seeking to control and contain the behavior of children. Of course, we're still really in political territory. In Denmark, the personal is the political. After sending his ambassadors to Norway, Claudius's next order of business is with two young men who want to leave town. He cheerfully permits Laertes, the son of his chief minister Polonius, to go traveling in France, but refuses permission for Hamlet to return to university at Wittenburg. Claudius doesn't want Hamlet out of his sight.

Claudius makes a point of playing father to Hamlet, not only offering paternal advice about getting over his grief, but also repeatedly calling him son. It is as if he wants to redefine their relationship and erase old Hamlet from the picture. But, Hamlet, of course, strongly resists the offered role of becoming Claudius's son. When Claudius tries to offer himself as a father to Hamlet, he responds, "a little more than kin and less than kind." Claudius is too close kin for comfort now he's married Hamlet's mother, and is not only someone whose action is unkind in the sense that it is hurtful to Hamlet, but also unkind in the early 17th-century sense of unnatural.

At the same time as Claudius is acting in this proprietary fashion, Hamlet's mother gently suggests that he's overplaying the part of the mourning son to his dead father. If everyone must go through the experience of losing a parent, why is he insisting on the uniqueness of his grief? "Why seems it so particular with thee?" says Gertrude. Hamlet seizes upon the word *seems*. "Seems madam? Nay, it is, I know not seems."

His black clothes, his tears and sad expressions constitute seeming. "An actor might play a part thus," he says, "but, I have that within which passeth show. These but the trappings and the suits of woe." I'm not just acting grief-stricken, my black clothes aren't just a costume; this isn't a mere performance. If you unfold me, you'll find inside and outside match. Except, of course, he doesn't tell her everything that is making him so wretched, the stuff that goes beyond any possible display, that "passeth show." We learn about that in his first soliloquy. Let's listen to Hamlet once he is on his own:

"O, that this too too solid flesh would melt, thaw and resolve itself into a dew. Or that the everlasting had not fixed his canon against self-slaughter. O God. God. How weary, stale, flat and unprofitable seem to me all the uses of this world. Fie on it. Fie. 'Tis an unweeded garden, that grows to seed; things rank and gross in nature possess it merely. That it should come to this. But two months dead. Nay, not so much, not two. So excellent a king; that was, to this, Hyperion to a satyr. So loving to my mother that he might not beteem the winds of heaven visit her face too roughly. Heaven and earth! Must I remember? Why, she would hang on him, as if increase of appetite had grown by what it fed on and yet, within a month—Let me not think on it. Frailty, thy name is woman. A little month, or ere those shoes were old with which she followed my poor father's body, like Niobe, all tears. Why she, even she. O, God. A beast, that wants discourse of reason, would have mourned longer, married with my uncle, my father's brother... O, most wicked speed, to post with such dexterity to incestuous sheets. It is not, nor it cannot come to good, but break my heart, for I must hold my tongue."

The soliloquy, the speech alone, the speech of self-reflection, is by dramatic convention a space of truth telling, of soul-baring. Even the villains speak the truth in soliloquy. Let's ponder the mood established by Hamlet's first soliloquy. He wants to die. He wishes that he wouldn't be risking damnation by committing suicide. Our hero is utterly disgusted with his continued existence: "How weary, flat, stale, and unprofitable, Seem to me all the uses of this world." In a thoroughly alienated manner, he describes the world as an "unweeded garden," gone to seed, rank, wild, disorderly. And as we get the story of Gertrude and Claudius's marriage retold in Hamlet's terms, it becomes clear that they are the things rank and gross in nature who seem to be infecting Hamlet's universe. He obsesses over Gertrude's speedy remarriage, harping on the shortness of time between his father's funeral and her wedding to Claudius, the

time he seems to telescope and gets shorter as he speaks of it. He presents Claudius as the absolute opposite to his father. His father was like Hyperion—that is Apollo, the sun God. Claudius is, he says, a satyr, a lustful creature, half animal, half man. Is this the objective truth of the matter, or is Hamlet's grief insisting on the extremity of Claudius's otherness?

His mother, by implication, is less than a beast. A beast, he says, would have mourned longer than she did. It's a very uncomfortable speech for the hearer. Hamlet seems horrified by the very fact of his mother's sexuality and by her refusal to discriminate between his father and Claudius as objects of her desire. Note how he generalizes about all women from her actions. "Frailty"—by this he means sort of sexual promiscuity almost or just general moral frailty—"frailty, thy name is woman," which reminds us how young he is, this kind of splendid generalization, this rather irrational leap of logic. You'll note, however, that whatever distresses him, the fact that he hasn't become king is not at the forefront of his mind. He doesn't talk at all about Claudius being king rather than himself.

And with one of the telling juxtapositions at which Shakespeare excels, the very next scene offers us another young man also worrying about female sexuality. Laertes, rather pompously and urbanely advises his sister Ophelia to distrust Hamlet's kindnesses to her, which brings us to another of the play's secrets. What exactly has passed between Hamlet and Ophelia before the action opens? It's something a director is going to have to decide before he shapes his own performance of the play, and in Kenneth Branagh's movie, for example, Branagh offered silent flashbacks in which Hamlet and Ophelia were being very intimate and loving, which that relationship was clearly sexual.

At any rate, Laertes and Polonius assume that Hamlet's intentions towards Ophelia must be dishonorable. Do not believe his vows, says Polonius. He's a prince. He will have to make a political marriage. He's only trying to beguile you, to seduce you. But, why should he be so assured of his opinion? Have we seen anything in Hamlet that suggests he's a callous and dishonorable womanizer? They seem to consider Hamlet only in terms of his political position, not as an individual who might love honorably. Polonius gives all sorts of fatherly advice to Laertes, concluding, famously, "to thine own self be true." But, he will not let Ophelia be true to herself, to act upon her belief that Hamlet's intentions are honorable.

There are some ironies here. We will later see Polonius himself sending off a kind of surveillance guy to check out what Laertes is up to in France, and that Polonius isn't a wise benign old man is suggested, perhaps, by his behavior with Ophelia, adding his own warnings to those of Laertes. He never says be careful because I don't want you to get hurt; his emphasis is on the fact that he doesn't want his property harmed. In Shakespeare's time, a woman of noble birth would be worthless on the marriage market without her virginity.

But even as he notes that Hamlet can, in any case, have more freedom of action than a young woman, because of his rank, because of his sex, Polonius's language is suggestive: "He is young, and with a larger tether may he walk than may be given to you." Within a larger tether he may walk. He has more freedom than her, but he's still on a leash. The older generation seeks to control the young in this play. While most of the men, whatever their age, want to control the sexuality of their kinswomen. All the early scenes of parents advising and seeking to control children climax in Hamlet's encounter with the ghost. You can't escape your parents, even when they're dead, in this play.

But, I want to skip for a moment to the very end of the encounter with the ghost. You may remember that when Hamlet gets Horatio and Marcellus to swear to reveal nothing of what they have seen that night, the ghost's voice is heard beneath their feet repeating the prince's command, "Swear!" And in response to this voice from the underworld, these notes from underground, Hamlet says, "Well said, old mole." Old mole. In this episode, Hamlet refers to the ghost as both a mole and also as a pioneer—that is, as a burrowing animal, and using the 17th-century term for a mining engineer. A pioneer was at that time a military digger of trenches. So, is this a being that undermines, subverts from below, a voice from hell? What's status of the ghost anyway?

The ghost tells Hamlet that he only walks at night. In the daytime, he is confined to suffer in fires until the sins he has committed during his lifetime have been burnt and purged away. He is invoking here the doctrine of purgatory. In Catholic belief of this time, the notion that a period of suffering and purging of sins must be endured before a soul might attain heaven. But, in Shakespeare's England, reformation England, Protestantism had declared the notion of purgatory to be no longer valid. How are we to take this reference to it? Is it supposed to make the audience of the play in 17th-century Protestant England suspicious of the ghost's claims? It has, after all, encouraged Hamlet to do murder. Is it Hamlet whom it is tempting to sin? Is it Hamlet it is undermining? For the ghost unfolds knowledge, which destroys innocence.

I want to think more about the ghost's terrible gift of knowledge. When, in Act 2, we see that Hamlet has not, after all, been able to carry out the ghost's behests immediately. Is this because there was something lacking in Hamlet from the start, or is it the story and the command that the ghost unfolds that corrupts or undermines or paralyzes Hamlet?

We might consider in relation to this a remark Marcellus makes just before Hamlet leaves to speak to the ghost alone. "Something is rotten in the state of Denmark," he says. Ghosts don't walk when all is well with the world. His words seem to echo Hamlet's image of his universe as a rank, poisonously overgrown garden. Marcellus is referring to his country, but note that it's possible that Denmark can mean the king of Denmark. Something may also be rotten in the state—that is, condition—of the king of Denmark. Marcellus speaks truer than he realizes. For Hamlet learns that not only is the current Denmark, Uncle Claudius, hiding evil behind his genial appearance, but that Claudius literally made something rotten in the state of Denmark. That is, he corrupted the physical condition of Hamlet's father, killing him with a poison, which made a horrible skin disease cover his entire body.

Shakespeare takes this image of a corruption of both ruler and state even further. The ghost tells Hamlet that the official bulletin about his death declares that he was stung by a serpent while sleeping in his orchard and says, "So, the whole ear of Denmark is by a forged process of my death, rankly abused." To abuse, in this context, means to misuse, to corrupt. Claudius poured his poison into the king of Denmark's ear, but the ear of the whole country, the political body of Denmark, has also been poisoned by the false story of his death.

Sixteenth and 17th-century authors regularly imagine the state as an organism comparable to a human body, or speak of the monarch's body as being continuous with the state. This is the notion of the body politic. Watch out for other images in this play of corruption and disease that seethe beneath the surface of both the state and its people, and consider the following. The ghost says that he will not unfold the terrors of purgatory, the secrets of his prison house, because it is forbidden him and it would be too much for Hamlet to bear. But it, nevertheless, leaves Hamlet in a kind of hell, which is exactly what Horatio feared when he told him not to follow the ghost, lest it draw him into madness. The ghost unfolds to Hamlet what he, in fact, already half knows. The official version of his father's death was that he was stung by a serpent while sleeping in the palace gardens, "But know, thou noble youth, the serpent that did sting thy father's life, now wears his crown." "Oh my prophetic soul," responds Hamlet, "mine uncle!" Is the ghost the prophetic soul, or has Hamlet's own soul been prophesying?

And then the ghost gives him his orders. Don't let this state of things continue, he says. "Let not the royal bed of Denmark be a couch for luxury and damned incest. But, howsoever thou pursuest this act, taint not thy mind, nor let thy soul contrive against thy mother aught." It's an impossible commission, taint not thy mind and at the same time don't contrive any action against your mother. Don't let your revenge touch her. Don't let your soul dwell on her sins. Hamlet's own ear has been poisoned by the ghost's history. Can his mind possibly not be tainted? How can he possibly separate the revenge on Claudius from his problematic relations with Gertrude? Especially since his first soliloquy showed us how obsessed he was with his mother's remarriage. When he speaks of what he has learned about Gertrude and Claudius after

the ghost's disappearance, note it's Gertrude whom he upbraids first, "O most pernicious woman," only then turning to his uncle, "O villain, villain, smiling, damned villain."

The ghost said, "Remember me." Let's see what Hamlet has to say about this:

"Remember thee? Yea, from the table of my memory I'll wipe away all trivial fond records, all saws of books, all forms, all pressures past that youth and observation copied there, and thy commandment all alone shall live within the book and volume of my brain."

The table of his memory, the image is of a writing tablet where one might copy down useful bits of information, wise sayings, observations on things that were important to one. Remembering, the act of memorializing the ghost, seems to require from Hamlet the wiping out of all other memories, of his very sense of his own identity. He has to forget himself. He swears to become a new person, a revenger. He must erase all ties, bonds, relations. They get reduced to, dismissed as trivial fond records. Does Hamlet suggest that the ghost is asking him to become something less than human? Certainly, he is no longer his own man, for, as an instrument of vengeance, he is going to have to become, in some sense, the living equivalent of his father who manifests in armor, as a warrior. But, we have already heard Hamlet say that he isn't a warrior. In his first soliloquy, he declares that Claudius is no more like his father than he, Hamlet, is like the great mythical hero Hercules, and all he wanted to do was to go back to his university life.

Hamlet's own language suggests how utterly uncongenial, how absolutely self-alienating the ghost's commands must be to him. At the very end of the scene, he declares, "The time is out of joint. O cursed spite that ever I was born to set it right." He is commanded to act, but according to somebody else's script, playing an unchosen part that he frets against. Why has he ended up being fingered by destiny as the avenging son? We have already learned that he loathes the idea of merely seeming. He's furious when his mother suggests he's putting on a rather too elaborate performance of his grief for his dead father. But, he is now going to have to dissimulate and hide the horrible knowledge he has been given. Now, he indeed has "that within which passeth show."

"The time is out of joint. O cursed spite that ever I was born to set it right." Whose is the spite in the end? Claudius's? His father's? Some cruel and unfeeling cosmic power that has put him in this position? Claudius had tried to take on old Hamlet's identity as Hamlet's father and who commanded the prince to stay in Denmark, to act against his own desires and temperament—to be a courtier, not a scholar. Is the ghost of his father doing exactly the same thing in demanding that he turn himself into a version of the dead warrior, refusing him a self, an identity of his own? Claudius poured poison into King Hamlet's ear. Are we getting a horrible replay of that event now that the ghost has poured poison into his own son's ear? How does Shakespeare himself want us to feel about the morality of revenge? Well, that's something I shall turn to in my next lecture.

Lecture Four

Hamlet II—The Performance of Revenge

Scope:

This lecture discusses the multiple perspectives *Hamlet* offers on the figure of the revenger and analyzes the play's complex exploration of the morality of revenge. Looking at the multiplying and competing acts of "plotting" within the work—and at the arrival of the players and Hamlet's exploitation of their performance for his own ends—it explores Shakespeare's interest in relationships among acting, revenge, and moral agency. Why is Hamlet so good at "acting" (that is, dissembling, role-playing) and so bad at turning the desire for revenge into the performance of revenge? Is his unwillingness to kill Claudius precipitately a sin or a virtue?

Outline

- I. Laertes's eagerness to avenge Polonius's death allows Shakespeare to explore and critique the notion that revenge is a "heroic" action.
 - A. Laertes, unlike Hamlet, seems untroubled by qualms of conscience and acts without hesitation, but his obsession with revenge allows Claudius to make him his tool.
 - B. When Hamlet acts most like Laertes—impulsively, violently—he kills the wrong man and sets in motion the events that will lead to his death.
 - C. To be bent on killing is always morally problematic: the revenger defies the dictates of Scripture when he takes over the role of divine justice, seeking to play God.
 - D. Ironically, when Hamlet tells Gertrude that the heavens have made him their "scourge and minister," he does so after mistakenly killing Polonius.
- II. Shakespeare is interested in exploring (and interrogating) the free agency of the revenger.
 - A. Laertes thinks he's fulfilling his own will and desires but is, in fact, serving Claudius's purposes.
 - B. Hamlet praises the man who is not "passion's slave" and who is unswayed by external forces, but his own situation is impossibly complicated.
 1. He is caught up in a set of events he didn't initiate and is commanded to do murder by a force beyond the grave.
 2. He is increasingly the object of plots initiated by Claudius, and he is surrounded by spies.
 3. Hamlet's will to action is also affected by his own intellect and emotions.
 - C. The complexity of Hamlet's situation suggests that the most powerful tragic dramas are those in which the protagonist is under the greatest pressure from a combination of *external and internal* forces.
 - D. It is not surprising that Hamlet contemplates suicide because his death may be the only thing he feels he has any control over.
- III. Hamlet's speeches of self-interrogation—and the soliloquies in which he lacerates himself for failing to exact bloody vengeance—often set (ostensibly) noble *action* in a complicated relationship with mere *acting*: dissembling and role-playing.
 - A. Shakespeare is here putting his own spin on a popular contemporary metaphor describing existence as a stage play (a metaphor often invoked in his other dramas).
 - B. An impromptu performance by the professional players leads Hamlet to contrast an actor's weeping for Queen Hecuba's fictional sufferings to his own inability to respond to a very real "cue for passion."

- C. Hamlet does not, however, turn away from theatricality: he deploys it to find out the truth of Claudius’s actions.
 - 1. He hopes his rewrite of *The Murder of Gonzago*, in mirroring his uncle’s murderous actions, will move Claudius to betray his guilt—although this “mirroring” is complicated when Hamlet makes the murderer the nephew of the poisoned king.
 - 2. Hamlet feels the need to be assured of Claudius’s guilt, lest the Ghost be an emissary of the devil tempting him to damn himself through murder.
 - D. Hamlet’s request that the chief player deliver a speech about Pyrrhus is interesting: the brutally vengeful Pyrrhus offers yet another problematic foil for Hamlet-as-revenger.
- IV. Hamlet is himself an actor when he deploys his “antic disposition,” his feigned madness.
- A. His crazed behavior will help him to mask his dangerous knowledge of his father’s murder.
 - B. However, conversing with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, Hamlet seems to articulate a melancholic vision remarkably similar to the one he voiced in his first soliloquy.
 - C. The slippery borderline between performance and reality is also suggested by his aggressive behavior to Ophelia in the nunnery scene.
- V. Hamlet as would-be man of action is juxtaposed not only with Laertes but also with Fortinbras.
- A. Sent on a mission to England by Claudius, Hamlet encounters the army of Fortinbras.
 - B. When Hamlet learns that Fortinbras and his men are risking their lives to recapture a meager bit of territory, he is moved to compare his own hesitations with their valiance.
 - C. At the same time that he seems to find Fortinbras’ actions heroic, Hamlet betrays in his soliloquy some skepticism concerning the rash courage that risks others’ lives “even for an eggshell.”
 - D. Shakespeare offers us the possibility that Hamlet’s scruples may be more admirable than the unthinking violence of Fortinbras and Laertes.
 - E. Hamlet’s world celebrates the warrior ethos that justifies destructive action when personal honor seems to be at stake. The question remains whether Hamlet can in fact play out the “Fortinbras script.”

Essential Reading:

Shakespeare, *Hamlet*.

Supplementary Reading:

Kerrigan, *Revenge Tragedy: Aeschylus to Armageddon*, pp. 181–192.

Mangan, *A Preface to Shakespeare’s Tragedies*, pp. 133–141.

Questions to Consider:

1. What advice on acting does Hamlet give the players before they stage the “play within the play”? Can you relate his concerns here to his other meditations on what it means to *act* (in both senses of the word)?
2. How does Hamlet exploit his assumed “antic disposition” to particular effect in his conversations with the various characters who are spying on his doings?

Lecture Four—Transcript

Hamlet II—The Performance of Revenge

In Act 4, scene 5 of *Hamlet*, Laertes, having heard of his father's death and desperate to find out who is responsible for it, comes charging back from France, stirs up a mob of supporters, and invades the palace. He does not pause for a soliloquy. "How came he dead? I'll not be juggled with. To hell, allegiance! Vows to the blackest devil! Conscience and grace to the profoundest pit! I dare damnation... Let come what comes. Only I'll be revenged most thoroughly for my father." Laertes doesn't care about the moral consequences of taking his revenge. He dispatches his conscience to hell and says I dare damnation. This is very different from Hamlet's scrupulous worrying about whether the ghost he's seen is really his father's spirit or an emissary from the devil seeking to tempt him to murder.

Laertes appears to be better qualified to be the hero of an orthodox revenge tragedy than Hamlet. But, the play isn't called *The Tragedy of Laertes, Nobleman of Denmark*. Shakespeare has chosen to explore what happens when an intelligent, sensitive, thoughtful man, who knows that actions have consequences and is concerned about the moral status of those actions, is asked to play a role that is entirely alien to his own nature. Indeed, it is on the one occasion that Hamlet acts most like Laertes—impulsively, violently—that he ends up causing the most havoc. That is, when he lunges out at the tapestry in his mother's bedroom, thinking Claudius is concealed behind it and finds it is Laertes's father that he has killed. And this is a watershed moment in the play. By killing Polonius, Hamlet himself becomes a man of blood, implicated in the pattern of wanton killings in Denmark. His action drives Ophelia into madness and sets in motion the train of events, which will lead to his own death at Laertes's hands.

Shakespeare offers us the much more conventional revenger, Laertes, as a foil to the prince, using him to critique the notion that revenge is necessarily a heroic action, because think what happens to the reckless Laertes. His passion for revenge allows Claudius to manipulate him easily. Before he knows it, he has become the king's tool. He starts by insisting that his honor requires that he carry out this revenge, that if he remains calm in the face of his father's death, he isn't his father's son. But, Claudius's proposition to Laertes is hardly honorable. He persuades him to arrange what will look like a kind of exhibition fencing match between himself and Hamlet, but one at which Laertes's sword will accidentally be unbated—that is, it won't be the blunt sword used for practice fights. Upon which Laertes proposes that his sword will not just be unbated, but poisoned. "I'll touch my point with this contagion, that if I gall him slightly it may be death." Poison and contagion and disease again. Laertes, in enthusiastically agreeing to Claudius's plan and then giving it a spin of his own, has become a part of the rot in Denmark.

The ghost said to Hamlet, don't taint your mind as you follow my commands, an impossible proposition. To be bent on murder is to be contaminated, in some sense. The universe of the play is indeed an officially Christian universe and revenge is officially forbidden in a Christian universe. We have the biblical injunction, "Thou shalt not kill," and the verse of the Bible most usually quoted in respect to revenge is from chapter 12 of St. Paul's Epistle to the Romans, verse 19: "Dearly beloved, avenge not yourselves...for it is written, Vengeance is mine; I will repay, saith the Lord," which are perhaps some of the most ignored words in the New Testament.

A revenger takes over the role of divine justice; he seeks to play God. Hamlet, indeed, will tell Gertrude that he is the heavens' scourge and minister, their agent who is carrying out God's punishments on earth. Ironically, he says this to her after he has killed the wrong person. Laertes thinks he's a heroic revenger fulfilling his own will and desires, but Claudius quickly starts scripting his actions, and his mind becomes as poisoned as the sword he'll use on Hamlet. Let's pursue this matter of revengers acting within other people's scripts a little further. In his tragedies, Shakespeare is particularly interested in exploring the whole issue of human agency. What shapes and what inhibits our actions? To what extent are our actions the products of our own free will and choice? To what extent are they determined by other people's actions or by social, political, cultural and even cosmic forces external to us?

Hamlet, praising his friend Horatio's character, honors the man who is not passion's slave, who stands alone, unswayed by the winds of fortune—a noble stoic. Laertes is certainly slave to his own passions. He also becomes subject to Claudius's will and desires. Hamlet's own situation is impossibly complicated. He is caught up in a set of events he didn't initiate within a world from which he feels wholly alienated. A force beyond the grave has commanded him on his honor as a loyal son to do certain terrible things. He is increasingly the object of plots initiated by Claudius. He is surrounded by people spying on his actions, and his will to action is also going to be affected by his own nature. There are forces within him that are going to shape what he does. I'd suggest to you, in fact, that the most powerful tragic dramas are those in which the protagonist is under the greatest pressure from a combination of external and internal forces.

It is not surprising, perhaps, that Hamlet has two soliloquies in which he contemplates suicide. His death may be the only thing he feels he has any control over. Famously, in the "to be or not to be" soliloquy, he is brought up short when he meditates upon the scary unknown of what comes next, the undiscovered country of the afterlife, the territory from which no traveler returns. He's trapped in a nightmarish existence, but worse might await. He tries to persuade himself that to die is simply to enter a final sleep, but in the sleep of death, what dreams might come?

The multiplicity of forces and circumstances impinging upon Hamlet's doings are suggested by the many and competing plots and performances devised by the play's characters. We have multiple plotters. Claudius orchestrates the treacherous duel. The ghost plots revenge and plots the cleansing of the monarchy. Hamlet plots to use a theatrical performance to nudge Claudius into revealing his guilt, and also puts everybody on edge with his extended performance of the antic disposition, that is, his faked madness. The king and queen give Rosencrantz and Guildenstern a script to follow as they command them to try to get Hamlet to reveal the cause of his melancholy. The king and Polonius stage two encounters to find out more about Hamlet's state of mind. First, the losing of Ophelia to him, while Claudius and Polonius spy on their encounter. Later, the interrogation of Hamlet by Gertrude while Polonius listens behind the tapestry. Hamlet rewrites this particular script, of course, when, thinking it is Claudius lurking behind the curtain, he kills Polonius.

The play keeps showing us its hero's interrogation of his actions, his renewed attempts to fulfill the ghost's commands, his self-laceration for his failure to act. At the same time, it interweaves the notion of heroic action with that of another kind of acting, dissembling, feigning, counterfeiting. It's not perhaps surprising this comes up so much; the very notion of comparing existence to a stage play is a particular favorite in Renaissance England, and you might think of references to this in Shakespeare's other plays. "All the world's a stage and all the men and women are merely players," says Jaques in *As You Like It*. Macbeth, of course, compares life to a poor player that struts and frets his hour upon the stage.

When the professional players arrive at Elsinore, Hamlet asks their leader to deliver a speech from a play in which a character is describing the last terrible night of the Trojan War. He is speaking of the Greeks' sacking of the city and the climactic moment when Pyrrhus, the son of the Greek hero Achilles, kills King Priam of Troy in revenge for his own father's death. The speech ends with a description of Queen Hecuba lamenting the butchering of her husband. Polonius, who is not the world's most sophisticated drama critic, exclaims at the fact that the actor is weeping as he speaks.

In the soliloquy Hamlet speaks after everybody has left, he is very much struck by the implications of this. "Is it not monstrous that this player here, but in a fiction, in a dream of passion could force his soul so to his own conceit? Tears in his eyes, distraction in his aspect. A broken voice. What's Hecuba to him, or he to Hecuba, that he should weep for her? What would he do had he the motive and the cue for passion that I have?" How can he, Hamlet, do nothing when the player, but in a fiction, in a dream of passion, has displayed such grief? What's Hecuba to him, or he to Hecuba? What does it mean that he, Hamlet, is silent about the death of his father, and has done nothing to avenge it?

But, Hamlet doesn't then rush off to kill Claudius. Having drawn our attention to the gap between the players' fabricated emotion and his own very real motive and cue for passion, he doesn't turn away from

counterfeiting, from acting, from pretending he doesn't know what he knows. He instead tries to exploit the possibilities of counterfeiting, of acting, of theatricality. He will have the players reenact the murder of his father and observe Claudius's reaction. "I have heard that guilty creatures sitting at a play have by the very cunning of the scene been struck so to the soul that presently they have proclaimed their malefactions." His art will hold a mirror up to nature and Hamlet will invite Claudius to see himself in the drama he stages for the court, to acknowledge his own crimes. "If he but blench, I know my course." If Claudius just turns pale, he'll know what to do, and we might recall here Sidney's definition of tragedy: "The high and excellent tragedy, that openeth the greatest wounds, and showeth forth the ulcers that are covered with tissue. That maketh kings fear to be tyrants and tyrants manifest their tyrannical humors."

But, the mirror presented by Hamlet's rewrite of *The Murder of Gonzago* is an interestingly skewed one. We do have a murdered king and a faithless queen, but who is the third character? As the little play is performed to the court, Hamlet offers a running commentary, and as the player who will murder the king enters, he says, "This is one Lucianus, nephew to the king"—that is, the murderer of the king in Hamlet's play is not the king's brother, but the king's nephew.

The play within a play could be thought of as showing Claudius killing his brother and then seducing his sister-in-law, or, alternatively, it could be showing Hamlet, the nephew of Claudius, killing Claudius and reclaiming his mother from him. Did Hamlet consciously mean to alter the original scenario? And what exactly has terrified Claudius when he calls for lights, lights, and flees the room?

Let's go back to the soliloquy at the end of Act 2, and look a little more at Hamlet's lingering doubts about the ghost in that speech. After deciding to stage a play that reenacts his father's death, he says:

"The spirit that I have seen may be the devil, and the devil hath power to assume a pleasing shape. Yea, and perhaps out of my weakness and my melancholy...abuses me to damn me. I'll have grounds more relative than this. The play's the thing wherein I'll catch the conscience of the king."

Hamlet has been asked to play the role of revenger, but it has to be his own action done on his own terms. He starts this long soliloquy cursing himself for his inertia, but he ends it insisting he doesn't want to be the tool of any dark force.

Something else we might note: On the one hand, the player offers Hamlet a stimulus to action. If he can be so moved by the tears of a fictional queen, why can't I be moved to action by the real death of my father? But, the players' bombastic set piece also offers a very repellent vision of a revenger in action. The frenzied Pyrrhus who chops up the limbs of old Priam with his sword. Pyrrhus constitutes another problematic alter ego for Hamlet, a fourth revenger to set beside Fortinbras and Laertes. Shakespeare's deployment of all these reflections and refractions of Hamlet's situation keeps obliging us to interrogate the morality of revenge. Hamlet ends his soliloquy by deciding to use feigning and indirect methods to justify his own vengeance. In pretending only to be putting on an entertainment for the court, he'll continue to act, to dissemble, rather than to take violent and direct action.

So, let's think a bit more about Hamlet, the actor. The most striking example of Hamlet's acting is his supposed madness. After he's seen the ghost, Hamlet warns Horatio and Marcellus that, in future, he may choose to feign insanity and to put on what he calls an antic disposition. There's an obvious logic behind this. He knows too much and he has to conceal what he knows. He can't possibly just act naturally, so he will act as if he's thoroughly crazy. But, if one looks closely at just how he enacts his supposed condition, some interesting things come into focus. For example, when Rosencrantz and Guildenstern—those Renaissance frat boys—show up at court and Hamlet realizes that they have been set upon him to uncover the cause of his troubled mind, he offers a kind of self-diagnosis for their benefit. "I have of late, but wherefore I know not, lost all my mirth." He goes on to say that all that is beautiful in the universe now looks hideous to him. "What a piece of work is a man? How noble in reason, how infinite in faculty, in

action how like an angel, in apprehension how like a god, the beauty of the world, the paragon of animals. And yet to me, what is this quintessence of dust? Man delights not me, nor woman neither.”

I’m going through a serious existential crisis; I haven’t a clue why, but it has put me in a condition of chronic melancholy, alienated from all humanity. In context, it might be offered as a safely generalized answer to stop Rosencrantz and Guildenstern’s proddings and to get them off his back, with a little joke in the end to show them he’s still their witty friend. But, if you think about it, he’s reporting exactly the condition he described in Act 1, before he started to feign madness. Remember the words he spoke from the heart in his first soliloquy: “How weary, flat, stale and unprofitable seem to me all the uses of this world.” Is the vision he offered in that first soliloquy really so different from the condition of anomie he describes to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern?

That is, the act he’s putting on for the benefit of all the court spies is pretty close to his own previous reality. So, what is performance, what is reality? Hamlet’s actions are at their most ambiguous perhaps in the nasty scene in which the wretched Ophelia is shoved into his path and he abuses her, makes her part of a general indictment of the deceits of women, and ends by telling her to get herself off to a nunnery. In Shakespearian English, a nunnery is the slang term for a brothel. He really seems to have lost it. It’s hard to draw the line between performance and pathology at this moment. But, whom is he actually talking to in this scene?

The whole encounter with Ophelia was carefully planned between Claudius and Polonius in Act 2, scene 2, and in that scene Hamlet enters at the end of their conversation. Does he hear anything of their plans? And this is another problem that a director will have to resolve for him or herself. The Olivier film version of *Hamlet*, in that the camera shows Hamlet quite clearly overhearing the exchange between the king and Polonius.

When Hamlet castigates Ophelia in Act 3, scene 1, some of his lines do seem strongly to hint at an awareness he’s being spied on. He suddenly says out of nowhere to her, where’s your father? And, of course, Ophelia is all too aware that her father is lurking and listening. And then, he goes off on that rant in which he says, “I say we will have no more marriages. Those that are married already, all but one, shall live. The rest shall keep as they are.” Those that are married already, all but one, shall live. Claudius might not like the sound of that. Hamlet might be seen here as a very skillful actor, speaking to one audience while also directing some jibes at another, without ever quite betraying that he knows himself to be under surveillance. But, he himself is repeatedly fearful that he is only acting, in the most problematic sense of just posturing, just playing a role.

I started this lecture by comparing Laertes and Hamlet. I’d now like to return to a doubling I pointed out between Hamlet and Fortinbras, another angry young man. They almost, but don’t quite meet in Act 4, scene 4. Their not quite meeting triggers more of Hamlet’s meditations on the problem of acting and action.

Fortinbras has been packed off by his uncle on a military mission to Poland. Hamlet, who has been packed off by his uncle on a diplomatic mission to England watches Fortinbras’s troops marching towards Poland and asks what’s going on. He’s told that they’re going to try to win back a small and worthless patch of disputed territory, which the Poles are defending fiercely. Hamlet, as he did with the player’s speech about Hecuba, makes this information the starting point for some reflections of his own. Soliloquizing about what he has seen, he wrestles with his own apparent inability to play the revenger:

“Now, whether it be bestial oblivion or some craven scruple of thinking too precisely on the event... I do not know why yet I live to say, ‘This thing’s to do,’ sith I have cause, and will, and strength, and means to do’t. Examples gross as earth exhort me. Witness this army of such mass and charge, led by a delicate and tender prince, whose spirit, with divine ambition puffed, makes mouths at the invisible event, exposing what is mortal and unsure to all that fortune, death, and danger dare, even for an eggshell... How stand I then, that have a father killed, a mother stained,

excitements of my reason and my blood, and let all sleep? While to my shame I see the imminent death of twenty thousand men that for a fantasy and trick of fame go to their graves like beds.”

This is a very double-edged speech. Whether it is a kind of cowardice, says Hamlet, or whether it is that I am being too conscience-stricken and scrupulous, or whether it is that I am worrying too much about what I’ll face after killing my uncle, whatever it is, I’m still talking, not acting. Here is a brave, ambitious young prince who risks everything even for an eggshell. I have an urgent reason to use violence, but do nothing, and now I see Fortinbras’s whole army facing death for a fantasy and a trick of fame, fighting over a bit of land not big enough to bury them all because they think it is the honorable thing to do.

But, as Hamlet exhorts himself to take action, to play the role of revenger properly, his argument is oddly self-subverting. He berates himself for fretting about the consequences of his actions, for thinking too precisely on the event and not making a move. But, is this his problem? Does this speak to some lack in him, or are his scruples what make him more fully human than a Laertes or a Fortinbras?

Hamlet’s world values the warrior ethos, which justifies destructive action when personal honor seems to be at stake. Hamlet, at times, seems to try to toe the party line, but his intellect and imagination persist in implicitly or explicitly interrogating the very ethos he is trying to imitate. Here he seems to wish to emulate the heroic warrior, tearing off to fight over an eggshell. But, his own thought processes, his own words, his metaphors, betray him. They set up a countercurrent to his purported desires. Look at the images he evokes. Fighting over an eggshell. Going to one’s death for a fantasy or a trick of fame. His language keeps evoking a very futile kind of violence. Can Fortinbras really be a role model? Hamlet ends his soliloquy with another assertion of renewed aggression: “O, from this time forth, my thoughts be bloody, or be nothing worth.” It’s pretty melodramatic stuff. Can Hamlet really play the Fortinbras script?

Well, I shall eventually be looking at what happens to Hamlet’s bloody thoughts of revenge, but in my next lecture, I am going to change my focus a little and explore some of the play’s other preoccupations and other characters and, in particular, its much abused women, Gertrude and Ophelia.

Lecture Five

Hamlet III—Difficult Women

Scope:

This lecture takes as its starting point the observation that although Hamlet may be slow to enact his revenge upon Claudius, he is capable of extraordinary emotional violence against his mother and against the young woman he claims to have loved. (It is to them that he “speaks daggers.”) The lecture explores Hamlet’s confrontations with Gertrude and Ophelia, addressing in particular his preoccupation with their sexuality; it also considers, in passing, the paradox that despite the fact that the “transgressive” actions of women seem to trigger a good deal of crucial action in this play, it is difficult to think of Gertrude and Ophelia as tragic protagonists in their own right. The lecture concludes by comparing Hamlet’s dissembled madness, his “antic disposition,” with the way that Shakespeare represents Ophelia’s actual madness.

Outline

- I. *Hamlet* is an enormously capacious play—but it is also a play full of gaps, secrets, and silences, and some of its most baffling aspects concern its female characters.
 - A. Although we learn a lot about Hamlet’s inner life and hear Claudius revealing his guilty fears in soliloquy, Ophelia and Gertrude have little or no opportunity for self-reflection.
 - B. We do not know how Ophelia feels about being told to cease communication with Hamlet, then being used as a tool in Polonius’s and Claudius’s machinations.
 - C. We cannot be entirely sure, when Hamlet tells Gertrude that Claudius murdered his father, whether she thinks he is speaking the truth or speaking in his madness.
- II. “Unreadable” as they are, Gertrude and Ophelia do operate as flash points for Hamlet’s anger. In Acts 1–3, much of his emotional violence is projected onto and directed at the two women.
 - A. In the “nunnery scene,” Hamlet verbally savages Ophelia and associates her with all the faults stereotypically ascribed to women in a misogynist culture.
 - B. Hamlet has been reviling his mother’s remarriage since Act 1, and when he is summoned to her chamber, he sidesteps an opportunity to kill Claudius in order to “speak daggers” to Gertrude.
 - C. As well as disclosing Claudius’s guilt, Hamlet dwells unpleasantly upon his vision of Gertrude’s sexual relationship with his uncle.
 - D. In a revenge play ostensibly focused upon the imperative to kill Claudius, Hamlet often behaves as if his mother is the primary transgressor.
 - E. Even though Shakespeare’s culture “policed” women’s sexuality very strictly, the degree of Hamlet’s disgust at his mother’s mature desires cannot be explained by historical difference alone.
- III. Interestingly, Shakespeare’s own representation of Gertrude is far more sympathetic than Hamlet’s characterization of his mother.
 - A. In 1.2., Gertrude gently tries to persuade Hamlet not to lose himself in grief.
 - B. In 2.2., she is worried by his ever-more disturbing behavior and shows herself to be well aware of some of the factors that have caused it.
 - C. Gertrude alone shows kindness to Ophelia when she is being used to bait a trap for Hamlet.
- IV. The “closet scene” is a particularly charged moment in the interaction between Hamlet and Gertrude.

- A. The fact that Polonius is lurking in a private space that would normally be accessible only by her husband or son confirms that Gertrude is complicit in Claudius’s spying on Hamlet.
 - B. In this scene, Hamlet acts with a violence we do not see again until the very end of the play and lays bare his mother’s most intimate acts.
 - C. Despite the violence of Hamlet’s assault on her, Gertrude afterwards describes his actions (to Claudius) in a forgiving light and speaks of him more generously than he ever speaks of her.
- V. The situations of Ophelia and Hamlet are in some ways parallel, but there are significant differences in Shakespeare’s treatment of their responses to their pain.
- A. Ophelia is not represented as instigating action or agonizing over her choices; her speeches show little of her inner state.
 - B. Ophelia, like Hamlet, can articulate her anger or grief in the language of madness that takes her outside the bounds of courtly decorum.
 - 1. But Hamlet uses his antic disposition to attack other people, elucidate their motives, and mirror back to them their problematic behavior. He operates in dialogue with others.
 - 2. Ophelia speaks in isolation and in heavily coded language, often through fragments of song.
 - 3. Hamlet’s “antic disposition” causes anxiety and fear in others; Ophelia’s madness causes pain and distress, but her actions are ultimately reduced to a pathetic yet pretty spectacle.
- VI. The play’s treatment of Ophelia’s death reinforces this muting of her actions.
- A. Gertrude describes her death in a lyrical speech in which Ophelia disappears into the natural setting where she perished.
 - B. Ophelia has little or no agency; the passivity she displays as she drowns differs significantly from the consciously chosen “self-slaughter” Hamlet has contemplated.

Essential Reading:

Shakespeare, *Hamlet*.

Supplementary Reading:

Adelman, *Suffocating Mothers: Fantasies of Maternal Origin in Shakespeare’s Plays*, chapter 2.

Showalter, “Representing Ophelia: Women, Madness and the Responsibilities of Feminist Criticism,” in *Shakespeare’s Middle Tragedies: A Collection of Critical Essays*, David Young, ed., pp. 56–69.

Questions to Consider:

1. Take another look at the scenes in which Ophelia appears prior to Polonius’s death. Can you glean anything about her own state of mind and opinions from her few speeches?
2. Why do you think Shakespeare has the ghost reappear in the closet scene? How does its brief appearance affect the dynamics of Hamlet’s confrontation with Gertrude?

Lecture Five—Transcript

Hamlet III—Difficult Women

Hamlet is almost never performed in its entirety. An uncut performance would take at least four hours. The film versions directed by Olivier and Zeffirelli are very much abridged. When Kenneth Branagh chose to film a complete text of the play, he was doing something quite unprecedented. This play is capacious. It incorporates discussions of the theater and of the theory of acting, meditations on suicide, on female sexuality, on warfare, on free will, fortune, and divine providence, on the powers and limits of human reason, on the nature of the afterlife, on human mortality, human passions, on the discrepancies between seeming and being, on the art of the duel, the phenomenology of ghosts, the relations between fathers and sons, sons and mothers, on the duties of kingship, and the silliness of certain contemporary court fashions. It's got everything in it except the kitchen sink. And yet, it is also a play that seems to be full of gaps, secrets, and silences.

Hamlet insists that he has that within, that "passeth show," but we still get an awful lot of Hamlet on show. His part is one of the two or three longest in all of Shakespeare's plays. And we get something of Claudius's inner life, too, when he finally has the soliloquy, as he tries to pray, that makes it quite clear to the audience that he did kill his brother.

But what about the women in this play? For me, they evoke questions that the text doesn't always or completely answer because, in the speeches they are given, we hardly ever see them disclosing their desires or reflecting upon their experiences. How strong are Ophelia's feelings for Hamlet? How intimate had they been with one another before Polonius interfered in Act 1, scene 3? How does she feel about first having to cut off communication with him and later being used as a tool by her father and king Claudius in their own machinations? Why does the madness caused by her father's death make her speak the way she does to Gertrude, Claudius, and Laertes? Was her death an accident or suicide?

And what about Gertrude? When Hamlet, in his mother's bedchamber, accuses Claudius of murdering his father, he doesn't exactly supply a lot of supporting evidence. Does Gertrude think he is speaking the truth or that this is part of his madness? If she does believe it, what does it do to her feelings for Claudius? How does she feel about her own son lecturing her on her sex life? And why isn't old Hamlet's ghost visible to her?

I ask these questions not to suggest that Shakespeare should have written his play quite differently with either Ophelia or Gertrude at its center, but rather to try to highlight certain artistic choices he did make. One thing in particular interests me. On the one hand, we don't get soliloquies from these women. We don't get them laying bare their private thoughts. They are given far less to say than the main male characters. But, on the other hand, Gertrude and Ophelia do operate as flash points for other people's emotional intensity, particularly that of Hamlet. This play will end with a lot of dead bodies on stage, but a good deal of the emotional violence before the final bloodbath is projected on to and directed at the two women.

Let me try to offer an overview of this particular phenomenon. Hamlet's first soliloquy keeps returning to his mother's swift remarriage, his horror at her slipping between, what he calls, incestuous sheets to embrace his uncle. "A beast...would have mourned longer," he says. After the ghost tells his story, Hamlet cries out against his mother, "O most pernicious woman," before he calls Claudius "damned, damned villain." We should remember, incidentally, that the ghost never suggests that Gertrude was an accessory to or even aware of the murder itself.

One of the first ways in which Hamlet stages his assumed madness is to show up in Ophelia's chamber looking both anguished and threatening. "He took me by the wrist and held me hard," she reports. In the only scene in which we see him alone on stage with Ophelia, he lays into her with enormous verbal violence and cries out, "Get thee to a nunnery!"—which, as I've already mentioned, could mean "Get thee to a brothel!" in Elizabethan slang. Berating her, telling her "I know all about you, about your female

artifice and deception,” he associates her with all the faults stereotypically ascribed to women in a misogynist culture. He also directs a series of cruel and coarse remarks at her before the staging of the play within a play.

“Lady,” he says, “shall I lie in your lap?” This is not the kind of behavior one expects at a court function and Ophelia nervously says, “No, my lord.” “I mean, my head upon your lap?” Hamlet says. “Did you think that I meant country matters?”—rustic tumbling on the one hand, but with a hint of an obscene buried pun. And of course, when he’s summoned to Gertrude’s chamber, Hamlet says, “I will speak daggers to her, but use none.” On his way there, he actually has the chance to stick a dagger in Claudius, but he backs out, claiming that, as the king is at his prayers, he might end up in heaven, which is not where Hamlet wishes to send him. Instead, he goes to his mother’s room and manhandles and bullies Gertrude until she cries out for help, which is what makes Polonius reveal his presence behind the tapestry.

After he has run Polonius through with his sword, thinking that it was Claudius lurking there, Hamlet brutally tells Gertrude what he thinks of her remarriage and accuses her of being possessed by the filthiest kind of lust. He seems especially appalled at the idea that a woman of mature years could still be interested in sex. I personally find this opinion rather problematic. He dwells upon his vision of her sexual relationship with Claudius. She has chosen to live, he says, “in the rank sweat of an enseamed bed, stewed in corruption, honeying and making love over the nasty sty.” His language makes her throw his own metaphor of speaking daggers back at him. She cries out, “These words, like daggers, enter in mine ears.”

But in a revenge play, where what is officially at issue is the murder of old Hamlet by Claudius and the question of whether Hamlet should obey the Ghost’s command and kill Claudius, it’s astonishing how much poetic energy is actually taken up by Hamlet’s assaults on female sexuality, as if this is what is primarily rotten in the state of Denmark from Hamlet’s point of view. As if Gertrude, in particular, is the main and original transgressor who has precipitated all the horror, and Ophelia is a kind of echo of her. The prince’s horrified fascinations with his mother’s doings, and the violence that he ends up unleashing in the most private space of her chamber, these are all the more striking because his father’s ghost had explicitly ordered him not to act against his mother, to leave her to her own conscience.

Female chastity, not only in the sense of premarital virginity, but also in the sense of monogamy within marriage, was a cultural absolute in Renaissance Europe. There were pragmatic reasons behind the societal double standard, which punished female unchastity much more harshly than male philandering. Inheritance was patrilineal, through the male line. In an age without DNA testing, fathers needed to know that their sons were their own. A man’s honor was absolutely bound up with the chastity of his wife. But, Gertrude is probably beyond childbearing years and Hamlet isn’t married to her; he’s her son. This is, to be sure, a culture where adult males often had authority over all the women in their family. But, there seems to be something very particular, excessive about Hamlet’s problems with his mother’s sexuality, something that can’t be explained simply by invoking historical difference.

It’s interesting to ask, does the play itself represent Gertrude with the kind of repulsion with which Hamlet depicts his mother and her actions? The prince comes close to describing her as a depraved, lust-obsessed, heartless animal. But, it’s interesting to compare Hamlet’s version of Gertrude with Shakespeare’s version of Gertrude. We don’t hear a lot from Gertrude, but what we do hear is far from horrible. In Act 1, scene 2, she gently tries to persuade Hamlet not to lose himself in his grief. In Act 2, scene 2, she is obviously worried at his ever more disturbing behavior and fervently hopes that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern will bring him out of his melancholy. When Claudius and Polonius are speculating on just what is wrong with Hamlet, Gertrude shows herself to be far from insensitive. Claudius tells her that Polonius has a theory about the cause of Hamlet’s mental disturbance and she responds, I doubt, I doubt, I believe. “I doubt it is no other but the main, his father’s death and our o’er hasty marriage.” When Polonius and Claudius are callously setting up Ophelia to bait a trap for Hamlet with no thought to her feelings, Gertrude is the only one who speaks kindly to the young

woman. “And for your part Ophelia, I do wish that your good beauties be the happy cause of Hamlet’s wildness. So, I shall hope your virtues will bring him to his wounded way again to both our honors.” She hopes Ophelia’s virtuous love can heal her son. She would obviously not oppose a marriage between them.

Hamlet’s is only one voice in the play. It’s the most articulate and compelling, but there are others. A play is a dialogic structure; multiple voices offer multiple perspectives. Hamlet’s own voice is so powerful that we may find ourselves co-opted, almost kidnapped, into sharing his point of view and ignore the words of other characters that complicate or even contradict it. Of course, from Hamlet’s perspective, the thing that damns both Ophelia and Gertrude is the fact that they let themselves be used in the plots of Claudius and Polonius. This is a world where women are pawns in the bigger chess games played by the men. As I mentioned last time, these are games that can be played in two directions, as when Hamlet uses his conversation with Ophelia to direct jibes at the eavesdropping King Claudius.

Gertrude summons Hamlet to a private conference. Rosencrantz says to the prince that Gertrude “desires to speak with you in her closet ere you go to bed.” Now, this is important, Gertrude is not in a little clothes closet, but in her own chamber. The word closet is used for various kinds of relatively private rooms at this time. I should mention that in the 17th century, the space in large palatial establishments is organized rather differently from what we expect of houses. Most of the rooms are public rooms. There’s very little, absolutely private space. So, going into the space of the closet is quite a big deal. You’re going into intimate space. When Hamlet overhears a noise behind the tapestry, the arras, he assumes it must be Claudius. The only men who would normally be permitted in the queen’s bedroom would be her husband or her son. The fact that it is Polonius and that Gertrude is not surprised that it is Polonius immediately reveals his mother’s involvement in the surveillance plot. Things, in fact, get pretty crowded in Gertrude’s closet. Hamlet is getting into the nooks and crannies of Gertrude’s private life. He thinks that he’s sharing space with Claudius, whom he considers an interloper in his mother’s bed, but is, in fact, doing so with a nosy old man who takes far too much interest in people’s private doings. Then, later in the scene, the ghost appears to Hamlet for the second time—that is, Gertrude’s other husband materializes, as if he’s running an intervention to get Hamlet back on track again, to make him reassume the proper role of vengeful son, not to hang around playing something rather close to an angry husband.

Here’s one last observation about Gertrude. When Claudius enters in the next scene and finds her weeping, she covers for Hamlet. She says it was his madness that had led him to attack the tapestry and kill Polonius, and when Claudius asks where her son has gone now, she says he’s gone to bear off Polonius’s body, adding that, even in the midst of his madness, Hamlet is weeping for what he has done. Well, is he? If you glance back at the end of the previous scene, Hamlet’s final speech to Gertrude goes as follows: “I’ll lug the guts,”—that’s not a very nice way to talk about a dead body—“I’ll lug the guts into the neighbor room. Mother, good night indeed. This counselor is now most still, most secret, and most grave, who was in life a foolish prating knave,”—which is a pretty brutal epitaph for Polonius, now reduced to a heap of guts by Hamlet’s language. There’s not much weeping here. Gertrude’s language about Hamlet is far more gentle and forgiving than his is ever about her.

Alright, I’d now like to turn to the play’s other woman, Ophelia. There are some interesting similarities between Hamlet’s situation and Ophelia’s. In Act 1, Hamlet and Ophelia are both given commands that they are reluctant to obey by their fathers. They both lose their fathers to violence. Hamlet is swamped in melancholy, assumes the appearance of madness, and contemplates suicide. Ophelia succumbs to actual madness and dies in dubious circumstances that may be, in effect, suicide. But, although there are some teasing parallels between Ophelia and Hamlet’s situations, the dramatic presence of Ophelia is of course nothing like that of Hamlet in the play. We don’t see her agonizing over her options. She doesn’t appear even to have choices to make or, at least, they’re not dramatized as such. She’s given no speeches, apart from perhaps the brief lament after the nunnery scene that revealed the agony of her own inner state. She has little or no agency. She doesn’t set plots in motion; she doesn’t instigate action.

Now, of course, young women in early modern Europe are not really supposed to have agency. The holy trinity of virtues held up to them in books prescribing female proper conduct consists of chastity, silence, and obedience. Ophelia says she has done nothing inappropriate with Hamlet, or, at least, that his treatment of her has been honorable, but she obeys her father. She's in a lose-lose situation, to be sure. In properly, according to the conduct books of the time, obeying her father and shunning Hamlet, she becomes an object of disgust to the man she loves. But, the play gives her no space to address her dilemma until she loses her mind. Once insane, she's outside the pale of courtly behavior, of proper female behavior. She can say what she wants. She can take center stage. She has her own antic disposition as a mask.

When Hamlet is performing his antic disposition, he uses language to attack other people, to fence with them, to find out their weaknesses and the true motives behind their actions and to make his own points, and also to mirror what is problematic in their behavior back to them. His madness, whether it be assumed or whether it be real derangement, is always in dialogue with others. For example, as Claudius packs him off to England, Hamlet says, "Farewell dear mother." "Your loving father, Hamlet," says his uncle. "My mother," Hamlet replies. "Father and mother is man and wife, man and wife is one flesh, and so my mother." His last barb, masked as random mockery, plays once more upon the technical incestuousness of Claudius's marriage and his own distaste for it.

Ophelia's derangement manifests very differently. She speaks in isolation, in a sort of personal code. She uses fragments of songs about death and sexual betrayal seemingly at random to articulate her fractured self, her torn emotions. I'm always intrigued by the song she sings out of nowhere in Act 4, scene 5. "Tomorrow is Saint Valentine's day, all in the morning betime. And I a maid at your window, to be your Valentine. Then up he rose and donned his clothes, and dupp'd the chamber door. Let in the maid, that out a maid, never departed more." She comes in a virgin; she doesn't leave a virgin. "By Gis and by Saint Charity, alack and fie for shame. Young men will do't if they come to it. By cock they are to blame. Quoth she, before you tumbled me, you promised me to wed. So would I have done, by yonder sun, if thou hadst not come to my bed."

A woman gives her virginity, her maidenhead to her beloved, and then is cast aside. The ballad gives us its own glimpse at the double standard that governs this society. The scorn felt for a woman who acts on her desire, the sense of a world where men both desire women sexually and shrink from women who manifest their sexuality. What's this song doing here? Is this speaking to something in her past with Hamlet? Is she breaking through the role of the maddened bereft daughter in mourning to speak as the betrayed lover?

What's striking about Ophelia's madness is how differently people respond to it. Hamlet's got the whole court on edge. People are always pressing him to find out what he means. Ophelia's madness barely communicates to anybody. She becomes a spectacle that gives people pain and distress, but she's not dangerous, even when she speaks the truth. When Ophelia reappears all in her madness after Laertes has come back to the Danish court, she's holding flowers that she's gathered and she starts to distribute them to Laertes, to Gertrude, and Claudius. There's a long tradition of different flowers having different symbolic meanings, the so-called language of flowers, and Ophelia is making use of it.

"There's rosemary, that's for remembrance. Pray love, remember. [And] there's pansies, that's for thoughts." She gives rosemary for remembrance and pansies for thoughts to her brother. Remember me, think on me. "There's fennel for you and columbines," she goes on. "There's rue for you and here's some for me... Oh, you must wear your rue with a difference." Fennel and columbines signified respectively, marital infidelity and flattery. Is she addressing Gertrude and Claudius here? And then the mention of the plant rue with the obvious pun on regret. Who gets that rue from her and why must he or she wear it with a difference?

She may be getting some interesting jabs in here, but look what happens. Laertes says, "Thought and affliction, passion, hell itself, she turns to favor and to prettiness." He insists that what we have here is a

pathetic yet pretty spectacle, something of aesthetic interest only. Not the kind of madness that speaks dangerous truths. And Ophelia exits from the play still singing her odd little songs. She'll appear again only as a dead body.

Strikingly, it is Gertrude who gets to report Ophelia's death, gets to give her a gentle lyrical tribute. Claudius and Laertes are, after all, too busy plotting how to kill Hamlet to notice what's happening to Ophelia. Their conversation is interrupted by Gertrude bringing her sad news:

“There is a willow grows aslant a brook, that shows his hoar leaves in the glassy stream. There with fantastic garlands did she make of crow flowers, nettles, daisies, and long purples, that liberal shepherds give a grosser name, but our cold maids do dead men's fingers call them. There on the pendant boughs her crownet weeds clambering to hang, an envious sliver broke, when down her weedy trophies and herself fell in the weeping brook. Her clothes spread wide and, mermaid like, awhile they bore her up, which time she chanted snatches of old tunes, as one incapable of her own distress, or like a creature native and indued unto that element. But long it could not be till that her garments, heavy with their drink, pulled the poor wretch from her melodious lay to muddy death.”

The woman disappears among the flowers and the natural setting. Her only action is to seek to hang her flowers on the willow. There was a longstanding folk-tradition in England that deserted or betrayed lovers hang symbols of their love on weeping willow trees. But, then what? Ophelia barely initiates any more action, an envious sliver broke. Gertrude makes the tree the thing that acts, a malicious branch breaks off. Her clothes bear her up for a while, then heavy with moisture pull her to her death. She isn't in control. She was never in control. Her passivity in the water suggests a kind of will not to survive, but it is hardly the kind of consciously chosen self-slaughter that Hamlet agonizes about at such length.

The very last we will see of Ophelia, to be sure, is the dead body receiving rather rushed burial at the end of the gravedigger scene at the start of Act 5. It seems entirely characteristic that she is, in effect, displaced from her own grave by her brother and by Hamlet himself, when both men almost come to blows in the burial space prepared for her, each of them claiming to have loved her best. But, I shall have more to say about this in my next lecture, as I consider the final scenes of the tragedy.

Lecture Six

Hamlet IV—Uncontainable *Hamlet*

Scope:

Hamlet is at once a sprawling and encyclopedic play and a play full of silences and mysteries. Addressing the difficulty of determining what exactly lies at the center of this play, this lecture offers an account of some resonant moments in its closing stages: the odd revelation of Hamlet's true age in the graveyard scene, the prince's new knowledge that "the readiness is all," and the hero's final request that Horatio safeguard his reputation by telling his story properly to posterity. After discussing the near impossibility of ever containing the multifarious events of the play within a single interpretation, it will consider the interpretive gap that opens up between the "unfoldings" of Hamlet's story voiced by characters *within* the play and the larger understanding of both Hamlet and *Hamlet* available to members of its audience.

Outline

- I. *Hamlet* is play that, like its hero, resists interpretation. One can attempt to "pluck out the heart of [its] mystery"; one can also suggest the problems that beset any interpretation that tries to contain its multiplicity.
- II. It is possible to offer a summation of the play that begins with the gravedigger scene of Act 5.
 - A. In this scene, we learn that Hamlet is 30. Previously, his concerns have been those of someone just entering adulthood, but this information seems to point to a newly mature Hamlet.
 - B. The scene suggests that Hamlet's desire for his own death has been transformed into a more general meditation on death as an ending to all actions and all dramas.
 - C. This suggests that he has achieved some distance on the questions that have been lacerating him.
- III. This larger vision of life is also evident in the action preceding the duel with Laertes.
 - A. Hamlet speaks of a "divinity that shapes our ends" and seems to accept that life may, after all, have some significant design to it (in contrast to his former insistence on its meaninglessness).
 - B. Hamlet evinces a renewed confidence in his power to act forcefully, describing how he foiled Claudius's plot against his life.
 - C. Hamlet offers a justification of revenge, redefining the killing of Claudius as a healing action that can be morally justified.
 - D. Although he has some misgivings before the fencing match with Laertes, Hamlet reasserts his belief in a providential design and surrenders his will to a higher destiny.
- IV. Hamlet's change of heart seems to be justified, after a fashion, in what ensues.
 - A. He achieves revenge without, precisely, initiating murder.
 - B. His actions are publicly justified by Laertes's revelations about Claudius's murderous plots.
 - C. Hamlet dies commanding Horatio to tell the story that will preserve his honor after death.
 - D. He is able to name Fortinbras as his successor.
- V. The above account is nevertheless only *one* story that might be told about *Hamlet*.
 - A. All accounts of *Hamlet* and all performances of it (most directors cut the long play-text) are only partial versions of the drama.
 - B. The design of the play raises the question of whether it is indeed a revenge tragedy or, rather, a play *about* revenge tragedies.

C. Given the play's capaciousness and its canvassing of so many topics, it is hard to tell what is central to the action and what is a digression from that center.

VI. There are parts of the play that cannot easily be contained by the account given above, and the ending raises as many questions as it resolves.

A. The disturbing confrontation between Laertes and Hamlet over Ophelia's dead body begs the question of whether the love Hamlet now claims to have felt for Ophelia is supported by his behavior elsewhere in the play.

B. When Hamlet apologizes to Laertes before the fencing match, he blames the killing of Polonius on his madness. Is he evading responsibility for his single most problematic action?

C. Hamlet's request that Horatio tell his story properly invites us to ask what would constitute an adequate report. Horatio's subsequent summary of events does not reaffirm his friend's declaration that there is a providential destiny that shapes our ends.

D. Although Hamlet designated Fortinbras his successor, Fortinbras swiftly seizes the throne of Denmark *without* Horatio telling him of Hamlet's decree.

E. The soldier's burial Fortinbras gives to Hamlet seems to offer a somewhat inappropriate end to a very complicated story.

VII. It may be a characteristic of Shakespearean tragedy that the complexities of the experience it seeks to represent escape those who speak the official final words of a play.

A. In older forms of tragedy, a chorus of speakers who had observed the action but were not entangled in it would offer a summation or draw a moral—but there is no chorus in *Hamlet*.

B. The reader or spectator of this play must be an active interpreter of its intricate action if he or she is to do a better job of unfolding Hamlet's story than either Horatio or Fortinbras.

Essential Reading:

Shakespeare, *Hamlet*.

Supplementary Reading/Viewing:

Booth, "On the Value of Hamlet," in *Shakespeare: An Anthology of Criticism and Theory, 1945–2000*, Russ McDonald, ed., pp. 225–244.

One or more of the film versions of *Hamlet* directed by Olivier, Zeffirelli, and Branagh (all available on VHS and DVD).

Questions to Consider:

1. Take a look at the last scene of *Hamlet* in the movies directed by Zeffirelli and Olivier. What are the most interesting differences between the directors' interpretations of the play's conclusion? Which version do you find most attractive—and why?

2. Is Hamlet a man who is sometimes truly deranged or a man whose madness is always and only pretended? What difference might your opinion make to your overall interpretation of this tragedy?

Lecture Six—Transcript

Hamlet IV—Uncontainable Hamlet

Towards the end of Act 3, scene 2 of *Hamlet*, the after-dinner entertainment from hell has caused Claudius to flee the room and the court to disperse in disarray. It's at this point that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, those supremely incompetent surveillance specialists, show up to tell Hamlet that Claudius is furious with him, his mother wants to see him immediately, and to ask him once more just why he's acting so weirdly. Hamlet doesn't answer them directly, but, instead, gives Guildenstern a music lesson, courtesy of one of the players who has just shown up carrying a recorder. The prince invites Guildenstern to play upon the pipe, and when Guildenstern protests that he does not have the skill, Hamlet declares:

“Why, look you now, how unworthy a thing you make of me. You would play upon me. You would seem to know my stops. You would pluck out the heart of my mystery. You would sound me from my lowest note to the top of my compass and there is much music, excellent voice in this little organ, yet cannot you make it speak. 'Sblood, do you think I'm easier to be played on than a pipe? Call me what instrument you will, though you can fret me, you cannot play upon me.”

Hamlet's accusation that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are attempting an impossible thing in seeking to pluck out the “heart of his mystery” echoes his declaration to Gertrude that he has “that within that passeth show.” His insistence that they can't find out the inner music that moves him, that his true self is ultimately inaccessible to them is for me one of the most telling moments of this play. In some sense, we're in the same position as the hapless Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. We are trying to try to find the heart of the mystery not just of Hamlet the prince, but of *Hamlet* the tragic drama.

I want to do two things in this lecture. I am first going to give an interpretation of the end of the play, which will offer one way of untangling its mysteries. I'm then going to suggest some of the limitations and problems that beset any attempt to offer an interpretation, which completely contains or sorts out the complicated action of *Hamlet*.

First, let me go off on a slight tangent. How old is prince Hamlet? We aren't actually told this until very near the end of the play. In the scene with the gravedigger, when Hamlet asks the sardonic fellow how long he's been digging graves, he's told that the gravedigger entered his profession the day young Hamlet was born. The man then adds, “I have been sexton here, man and boy, thirty years.” This information often surprises careful readers. In Act 1, Hamlet is called young Hamlet and his concerns seem very much those of somebody just entering into adulthood, trying to establish an identity of his own, rebelling against parent figures who seem to want to control his life, dealing with problems to do with his own sexuality and that of others, meditating obsessively on what it all means, why am I here, what's the point of it all, not to mention dressing in black a lot and being sarcastic.

And then, we learn he's 30. This belated knowledge has, I'd suggest, poetic rather than logical significance. He can't really be 20 in Act 1 and 30 in Act 5. But, at least one critic has suggested that Shakespeare, rather than forgetting what he's up to, may be drawing our attention to the fact that the Hamlet who returns to the court in Act 5 from his aborted voyage to England is, in effect, a different man, a more mature hero. Let's explore this notion.

We first meet Hamlet on his return in a graveyard, which seems suitable enough since he has been talking about death ever since his very first soliloquy. We've previously heard him wishing that his “too, too solid flesh” would melt or discussing the fears of what may come after death, the fears that “make us rather bear those ills we have than fly to others which we know not of.” Now, however, he speaks of death in more general terms, putting the actions he may or may not carry out in a larger perspective. Hamlet and Horatio watch the gravedigger at his task. Even as he digs the new grave, he is turning over the remains of people who have died before. Hamlet observes that nothing these poor skeletons did while alive has saved them from the grave. All the cases, the deceptive gambits and tricks of the lawyer, all the

witty pranks of the court jester, could not hold off death. The court lady could not disguise the inevitable decay of her flesh with all her cosmetics, even if she painted them on an inch thick.

Death, too, is the great equalizer. You can't tell the difference between a king's skeleton and a peasant's. And as their bodies gradually turn to dust, there are no heroes in the bone yard. One rotting corpse looks very much like another. Hamlet asks, "Dost thou think Alexander looked of this fashion in the earth?" He means, of course, Alexander the Great, the Greek ruler and general who, at a ridiculously young age, conquered vast territories of Asia Minor and supposedly wept that there were no more worlds to conquer. Hamlet goes on to imagine how even the body of a hero and a warlord returning to the earth will eventually become part of the clay used to stop up a bunghole in a beer barrel. Ashes to ashes, dust to dust.

All our dramas have the same end. All our actions, however heroic, come to this, he's saying. This larger perspective suggests a Hamlet who's got some distance from the things that were lacerating him earlier. And you might also note, he has no more soliloquies in Act 5. A soliloquy is a verbal space where somebody explores the conflicts within himself. Does this mean that Hamlet is no longer a divided and tormented individual?

We see this larger perspective again at the start of the next scene, when Hamlet tells Horatio how he escaped Claudius's plotting. Following a hunch, he examined the letters his escorts, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, were taking to the English King, and discovered an order for his execution, which he then replaced with an order for their execution. As he starts to describe the events that led to the letter substitution, he says, "There's a divinity"—a deity—"that shapes our ends. Rough hew them how we will." In context, he seems to mean that a larger force has gone about saving him. The metaphor is an interesting one. Hamlet offers the notion of a god who is a kind of sculptor, as opposed to a mere woodchopper roughly hewing his materials. He seems to suggest that God, the artist, has shaped a universe with some meaningful patterns to it after all. Humanity is subject to a shaping destiny rather than mere chance, or rather than its own fumbling, clumsy efforts to bring order out of chaos. We should perhaps also notice the pun on ends. That divinity shapes our ends in the sense of our aims, our goals, and also the way we end, the way we die. It seems that Hamlet is no longer in rebellion against weary, flat, stale, unprofitable life, but accepts that it might, after all, have a meaningful design to it.

As he describes how he himself reshaped Claudius's plot and turned it onto Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, he mentions that he had in his possession his own father's signet ring, the sign of royal authority. Using it to seal the letter he has rewritten, he gets to act as king at last. He displaces Claudius, Claudius who had usurped the place of his father. Indeed, he now seems to speak from a position of royal confidence. When Horatio notes, rather queasily, that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern have been sent to their deaths in England, Hamlet says, "They are not near my conscience. Their defeat doth by their own insinuation grow." Their willingness to be used against me brought about their destruction. And he adds that men ought to look out when they get caught up in battles between more powerful opponents. Horatio exclaims, "Why, what a king is this!" Is Hamlet, indeed, claiming his own regal identity at last? Horatio seems to think so.

The exchange with Horatio ends with Hamlet offering a new summary of the evidence justifying his taking action against Claudius. Don't you think, he says, that given what Claudius has done, "he that hath killed my king and whored my mother, popped in between the election and my hopes, thrown out his angle for my proper life, and with such cozenage, is it not perfect conscience to quit him with this arm? And is it not to be damned to let this canker of our nature come in further evil?"

He seems to have solved the problem of the conscience that makes cowards of us all. He does not say now, will I be damned if I do murder at the ghost's bidding? But, rather, he asks will I not be damned if I let the canker, the cancerous disease, the rot, spread further? Is it not an act of true moral conscience to kill Claudius?

His question never gets answered by Horatio and, in fact, doesn't have to be. Hamlet doesn't have to plot any more about what to do with Claudius because another plot is closing in on him. For, now, the preening courtier Osric arrives bearing a challenge from Laertes to a supposedly friendly fencing match. Hamlet has no conscious suspicion that this is a setup job, but he does have a moment of foreboding. Horatio jokingly teases him that he'll lose the wager. I do not think so, says Hamlet. "Since he went into France, I have been in continual practice. I shall win at the odds. But thou wouldst not think how ill all's here about my heart." Horatio picks up on this moment of uncertainty. "If your mind dislike anything, obey it." But, Hamlet refuses to refuse the fight. "We defy augury," he says. We scorn mysterious prophetic fears about the future. He continues: "There's a special providence in the fall of a sparrow. If it be now, 'tis not to come. If it be not to come, it will be now. If it be not now, yet it will come. The readiness is all." The "it," of course, is death.

This special providence that shapes our ends and includes even so small a thing as a sparrow's death—Hamlet is not talking about fate, a pre-Christian notion of actions pre-ordained by uncaring cosmic forces, nor is he talking about the malicious caprices of the goddess Fortune. He's once more offering a Christian optimistic belief in a higher design. If he dies now, there will be a reason behind that death. It will have its place in the divinity's larger plans. And, indeed, when he surrenders his will to a higher scheme of things, providence does seem to step in, after a fashion. Through the accidental reversals of the duel, the exchange of swords that occurs in the heat of action, he is given the chance of achieving revenge without precisely initiating murder. Laertes, poisoned with his own poisoned weapon, is struck by conscience and reveals Claudius's plots before he dies. And Claudius's plots have already turned back on themselves. The king's treacherous backup plan to poison the wine he offers Hamlet leads instead to the death of his beloved Gertrude.

By the time Hamlet actually stabs Claudius and forces him to finish the wine, the whole court knows Claudius is a traitor and murderer receiving his deserved punishment. Laertes forgives Hamlet for his father's death and in saying "Exchange forgiveness with me, noble Hamlet," publicly reaffirms the prince's integrity.

Hamlet dies, but he's ensured that Horatio will tell the story that will preserve his honor after his death. Young Hamlet has taken over old Hamlet's role. He's now the one saying remember me. And he even gets to name his successor before he dies. This is Fortinbras, whose words conclude the play. Fortinbras pays tribute to the dead prince and promises him a warrior's burial.

So, I've finished off *Hamlet*, but I haven't finished. To be honest, I'm only partly satisfied with this account of the ending of the play. It's a bit too glib, a bit too pat. This play perpetually eludes my control. At the beginning of the Olivier movie version, we hear a voiceover portentously announcing, "This is the story of a man who could not make up his mind." Well, that's one story to be found in *Hamlet*. But as I've previously mentioned, productions of *Hamlet* tend to be partial versions of the play. It's so long that directors almost always make cuts in the script. Olivier, for example, omits Fortinbras, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, and most of Hamlet's conversations with the players from his version.

To omit bits of a text is as much an act of reinterpretation as rewriting it directly. And even when we read the whole text, we nearly always end up constructing a selective narrative of its action and its themes in our minds. I've already mentioned that the action of this play includes shadowy reflections and refractions of Hamlet's own story in those of Laertes and Fortinbras who are involved in their own revenge plots. Shakespeare's juxtaposition of these characters with a hero who meditates on his actions almost every step of the way and insists on looking towards their possible results potentially turns the play into a critique of the whole idea of revenge tragedy. It's not so much a revenge tragedy, as a play about revenge tragedies.

It's also a hugely encyclopedic play. Remember that long list I gave you in my last lecture of all the issues that it takes on board. It's extraordinarily difficult to work out what is at the center of *Hamlet* and what is a digression from its main themes. One might ask, for example, are the prince's meditations on the

meaning of life and death digressions from the revenge plot? Or is the revenge plot merely the occasion, the pretext, for his existential meditations, which are the real heart of the play?

I used Hamlet's apparent surrender to the providence that he now seems to find in even so small a thing as the fall of a sparrow to focus the ending of the play, suggesting that when Hamlet defers to a higher scheme of things, he's rewarded with a noble ending and a meaningful death. But, there are parts of the play that are never quite resolved by the ending I traced and that ending itself opens matters out again in teasing ways. I want to look first at a couple of things that, for me at least, don't ever get properly subordinated to or re-explained by the ending.

First, the incredibly disturbing and competitive confrontation between Laertes and Hamlet at Ophelia's grave at end of Act 5, scene 1. When both of them leap into her grave shouting, the episode threatens to devolve into a crude competition over who loved her best. As they rave over her corpse, two men who have bullied her in life, now literally trample her in death. Hamlet insists, "I loved Ophelia. Forty thousand brothers could not, with all their quantity of love, make up my sum." So, what are we to make of Hamlet's insisting he loved Ophelia so much better than Laertes? He hasn't previously said one word about his feelings for Ophelia to any third party. Nor does he refer to her in any of the early soliloquies, which lay out his misery. And he never says anything that suggests he has recognized that he might be responsible for her fate, that the combination of his cruelty to her and his murder of her father might have pushed her over the edge. Is he just theatricalizing his grief here? Has his demonstration of his sorrow simply become the occasion to reassert his own identity? "This is I, Hamlet the Dane," he says, as he jumps into her grave.

I'm also made uneasy by Hamlet's speech to Laertes before they fight their duel. Formally asking his pardon and referring back to the slaying of Polonius, Hamlet says:

"What I have done that might your nature, honor, and exception roughly awake, I here proclaim was madness. Was it Hamlet wronged Laertes? Never Hamlet. If Hamlet from himself be taken away and when he's not himself does wrong Laertes, then Hamlet does it not. Hamlet denies it. Who does it then? His madness. If it be so, Hamlet is of the faction that is wronged; his madness is poor Hamlet's enemy."

The speech re-complicates the issue of moral agency. Hamlet has, after all, killed Laertes's father and been the indirect cause of his sister's madness and possible suicide. By invoking his supposed madness as his excuse, is Hamlet just using a clever rationalization? Or, is he now claiming the antic disposition was, in fact, a reality, looking back on his actions and realizing he was deranged, making the insanity plea. What he says here contradicts what he said during his confrontation with Gertrude in her bedchamber, that she must not deceive herself, that it was his madness speaking when he berated her for her actions. Here, the prince speaks of a deranged Hamlet who did that bad stuff when he was not himself. Hamlets don't kill people, madness kills people. But was he mad when he killed Polonius, given that in that scene he had made it clear he thought it was the hated Claudius behind the arras? Might this gracefully apologetic Hamlet, in fact be Hamlet at his nearest to Claudius, the good politician ready with a glib excuse? Hamlet, the spin-doctor?

And finally, there's the matter of the ending of this play, which raises its own questions. On the point of death, Hamlet addresses the horrified onlookers. "I am dead, Horatio. Wretched queen, adieu. You that look pale and tremble at this chance, that are but mutes or audience to this act, had I but time, oh I could tell you, but let it be." Note the way his language suggests that what has just happened was, in some sense, a theatrical performance in which the dazed courtiers are the mutes—that is, the extras. It is as if Hamlet, having triumphed over other people's plots, now stages himself on his own terms and once again by way of a story that doesn't get told, that "passeth show." "O I could tell you..."—he sounds like the ghost.

Hamlet begs Horatio to “report me and my cause aright to the unsatisfied—to do what is necessary to prevent Hamlet leaving what he calls a “wounded name” behind him in this world, to see to his reputation by unfolding him properly. I’m invoking that word from the very beginning of the play and, in a sense, we are back where we started. The opening began with a command to stand and unfold yourself. Now, Hamlet wants himself unfolded by Horatio.

But this raises the question of what it means to report Hamlet aright, what his story is. Is it the tale of a man who could not make up his mind? Is it the story of a noble revenger who did his duty at the last? Is it the story of somebody who was tempted to revenge, who finally realized that vengeance belongs to God, not man? Is it the story of a sensitive scholar who was placed in a situation where the very qualities that made him superior to other people, his capacity to love strongly, his powers of introspection, made him particularly vulnerable and at once ineffective and deadly dangerous?

Well, Horatio does tell Hamlet’s story, sort of. Horatio begins the play as the witness invited to authenticate the sentries’ vision of a dead man. He ends the play bearing witness for the dead man’s son. Speaking to Fortinbras, as they both stand among the dead bodies, Horatio says that he will unfold “how these things came about. So shall you hear of carnal, bloody and unnatural acts, of accidental judgments, casual slaughters, of purposes mistook fallen on the inventors’ heads. All this I can truly deliver.” He speaks of accident and chance and destructive actions, which turn back upon the heads of their inventors. He doesn’t speak of providence, or a sense of a larger significant design—that is, Horatio does not reaffirm Hamlet’s assertion that there is a providential destiny that shapes our ends.

We might want to ask, what are the implications of Fortinbras, the man of action who has been hovering threateningly on the margins of events throughout, ending up the inheritor of Denmark? He says, “I have some rights of memory in this kingdom,” but never explains what these rights are. And, although Hamlet designated Fortinbras his successor, Fortinbras in fact declares himself king without Horatio telling him of Hamlet’s casting vote. I have, in fact, seen at least one performance of the end of this play in which Fortinbras’s arrival is much more like an invasion, a coup d’état. And the last thing you see is Horatio being beaten and dragged off by his soldiers. At any rate, Fortinbras inherits. Is pure unthinking will to action left triumphant at the last?

Fortinbras claims that if Hamlet had been put on, put on the throne, put to the test, he was, says Fortinbras, likely to have proved most royally, to have shown himself to be a true king, which seems to echo Horatio’s earlier “Why, what a king is this!” But, one wonders just what would be Fortinbras’s definition of “most royal”? Is the soldier’s burial he gives Hamlet the true end of the man we’ve seen, or are we seeing a sort of pasted on conventional ending to a much more complicated story? At the end of Shakespearean tragedies, the survivors, usually by definition not the central characters, get to say the last words. But, their vision of what has occurred or their summing up of the dead hero, is likely to be a partial and incomplete one. And on the other hand, it may be a characteristic of tragedy itself that not everything will be fully articulated in its action, that the tragic experience escapes the words of the figures within the play.

In the tragedy of ancient Greece, the last words are given to the chorus, a group of bystanders who have watched the action throughout and who then attempt some kind of summation of its significance. But, there’s no chorus in *Hamlet*, which means that if readers or audiences of this play want to grasp the action whole, they are going to have to think for themselves and ask themselves whether they can do a better job of unfolding Hamlet’s story than either Horatio or Fortinbras.

Lecture Seven

Othello I—Miscegenation and Mixed Messages

Scope:

This lecture begins with a discussion of Renaissance notions of race and cultural geography; it then glances at the semantic slippage, in Shakespeare's play, between the material differences of black and white skin and the metaphysical connotations of the black/white opposition. It explores just what it means to call Othello a "Moor" and examines the contrast between the way he is presented in Iago's abusive exchange with Desdemona's father and the way his own language constructs his identity. Analyzing in some detail Othello and Desdemona's defense of their love before the Venetian Senate, it considers Shakespeare's highly nuanced treatment of Desdemona's "errant" marriage. The lecture concludes by addressing the self-division evident in Othello's uneasy negotiation of his double identity as warrior and lover.

Outline

- I. Othello is a North African "Moor" leading Venetian forces against the Turks of the Ottoman Empire in defense of the Venetian colony of Cyprus: his tragedy has a complex social geography.
 - A. The city-state of Venice was a rich trading center. Italians were generally associated by the English with political intrigue and savage vendettas; Venice was also remarkable for its expensive prostitutes.
 - B. The Muslim Turks, who threaten Cyprus, were considered pagan enemies by western Europeans.
 - C. Othello is himself an alien of sorts: despite his Christianity, his blackness makes him an exotic "other" to the Venetians. He is admired as a warrior, but his marriage to Desdemona appalls her father.
 - D. The Turkish threat that starts out the play is soon dispelled; the play's disputed territory shifts from the island of Cyprus to the body of Desdemona.
- II. Our first acquaintance with Othello comes by way of the secret slanders of Iago and the increasingly hysterical response of Brabantio.
 - A. Iago and his "gull," Roderigo, play upon 16th-century racial stereotypes in characterizing Othello as both bestial and demonic.
 - B. Brabantio assumes that his daughter's "unnatural" action in marrying Othello must mean that she is the victim of some form of black magic.
 - C. A dualistic mode of thought in which black and white skins are equated with evil and virtue, respectively, is reinforced by the men's words; the play will proceed to complicate these tidy oppositions when Iago's evil blackens the whiteness of Desdemona.
- III. Othello's first appearance on stage allows us to compare him with Iago's slanderous portrait.
 - A. Othello speaks with absolute self-possession and dignity and assumes that his merits will speak for themselves.
 - B. He refuses to be drawn into violence by Brabantio and the mob who threaten him, and his behavior offers a striking contrast to Brabantio's hysterical speeches.
- IV. When Othello and Desdemona defend their actions before the Venetian senate, their marriage is ratified—but the scene hints at problems to come.
 - A. Brabantio insists upon the "unnatural" nature of Desdemona's love for Othello and suggests that

if she has deceived her father, she may deceive her husband.

- B. The marriage that testifies to Desdemona's love for Othello is not viewed as an admirable transcendence of prejudice by Brabantio, who redefines it as an act of female transgression and social disobedience.
- C. Othello offers a passionate and persuasive account of his wooing of Desdemona that nevertheless amplifies earlier intimations that his marriage is a cause of anxiety.
 - 1. He has previously associated entering into marriage with a circumscription of his identity and a restriction upon his freedom of movement.
 - 2. His description of why he loves Desdemona focuses exclusively on his utter investment in Desdemona's love for him.
- D. When Desdemona frankly insists that she wishes to accompany Othello to Cyprus (and consummate her marriage), Othello supports her plea more cautiously, insisting that her presence will not detract from his warrior identity.
- V. Othello exhibits a certain self-division: his notion of himself as warrior-leader seems at odds with his imagination of himself as Desdemona's husband. This will make him particularly vulnerable to Iago's manipulations.

Essential Reading:

Shakespeare, *Othello*.

Supplementary Reading:

Snyder, *The Comic Matrix of Shakespeare's Tragedies*, pp. 73–90.

Questions to Consider:

- 1. To what extent does the language that Shakespeare gives Othello differentiate him from other characters in the first act of the play? Does his style of speech indeed present him as significantly "other" in the world of Venice?
- 2. Desdemona says, "I saw Othello's visage in his mind"; the Duke tells Brabantio, "If virtue no delighted beauty lack, / Your son-in-law is far more fair than black." What do they mean by these speeches and are they, in fact, saying the same thing?

Lecture Seven—Transcript

Othello I—Miscegenation and Mixed Messages

I'll start with a confession. Of all Shakespeare's tragedies, I find *Othello* the most unbearable to watch. It has a certain claustrophobic horror. The play starts with the suggestion it's going to be concerned with international conflict, but it swiftly narrows to the doings of a very few characters in an intimately domestic setting, as a new marriage is torn apart by poisonous jealousy. We watch, helplessly, the insidious corruption of a warrior's mind and the destruction of a generous-hearted woman. We watch a horribly creative evildoer wreak havoc on other people's lives until we're left staring at three broken bodies on a bed. The play begins where many comedies end. Two lovers overcome social obstacles and are united in marriage. But, Shakespeare writes beyond the end of comedy, taking us into very dark territory, indeed.

The first act of *Othello* takes place in Venice, Italy, the remainder in Cyprus. Here are a few preliminary words about the social geography of *Othello*. A 17th-century English audience would bring their own preconceptions to a play in which most of the characters are Italians. Italy was a land associated in the popular mind with learning and the arts, but also with political intrigue, with savage vendettas and the art of the duel, and with assassination and poison. At this time, Italy was not a unified country, but an agglomeration of independent city-states, often warring with one another and often hiring foreign mercenaries to fight for them. Venice was one of these city-states, a great port and a particularly rich trading center, ruled by sophisticated merchant princes. Shakespeare had already visited it in his rather dark comedy, *The Merchant of Venice*. Venice was highly cosmopolitan. You'd meet citizens of many other countries trading there and it was infamous, or famous, for its expensive and beautiful high class prostitutes, its courtesans. But, most of this play doesn't take place in Venice, but in Cyprus, a large island in the eastern Mediterranean near Turkey, which has always been disputed territory. In the play, it's ruled by Venice, but threatened by the Turks of the powerful Muslim Ottoman Empire, who are perceived by the Europeans as pagan barbarians. So, we have an outpost of a Christian empire, which is threatened by enemy aliens. And we quickly learn that its chief defender, the general of the Venetian forces is himself, an alien, a foreigner, a North African, a Christian moor, Othello.

I should speak a little bit first about that term *moor*, which is rather vaguely used at the time Shakespeare was writing to refer to not just an inhabitant of Morocco, but any African, whether Arab or Black. The play makes it clear, however, that Othello is a black man; Iago brutally derides its hero's African features. For early 17th-century audiences, the word moor conjures up a certain exoticism, something dangerous, something emphatically other, not necessarily a person to be enslaved. Although John Hawkins had taken a first boatload of Africans to the Americas about 40 years previously, the transatlantic slave trade hadn't really yet got underway.

Incidentally, Londoners would have been used to seeing black Africans. They would have come to the city as sailors on trading ships, for example, and some of them appear to have settled there. Indeed, in 1596, Queen Elizabeth I writes a letter to the lord mayor of London expressing concern at the large number of what she calls blackamoors in the city and suggesting that they be encouraged to leave.

In this play, Othello has a foot in two cultural camps. He is perceived as a respected warrior, who is absolutely essential to Venice's security. He's valiant Othello. But, he's also an alien. We learn that Brabantio has invited him to his house, honoring him as a noble employee of the Venetian state. But, Brabantio is appalled when he discovers that his daughter has married this same noble soldier.

Although Act 1 is pervaded with anxiety about the Turkish threat, and Act 1, scene 3 starts with a series of contradictory messages about the destination of the Turkish fleet, the military crisis is resolved by the end of Act 2, scene 1, with the news of the dispersal and wreck of the Turkish fleet and the safe arrival of Othello's forces in Cyprus. The rest of the play will take place in this imaginative Cyprus space, halfway between ostensibly civilized Venice and the territory of threatening otherness. But, the disputed territory

will not be Cyprus itself. Instead, two other disputed territories are at issue in the action. One is a woman's body, Desdemona's, which Iago and Roderigo initially represent in the crudest terms as being invaded and stolen by an alien. The other disputed territory is the mind and soul of Othello, which Iago is determined to poison and corrupt. The play starts with the suggestion of a broad political context for the character's actions, but the center of action gradually narrows into the domestic sphere, and it will climax in the most intimate space imaginable, the marriage bed of Othello and Desdemona.

Shakespeare delays Othello's first entrance. Before we meet the moor, himself, we have heard other characters speak forcibly about him. His identity has been constructed by the slanders of Iago, his duplicitous "ancient" or ensign, and by Roderigo, Desdemona's disappointed suitor. And we've watched Brabantio, Desdemona's father, transform Othello into a kind of evil magician. I'm going to be talking at some length about Iago's poisonous use of language in my next lecture. For the moment, I'm going to focus on Brabantio's response to the news his daughter has eloped with Othello. Shrouded in darkness, working with Roderigo to drive Brabantio into violent action, Iago shouts up at the senator's window. "Even now, now, very now, an old black ram is tupping your white ewe. Arise! Arise! Or else the devil will make a grandsire of you."

He speaks of Desdemona being covered with a Barbary horse. He describes Othello and Desdemona as making the beast with two backs. Roderigo helpfully adds that she lies in the gross clasps of a lascivious moor. They create a vision of the sexual union of Othello and Desdemona that reduces it to animals rutting.

The plotters are manipulating those nastier bits of Brabantio's mind that might be tempted to think of a black man as something bestial or even as something demonic, for in popular belief, the devil was depicted as black. And Brabantio responds to Iago's slanderous manipulation just as Iago would wish. His hysteria is the more striking because we will learn from Othello himself that Brabantio had often invited Othello to his house, had let him speak alone with Desdemona, had treated him as a noble warrior worthy of all hospitality, for it had never crossed Brabantio's mind that Othello could possibly be a sexual threat to his daughter. We know Brabantio had considered Roderigo unworthy of Desdemona. He starts the exchange with Roderigo repeating that the man will never get to marry his daughter. But, by the time that Iago, lurking in the darkness, has finished with him, Brabantio is saying he'd rather have had this idiot married to Desdemona than the noble general, Othello. Indeed, the situation seems so unnatural to him that this sophisticated, civilized Venetian senator can only imagine that Othello has used black magic to win his daughter. "Is there not charms by which the property of youth and maid hood, may be abused? Have you not read, Roderigo, of some such thing?"

Notice how deeply embedded the cultural assumptions are in all of this. The easy slippage between blackness and evil, black skin and black deeds, black magic. The Western world has always liked to think in tidy dualities, diagramming things so that Black, evil, ugly line up on one side and White, fair, virtuous, beautiful on the other. Brabantio finds it easy to think of a black man as a black magician. But Shakespeare, having put an apparent embodiment of utter opposites—a black man, a white woman—at the center of his play, then goes on to complicate all the easy dualities. It's Iago, the white man, who is the morally blackened man and his particular evil will be to transform the noble black man from a generous loving husband to a monster of jealousy. And he'll do this by making Othello think that the white skin of his aristocratic bride is just a deceiving mask for her dark and corrupt soul.

To return to the start of the play, by the end of Act 1, scene 1, Othello has been labeled and constructed in various unpleasant ways—as a black ram, a devil, a trickster, a thief, a black magician. But then, we actually get to see him for ourselves in the next scene. Iago, slipping away from the mischief he's caused to rejoin his superior officer, pretends deep concern for the risk presented by Brabantio. He asks Othello if he is firmly married because the enraged father is likely to try to divorce him from Desdemona and is all set to work his vengeance on him. This is Othello's response: "Let him do his spite. My services which I have done the signory shall out tongue his complaints. 'Tis yet to know which when I know that

boasting is an honor, I shall promulgate. I fetch my life and being from men of royal siege, and my demerits may speak unbonneted.”

Now we actually get a sense of the person who the speakers in Act 1, scene 1 have demonized. We see Othello’s absolute self-possession and quiet dignity. He puts it on the record that what he has done for Venice has earned him favors from its ruling class and that his worth must surely outweigh the accusations made against him. He also notes that he is of as high rank as Desdemona. “I fetch my life and being,” he says, “from men of royal descent.” But, at the same time, he implies that he finds boasting dishonorable and thus has never made much noise about this. His merits will speak for themselves.

When Brabantio and a mob of his followers come seeking him, Othello stands firm. He rejects Iago’s suggestion that he make himself scarce: “I must be found. My parts, my title, my perfect soul shall manifest me rightly.” His personal qualities, his rank, his clear conscience will speak for him. When Brabantio and his men come at him with their weapons drawn, Othello simply says, “Keep up your bright swords, for the dew will rust them.” Put away your swords, I’m not going to fight. And the only bloodstains they’re going to get here will be from the dew that rusts the metal. It’s a wonderful throwaway, elegant line. He’s quietly joking in the face of an armed mob and also suggesting that there is nothing that deserves fighting over here.

His self-command stands in striking contrast to Brabantio’s own speeches, when the old man continues to accuse him hysterically of corrupting or seducing Desdemona with black magic or drugs. Othello is calmly prepared to answer for his actions and, of course, he does so at the meeting of the Venetian senate, which follows.

In the scene before the senate, Othello and Desdemona both nobly defend their feelings for one another and their actions. The duke of Venice approves their marriage. Brabantio grudgingly accepts the match and Desdemona gives further testimony of her love for Othello by refusing to be left behind when he sails to Cyprus. A happy ending, but, unfortunately, we still have four acts to go, so that what it is is rather like a premature end of a Shakespearean comedy. And, even now, there are some undercurrents in this scene, which are worth discussing. For a start, there’s Brabantio’s repeated insistence on the unnaturalness of his daughter’s behavior. “A maiden never bold, of spirit so still and quiet that her motion blushed at itself. And she in spite of nature, of years, of country, credit, everything, to fall in love with what she feared to look on.” To act “against all rules of nature,” he argues, a virtuous and gently behaved woman like Desdemona must have been conjured to it by the dark arts.

Now, to be sure, the idea of natural behavior is a very slippery matter. The people in power in any given culture or society tend to have the privilege of deciding what is natural and what is not. Think of all the supposedly scientific writing in the 19th century that ostensibly proved that women were naturally unsuited for taking part in public life or that the dark races were naturally inferior to Caucasians. Brabantio, at any rate, is utterly unable to contemplate the possibility that his daughter has loved Othello, chosen him of her own free will. Her action, for him, is deeply unnatural. If she wasn’t won by trickery or magic, if she really chose the moor for her husband, it can only be symptomatic, he later claims, of something deeply flawed in her character. When he is obliged to let her marriage with Othello stand, he offers this parting shot: “Look to her, moor, if thou hast eyes to see, she has deceived her father and may thee.” These lines are going to echo through the play.

There is, of course, some deep illogic here. Brabantio equates the transgression of Desdemona’s deceit in choosing Othello and not letting her father see her love for Othello with a very different transgression, that of sexually betraying her husband. The very act which shows Desdemona’s love for Othello is paradoxically interpreted as a sign that she mustn’t be trusted to keep faith with Othello. And we should perhaps note the doubleness with which Desdemona’s action can be interpreted. On the one hand, she may be seen as a woman who has risen above the arbitrary prejudices of her society to follow her heart, but from Brabantio’s perspective, there’s no admirable transcendence of prejudice, only social transgression. To embrace his logic is to assert that Desdemona is a woman who, having broken the rules

once, may continue to do so—indeed, is more likely to do so—which makes it all the more interesting that Desdemona herself, when her father confronts her with her deed, is extremely careful to relocate her supposed transgression within the rules of her society. When Desdemona is brought before the senate, Brabantio asks her, “Where in all this company do you owe most obedience?” and this is her response:

“My noble father, I do perceive here a divided duty. To you I am bound for life and education... You are the lord of duty. I am hitherto your daughter. But here’s my husband and so much duty as my mother showed to you, preferring you before her father, so much I challenge that I may profess due to the moor, my lord.”

She insists that she’s not a disobedient woman. She has changed masters, as all women must do when they marry in a society which does not offer them an autonomous identity under the law, and in which the church insists on a wife’s obedience and submission to her husband. Desdemona suggests that her allegiance must now be to her new lord, just as her mother’s was given to Brabantio when she left her father’s house. And of course, we have a faint contemporary survival of this in the marriage ceremony, where the father ritually gives the bride to the husband. Desdemona is perhaps slightly fudging the fact that she has married without formally seeking her father’s permission, but she seems to be going out of her way to insist that what she has done is no transgression.

Othello himself in this scene offers his own refutation of the accusation he’s used drugs or sorcery to win Desdemona. He modestly assures the senate that he’s just a plain soldier who will offer them a “round unvarnished tale,” no fancy spin doctoring. It’s a story, which he then gives at some considerable length. Is it a “round unvarnished tale”? The duke of Venice responds, “I think this tale would win my daughter too.” Othello has his own verbal magic at the start of the play. Here he narrates the history of his wooing and he isn’t just plain, he’s persuasive and powerful, as he touches upon the stories he told Desdemona of his own action-packed and often agonizing past, and then speaks of her response. “She swore in faith was strange, was passing strange, was pitiful, was wondrous pitiful, she wished she had not heard it, yet she wished that heaven had made her such a man. She thanked me and bade me, if I had a friend that loved her, I should but teach him how to tell my story and that would woo her. Upon this hint I spoke. She loved me for the dangers I had passed, and I loved her that she did pity them. This only is the witchcraft I have used.” Othello offers no plain tale. He speaks for himself persuasively and powerfully, as he argues he hasn’t seduced Desdemona by sorcery, by dark spells, but has won her by another kind of magic—the stories he related that first won her empathy and then her love.

I’d like now to look a little closer at the information we’re given in Act 1 about the nature of Desdemona and Othello’s love and especially in relation to Othello’s feelings and assumptions about love and marriage. This is structurally important in the play because it is the material Iago will have to work with as he pursues his plotting in subsequent acts.

Before we even meet Desdemona, Othello offers some suggestive opinions about marriage in his brief exchange with Iago in Act 1, scene 2. If I did not love Desdemona so much, he says, “I would not my unhoused free condition put into circumscription and confine.” The words are revealing. The marriage bond for this warrior is potentially a confinement, not so much enriching his identity, as somehow potentially undercutting it, circumscribing it, and restricting his absolute freedom and autonomy. Only his passionate love for this woman has provoked him to risk marriage.

Let’s also remember the rather asymmetrical formula he offers as he explains the way their mutual love began: “She loved me for the dangers I had passed, and I loved her that she did pity them.” I loved her because she showed such feeling for my sufferings. She loved me for my endurance and heroism; I loved her for her sympathy. It’s as if he doesn’t love Desdemona so much as he loves Desdemona’s love for him, and as if, perhaps, his sense of self is going to be dependent on his sense that Desdemona does indeed love him. He needs her to mirror him in a certain kind of way; perhaps there’s a hint of narcissism here.

Then, let's consider what happens when Othello is ordered off to deal with the Turks and Desdemona makes it clear that staying alone in Venice is not her idea of a honeymoon. She's more outspoken here than with her father. She married the moor to follow him, she says. She has consecrated her soul and fortunes to him, she says. If she's left behind while he goes to the war, she says, "the rites for which I love him are bereft me." Rites, as in marriage ritual, but also, punningly, rights, as in the rights of a wife. She doesn't want to be a wife in name only. She's frank about her desire. She wants sexual consummation, full union with her beloved.

Let's look at what Othello has to say on this topic. He is oddly defensive as he asks that her request be granted. He explicitly claims that his own physical desire is not at issue. He doesn't beg for Desdemona to accompany him, he says, "to please the palate of my appetite." He wishes, instead, to be "free and bounteous to her mind." He also goes out of his way to insist that having his wife along on his mission won't detract from his warrior identity. The day, he says, that the light-winged toys of love corrupt his warrior abilities, the day that lovers' trivia gets in the way of his generalship, then he says, "let housewives use my helmet as a skillet," which suggests that he anticipates some suspicion in the minds of his listeners that his love for his wife may render him effeminate, unable to do his duty, fit only for domestic tasks. He is speaking, in fact, to a kind of anxiety we quite often see in Renaissance writings on love. The masculine fear that simply to love a woman, to care for her too much, might weaken one's manly powers.

There's a little war going on within Othello, as if his notion of himself as warrior leader and his notion of himself as the man who loves and desires Desdemona are somehow at odds. And, if he is divided within, if his sense of self has been fractured by the experience of love, then he is going to be vulnerable to manipulation. Such self-division is exactly the kind of thing that Iago will be able to manipulate and exploit.

To summarize, we seem to see, in Othello, a fear that marriage will be imprisoning, confining, a kind of trap, and a sort of disempowerment. He seems to exhibit a hint of uneasiness at Desdemona's frank articulation of her desire. And then, there's also this whole matter of his loving her because she loves him, which would suggest his love might be dependent on his absolute confidence in her emotional investment in him.

When Brabantio gave his parting shot about Desdemona, "Look to her, moor, if you have eyes to see, she has deceived her father and may thee," Othello's reply was, "My life upon her faith." It's a pretty extreme declaration of his investment in her fidelity. He stakes his very being on her devotion. And he'll echo this extremity of feeling later in the play, when he says, "Perdition catch my soul but I do love thee and when I love thee not chaos is come again." He offers a near apocalyptic vision of what it would mean to have his love for Desdemona shattered. Watch out to see what use Iago will make of all this.

Lecture Eight

Othello II—Monstrous Births

Scope:

This lecture considers the character of Iago, his plots against Othello, and the longstanding mystery of his “motiveless malignity.” It explores Iago’s capacity to manipulate other characters’ actions through his skillful use of loaded language and his exploitation of the unexamined assumptions and biases instilled in them by their society and culture (their irrational but strongly held prejudices of all kinds). The lecture offers a close analysis of the scenes in which Iago begins to poison Othello’s imagination; as Iago leads his commanding officer to suspect both Desdemona and the hapless Cassio, it pays particular attention to the ways in which he plays midwife to the “monstrous birth” of Othello’s jealousy.

Outline

- I. The workings of Iago’s mind are disclosed to us from the very start of *Othello*.
 - A. We learn of his hatred toward Othello.
 1. The reasons for this are particularly impenetrable: his revenge goes beyond anything that might be justified by his jealousy over Cassio’s promotion.
 2. Iago, in fact, adduces an excess of reasons for his “motiveless malignity” and doesn’t seem to care whether they are provable.
 - B. We see his ability to mask his private desires and his horrible aims under a façade of honesty and bluntness.
 - C. We see his ability to corrupt, transform, and debase anything and anybody through his cunning use of language.
- II. Iago is skilled in manipulating and poisoning the minds of others.
 - A. He exploits the prejudices and unexamined assumptions already held by others (as with Brabantio).
 - B. He makes people see other people as if they are types, not individuals—speaking to Roderigo, he reduces Othello to a “barbarian” and Desdemona to a Venetian woman of sophisticated and debased tastes.
 - C. He insists on his own cool rationalism while offering irrational arguments that sway others.
 - D. He is a superb improviser (a quality exemplified by his impromptu plotting during his soliloquies).
 - E. He exhibits a fearful creativity in “birthing” his monstrous plans.
- III. Iago most obviously brings about a terrible transformation of Othello.
 - A. He changes him from a noble lover to an insanely jealous man and from an imposing warrior to a crazed would-be murderer.
 - B. He makes Othello think himself a monster: a betrayed husband wearing the horns of the cuckold.
 - C. Iago’s corruption of Othello impregnates his imagination, bringing forth the “green-eyed monster” of jealousy.
- IV. In Act 3, Iago deploys a variety of tactics in the long, drawn-out manipulation of his commander that results in Othello’s doubting Desdemona’s faith.
 - A. He works by silence and omission as much as direct statement.

- B. Iago's suggestive withholding of information permits Othello's own imagination to run riot; he will introduce new topics at random and encourage Othello to piece together a story.
 - C. He produces subtly revised accounts of actual events (as when he presents Desdemona as the beguiling deceiver of Brabantio, although Brabantio had actually accused *Othello* of using witchcraft against Desdemona).
 - D. Most horribly, he transforms Desdemona's willingness to love a man across cultural boundaries into evidence of her predisposition to "unnatural" behavior (namely, adultery).
 - E. He nudges Othello into thinking that his own blackness may now disgust his wife.
- V. Having imparted his poison to Othello, Iago is now in a position to make him see only what Iago wants him to see.

Essential Reading:

Shakespeare, *Othello*.

Supplementary Reading:

Introduction to Neill's Oxford edition of *Othello*, pp. 147–169.

Questions to Consider:

1. Iago's horrible ingenuity is made manifest well before he starts to poison Othello's imagination against Desdemona. Discuss the report he gives to Othello of what supposedly happened in the "drinking scene" and his behavior when he offers comfort to the disgraced Cassio.
2. In 3.3., Othello has his first soliloquy of the play ("This fellow's of exceeding honesty..."). Examine the progression of his thoughts and reflections. How logical are the conclusions he reaches?

Lecture Eight—Transcript

Othello II—Monstrous Births

In *Hamlet*, we were invited into the hero's inner life almost from the start. It wasn't until quite late in the play that we got some insight into the workings of Claudius's mind when he contemplated his own evil doings. We were invited, as it were, to become identified with the *Hamlet* perspective. In *Othello*, by contrast, it is the operations of the villain's mind that are revealed to us from the beginning. We have no soliloquy from Othello until Act 3, but Iago soliloquizes at the end of Act 1, scene 3, Act 2, scene 1, and towards the end of Act 2, scene 3.

Three things are made very clear to us about Iago from the beginning: his enmity to Othello; his ability to mask his private desires and his real nature and intentions, under a facade of honesty and bluntness; and his ability to corrupt, to taint, to horribly transform and debase anything and anybody simply through his use of language. This lecture will explore, in some detail, all of these aspects of Iago.

The reason for Iago's hatred for Othello turns out to be peculiarly impenetrable. As the play opens, Iago tells foolish Roderigo, Othello's rival for Desdemona, that Othello has blighted his career prospects. Iago is Othello's ensign, his standard-bearer, senior non-commissioned officer—in our terms, I guess, a kind of career sergeant major. He had hopes of being promoted to the rank of lieutenant, but he's been passed over in favor of Michael Cassio, an inexperienced young nobleman. According to Iago, Cassio is "a great arithmetician," all theory, no practical experience—straight out of ROTC, as it were.

Of course, in a sense, this explanation explains nothing. The destruction Iago goes on to wreak on Othello, Desdemona, and Cassio is out of all proportion to this rationalized grievance. Furthermore, Iago keeps on producing new reasons for hating Othello, which only muddy the waters. For example, in the soliloquy at the end of Act 1, scene 3, he says he suspects Othello of having slept with his own wife, Emilia. In the soliloquy at the end of Act 2, scene 1, he says he desires Desdemona and wishes to even things out with Othello, wife for wife. In the same soliloquy, he says he suspects Cassio has cheated with Emilia, as well. He simply offers too many reasons and none of the sexual ones are substantiated in any way by the text or action. Emilia, in fact, is so concerned to please Iago that she gives him Desdemona's lost handkerchief—which will be fatally important in the plot of the tragedy—even against her better instincts. In fact, Iago eventually says he doesn't really know if Othello has cuckolded him. "I hate the moor and it is thought abroad that twixt my sheets he has done my office. I know not if it be true, but I for mere suspicion in that kind will do as if for surety."

All we can be sure is that Iago hates Othello and wishes to destroy him and all around him. It's as if he is the very incarnation of malice and destructive energy. The poet Coleridge memorably described Iago's "motiveless malignity." There is one point in the play, though, that kind of points me to what's going on with Iago. He says of Cassio, "He hath a daily beauty in his life that makes me ugly." Something about Cassio's easy enjoyment of life makes Iago loathe himself all the more and compels him to destroy him. You can probably extend that to all the people who are seemingly happy in this play.

Iago makes it clear to Roderigo that his whole life is one big play act. When Roderigo doubts that Iago really hates Othello, since he seems to attend upon Othello so faithfully, Iago declares, "In following him I follow but myself. Heaven is my judge, not I for love and duty but seeming so for my peculiar end." He goes on to suggest that when his outward actions actually show what is in his heart, "'tis not long after but I will wear my heart upon my sleeve for daws to pick at." The day you see my appearance match my reality, I'll wear my heart on my sleeve to be picked at by crows and jackdaws.

Note that Roderigo never stops to ask whether Iago is showing a false face to him, as well. Roderigo is what Shakespeare's contemporaries would call a gull and what we would call a sucker. Othello, meanwhile, has no suspicion of Iago's doubleness. He describes him to the duke of Venice as a man of honesty and trust, and both Othello and Cassio are always labeling him good Iago and honest Iago. We hold the discrepancy of awareness. We bear the weight of knowledge as we watch Iago carrying out his

poisonous activities. I don't use that word lightly. After all, one of the first tasks Iago sets himself and Rodrigo is to go to Brabantio, and as Iago puts it, poison his delight. But, unlike the murderous Claudius, Iago doesn't pour something entirely new and horrible into people's ears. He exploits what is already in their minds. The unexamined assumptions and biases instilled in them by their society and culture—their irrational, but strongly held prejudices. As we've already seen him do when he shouted up to Brabantio that his daughter was copulating with an old black ram, that the devil had taken her.

Iago presents himself as a supreme rationalist or pragmatist. After Othello and Desdemona's marriage has been validated by the duke and Roderigo is whimpering that he is so overwhelmed by his frustrated love for Desdemona that he's about to drown himself, Iago lectures Roderigo on the power of self-control, on will and reason, on not being ruled by one's emotions. "We have reason to cool our raging motions, our carnal stings, our unbitted lusts, whereof I think this that you call love to be a sect or scion."

His attitude towards the very notion of love is telling. For him, it always gets translated into lust, sensual appetite. He informs Roderigo that what Roderigo calls love is just a funny little offshoot of lust. His emphasis on reason has its own irony, though, given the irrationality of his own desire to utterly destroy Othello. But, of course, Iago, the self-proclaimed rationalist, always plays on the irrational in his victims. He does so by making them see their universe in terms of unexamined generalizations, or by looking at people as types, not individuals. Let's look at him working hard to persuade Roderigo that Othello and Desdemona's relationship must be doomed. He wants to do this, of course, so that Roderigo will continue to stick around and will keep funding Iago's plots:

"Drown thyself? Drown cats and blind puppies. It cannot be long that Desdemona should continue her love to the moor, put money in thy purse. It was a violent commencement in her and thou shalt see an answerable sequestration, put money in thy purse. These moors are changeable in their wills, fill thy purse with money. She must change for youth. When she is sated with his body, she will find the error of her choice. If a frail vow between an erring barbarian and a super subtle Venetian be not too hard for my wits and all the tribe of hell, thou shalt enjoy her, therefore make money."

The slippery argument's full of unproven claims. There's the unexamined assumption that it is only lustful appetite that has drawn Othello and Desdemona together in the first place, and that once that appetite is sated, they'll turn from one another, that because Desdemona is younger than Othello, she must turn to a younger man eventually, that the vows between them are necessarily frail. Iago glides over the fact that Roderigo has presumably just heard Othello say to Brabantio, "My life upon her faith." Iago insists that Othello is a typical barbarian who has erred, made a mistake, in choosing this fine Venetian lady, and who will err, wander away from her eventually. He also insists that Desdemona herself is a typical Venetian woman whose sophisticated and debased tastes will require new sources of pleasure. You might compare Iago here to Iago in his joking conversation with Desdemona while they await the arrival of Othello's ship in Cyprus, in which Iago reduces all women to the same thing—horny, grasping, and deceptive. And of course, even as Iago offers his slippery comfort, he threads through his arguments with his own interest in Roderigo's finances. As he persuades him to come to Cyprus with him to win Desdemona, put money in thy purse, sucker.

Iago has another skill; he's an improviser. We see him making up his plots as he goes along, bringing them into being before our eyes. Listen to him musing in his soliloquy at the very end of the first act, pondering how to ruin Cassio. "To get his place, how? How? Let's see. After some time to abuse Othello's ears that he is too familiar with his wife. He hath a person and a smooth dispose to be suspected, framed to make women false. The moor is of a free and open nature that thinks men honest that but seem to be so, and will as tenderly be led by the nose as asses are. I have it. It is engendered. Hell and night must bring this monstrous birth to the world's light."

There is a monstrous kind of creativity here as Iago ponders his new idea of fabricating, out of nothing, an adulterous affair between Cassio and Desdemona. The imagery of Iago's concluding lines makes him

midwife to a horrible birth. Something will get born out of blackness and not the blackness of pigmented skin, but the moral blackness that belongs to Iago. Look out for other images of birth and monstrosity in this play—a play, which after all, will end up with the spectacle of something horrible lying on a bloodied bed.

So, what does Iago bring to birth? Most obviously, he produces a terrible transformation of Othello. In Act 2, we'd seen the noble lover rapturously greeting his bride in Cyprus, calling her, "Oh my fair warrior, my soul's joy." Iago transforms Othello into the insanely jealous man who can say to Desdemona, "Oh thou weed, who art so lovely fair and smells so sweet, that the sense aches at thee. Would thou hadst never been born." He changes the hero from the imposing warrior who could stop a 17th-century lynch mob with a few words to a man who, by Act 4, is insanely babbling of noses, lips, and handkerchiefs, and overwhelmed by his passions, falling into a kind of fit. He turns Othello into a crazed, would-be murderer who can say of Desdemona, "I will chop her into messes."

Iago makes Othello think of himself as something monstrous, for he makes him believe himself to be a cuckold, a deceived husband. There is a longstanding folk tradition of the cuckold, the guy whose wife is cheating on him and who grows horns that are invisible to himself, but visible to the rest of the world. A horned man's a monster and a beast, says Othello, at one point contemplating his apparent identity as husband of a cheating wife. But, the monster is all of Iago's making. Indeed, the very language of the play suggests this.

Early on in the long drawn out process of poisoning Othello's mind, Iago appears to be holding back key information from the general. "What dost thou think?" says Othello. "Think, my lord?" Iago replies. Othello explodes, "'Think, my lord.' By heaven, thou echoest me, as if there were some monster in thy thought too hideous to be shown." There's a terrible irony here because of course it is the Iago-engendered monster that hides in Iago's mind, the false story of Desdemona and Cassio's affair.

Let's push this a little further. Othello and Iago glimpse Cassio parting from Desdemona. We know that Cassio was innocently visiting her to beg her aid in winning Othello's favor after the disgrace that Iago had brought him into. But, Othello focuses upon Iago's theatrical response to the Desdemona/Cassio connection, remarking, "Thou didst contract and purse thy brow together as though thou then hadst shut up in thy brain some horrible conceit."

Conceit, the word in the 17th century means concept, idea, or thought. It's a word allied with mental processes and other kinds of conception. Iago has conceived his plot, conceived a monster. Now, by making Othello insist on learning his "conceit," he is going to make Othello conceive ill of Desdemona, almost by a process of impregnation.

While we're on the subject of conceiving monsters, another monster that Iago helps to engender is jealousy. He himself says, "Oh beware my lord of jealousy, it is the green eyed monster which doth mock the meat it feeds on." Jealousy, of course, will now possess and feed upon Othello's soul. Emilia, speaking to Desdemona in the next scene, claims that jealousy is a monster begot upon itself, born on itself, self-propagating. But, in truth, it is her own husband who has begotten this jealousy on Othello.

How does Iago achieve this ghastly work of miscreation? First of all, paradoxically, by silence and omission. Or rather, by just saying enough that Othello fills in the gaps in his speech, colors in the picture. At first, Iago never directly says, "I believe Cassio has been sleeping with your wife." It's a long time before he even says "Keep an eye on your wife and Cassio."

The morning after Cassio has been made drunk by Iago, has been drawn into a brawl by Iago's machinations, and has been dismissed from his lieutenantcy by Othello, he goes on Iago's suggestion, to beg Desdemona's help in recovering Othello's favor. In Act 3, scene 3, after Desdemona has pretty much persuaded Othello to reinstate Cassio, Iago asks an apparently innocent question: "Did Michael Cassio, when you wooed my lady, know of your love?" Othello says, "He did, from first to last, why dost thou ask?" "But for a satisfaction of my thought, no further harm." "Why of thy thought, Iago?" asks Othello.

“I did not think he had been acquainted with her.” “Oh yes, and went between us very oft.” “Indeed,” says Iago.

Iago begins a process of withholding that becomes more and more significant, making Othello beg, demand that he reveal his thoughts. When Othello asks what he thinks of Michael Cassio, Iago replies, “I dare be sworn I think that he is honest.” I think so too, says Othello. “Men should be what they seem,” says Iago. “Certain, men should be what they seem,” says Othello. “Why then I think Cassio’s an honest man.” I dare be sworn I think that he is honest. Men should be what they seem. Why then I think Cassio’s an honest man. Iago’s implication, well since he seems honest, I guess he must be so, but he leaves the question dangling.

Often during the conversation, Iago will appear to move off at random to a different topic entirely, that nevertheless adds to the dark story he’s inviting Othello to piece together. He’ll suddenly, for example, start talking about the absolute importance of good name in man or woman, the sanctity of good reputation. His official meaning is that he must not wantonly blacken anybody’s reputation. But, it is as if he is making Othello wonder with his very protestations, what man’s name is in danger of being darkened or what woman’s.

Another example of this comes when he suddenly says, “Beware, my lord, of jealousy.” Jealousy just sorts of floats in there, this abstract noun in isolation and dangles to suggest that Othello has something to be jealous of. Othello is invited to take Iago’s word, which has not yet been attached to a person. Your jealousy, my jealousy, and build it into a narrative.

And finally, Iago says, “Look to your wife. Observe her well with Cassio. Wear your eyes thus, not jealous, nor secure. I would not have your free and noble nature out of self bounty be abused. Look to it.” “Look to your wife. Observe her well with Cassio.” He still forces Othello to fill in the words, observe her well because...

We’re presented with the slow, but inexorable poisoning of Othello’s imagination. Incidentally, the very leisureliness of this action is one reason that *Othello* is a very difficult play to film. If a movie director makes cuts in the text and compresses this insidious process whereby Iago moves Othello to doubt his wife, he risks making the hero look like an ignoble fool. Shakespeare gives Iago a lot of space in which to work his horrible magic.

Iago, having raised preliminary doubts in Othello’s mind about his wife and Cassio, then adds to this a different strategy. A strategy already familiar to us from his conversations with Roderigo, that of erasing the individual, ignoring Desdemona’s unique qualities and her manifest goodness and working instead with stereotypes and unexamined assumptions about human nature or Venetian women. His speech continues: “In Venice they do let God see the pranks they dare not show their husbands. Their best conscience is not to leave it undone but keep it unknown.” In Venice, “they,” women—we all know what Venetian women are like. He’s drawing on the city’s general reputation for certain kind of sexual promiscuity that was mainly associated with the courtesans, the high-class prostitutes.

Then he begins to turn the screw. She did deceive her father marrying you and when she seemed to shake and fear your looks, she loved them most. He reprises Brabantio’s words of Act 1, scene 3, but he also erases Othello’s own passionate assertion, “She had eyes and chose me.” A positive act of loving choice is reconstructed or refocused as a transgressive act of deception and Iago also cleverly takes up another aspect of Brabantio’s accusations. “She that so young could give out such a seeming to seal her father’s eyes up, he thought it witchcraft.” Iago is suggesting that Brabantio thought it was witchcraft that he couldn’t tell Desdemona was in love with Othello, but Othello seems to forget here that it was he, Othello, who was accused of using a kind of black magic by Brabantio to seduce the lady. Brabantio never accused his daughter of using evil charms to deceive him. Desdemona’s heroic love that crosses boundaries, takes risks, is gradually and paradoxically transformed by Iago into evidence of her

willingness to transgress, to deceive. And Othello has now been nudged towards the position Brabantio took in Act 1.

We can push this further. Remember Brabantio's constant recurrence in Act 1 to the notion of Desdemona's "unnatural" behavior, his refusal to believe that there was anything natural in Desdemona's falling in love with Othello? Iago also exploits this, as well. "I do not think but Desdemona's honest," says Othello. I cannot but think that Desdemona is honest. And the word honest, incidentally, has a broader connotation than in modern English when applied to a woman. A woman's honesty is not only her lack of deceitfulness, but her chastity, whether that means her virginity, or, as in this case, the virtuous monogamy of a married woman.

But Othello goes on: "And yet how nature erring from itself." He's musing as if speaking in general about the way we may act against our better nature. Iago then intervenes, kidnaps his terms and refocuses the whole business of unnatural behavior in terms of Desdemona's marriage to Othello. "Ay, there's the point; as to be bold with you, not to affect many proposed matches of her own clime, complexion, and degree, whereto we see in all things nature tends. Foh! One may smell in such a will most rank, foul disproportion, thoughts unnatural."

Iago's argument is that one can see, in Desdemona's refusal to marry anybody of her own ethnicity, and nationality, and social rank, a willful perversity and unnatural desires. That there is something inherently very wrong about the very fact she chose Othello. And as this speech continues, he will also ask, may she not come to repent that she has swerved from the natural behavior of a noble Venetian lady?

This, for me, is one of the most terrible moments in this play. Othello is invited to accept that the very fact that she had loved a black man means that she, by definition, has a perverse, erring disposition and that she may naturally turn back to prefer more natural objects of desire than Othello. The result of it is that only about 30 lines later Othello is saying, perhaps it is because I am black that she has stopped loving me, but he's always been black and he himself has said, she had eyes and chose him.

"She had eyes and chose me." Othello loses sight of Desdemona's loving vision. Instead, his own inner eye becomes filled with the horrible visions Iago offers to him until he can only see Desdemona as the promiscuous liar Iago has created out of nothing. I'll have more to say about just what Iago does to Othello's eyes in my next lecture.

Lecture Nine

Othello III—"Ocular Proof"

Scope:

What aspects of Othello's own psyche and of the universe he inhabits lead him to choose an unholy alliance with Iago over a resolute belief in his wife's fidelity? This lecture looks more closely at the gender dynamics of this play, establishing some cultural contexts for thinking about the anxieties and suspicions that Iago exploits in Othello and for the link that Othello himself articulates between Desdemona's ostensible betrayal of their love and the destruction of his warrior identity. It will also develop at greater length a topic touched on in the previous lecture, analyzing Shakespeare's finely nuanced representation of Othello's poisoned sight and corrupted imagination and examining in particular the "handkerchief plot" as it develops in Acts 3 and 4.

Outline

- I. Tragedy often focuses upon highly fraught moments of choice.
 - A. Othello declares that he is torn between believing in Desdemona's honesty (which means her chastity, as well as her faith) and believing in Iago's integrity and good judgment.
 - B. He insists on having proof—but that proof will be mediated by Iago.
- II. In addition to Iago's manipulative actions, other forces in the world of this play help to make Othello choose as he does.
 - A. The workings of chance help Iago—for example, Desdemona's accidental loss of her handkerchief.
 - B. Human fallibility helps Iago—for example, Emilia's desire to gain a kind word from him by giving him the lost handkerchief.
 - C. People's own virtues may undo them—Iago uses Desdemona's generous sympathy for Cassio against her.
 - D. The fertility of other people's imaginations aids Iago—their ability to make their own monsters.
- III. But Iago also makes use of Othello's demand for "ocular proof" that Desdemona is untrue.
 - A. Without actually offering any material evidence, Iago makes Othello "see" what he fears by spinning a story of Cassio talking in his sleep about a tryst with Desdemona.
 - B. The "ocular proof" that Othello is eventually given is an interchange between Cassio and Iago that Othello does not fully hear.
 - C. Iago's fabrication of this proof is helped by the fortuitous appearance of Cassio's mistress, Bianca, brandishing Desdemona's handkerchief.
 - D. Othello sees nothing of Desdemona's supposed infidelity, only the lost handkerchief. The object becomes equated with her lost honor and with Cassio's supposed possession of her.
- IV. Othello's choice to believe that Iago is honest and Desdemona false has immediate consequences.
 - A. He invokes the infernal powers of vengeance and enters into a terrible covenant of revenge with Iago.
 - B. He transforms Desdemona into a "fair devil" whose white skin masks blackness within.
 - C. He asserts that the purity of his own name has been begrimed by Desdemona's actions.

- V. Othello’s insistence that Desdemona’s actions have transformed him into something infamous seems to be related to some anxieties that are located not so much in race as in gender.
 - A. He cries out against husbands’ inability to possess and control the desires of their wives (even though his society officially makes husbands the “owners” of their wives’ bodies).
 - B. It is crucially important for Othello to believe that Desdemona is true: he has declared that “chaos will come again” when he ceases to love her.
 - C. He cannot bear to be identified by other men as a man who has failed to possess his wife exclusively.
 - D. He now believes his warrior “occupation” to have been undone by her infidelity.
 - E. He also believes that the only way to end her power to hurt him—and to reestablish control over her—is to kill her.
- VI. The play offers an alternative model of how one might respond to jealous suspicions.
 - A. When Bianca suspects Cassio of involvement with another woman, she confronts him directly.
 - B. She does not attempt to discover the identity of her putative rival or to seek revenge.
- VII. It is sometimes argued that Othello’s choice is determined by his soldier identity.
 - A. He is inexperienced in matters of the heart.
 - B. He automatically trusts the comrade whom he has known for a long time.
 - C. Nevertheless, he makes an important strategic decision based on flimsy evidence.
- VIII. It has also been suggested that the central opposition in the play is not, in fact, Iago versus Othello but men versus women.
 - A. In a world where men seek to control women’s bodies and their speech, Othello’s eventual suffocation of Desdemona silences the tongue with which she protests her innocence.
 - B. Desdemona’s apparently problematic passivity—her silence in the face of Othello’s abuse until her last hour—is, ironically, exactly the kind of behavior required of virtuous wives in Shakespeare’s society.
 - C. Desdemona’s generous response to Emilia’s suspicions that someone has slandered her to Othello suggests a striking discrepancy between male and female perspectives in this play.
 - D. Shakespeare scholar Carol Neely suggests that in *Othello*, female attitudes toward men tend to be overindulgent, while male attitudes toward women are brutally suspicious.
 - E. In the gap between these perspectives, the tragedy moves toward its climax.

Essential Reading:

Shakespeare, *Othello*.

Supplementary Reading:

Neely, *Broken Nuptials in Shakespeare’s Plays*, chapter 3.

Questions to Consider:

1. Trace the movements of Desdemona’s lost handkerchief through the action of the play. What kind of significance does it accrue, and what do you make of the story Othello tells about its origin?

2. After Othello abuses Desdemona as if she were a common prostitute in 4.2., Shakespeare gives us an exchange among Desdemona, Emilia, and Iago. Discuss the distinctive ways in which Emilia and Iago react to Desdemona's plight.

Lecture Nine—Transcript

Othello III—“Ocular Proof”

Choosing is always a very loaded business in tragedy. Tragic dramas may focus the matter differently. They may imagine a universe where there are perhaps no right choices, as in *Hamlet*. They may explore in great detail the unfolding consequences of a swift or rash decision. Or, they may dissect out, in agonizing detail, the making of a choice. This is what we are offered in *Othello* and Othello himself articulates his moral dilemma in Act 3, scene 3. “I think my wife be honest, and think she is not. I think that thou art just, and think thou art not. I’ll have some proof.” I’ll reemphasize once more that double meaning of honest, both without deceit and also sexually faithful. Who should he believe? Desdemona or Iago? I’ll have some proof, he says.

I’m going to talk about the business of proof in this lecture, but I want to begin by looking at some of the forces that even Iago can’t completely control—not only matters of happenstance or coincidence, the kind of cosmic bad luck one often sees in tragedy, but also the prevailing conditions that in the world Shakespeare creates may make Othello choose as he does. I’ll eventually be exploring in larger detail and setting in historical context these forces that also contribute to Othello’s predicament.

Let’s start by thinking about some of the small chance happenings that end up making their own contribution towards the evil Iago has unleashed in this universe. There’s the matter of Desdemona’s handkerchief, Othello’s gift, which goes missing. And I think I should say a word about Renaissance handkerchiefs at this point, which were rather a bigger deal than our handkerchiefs, pieces of very beautiful, expensive linen, often elaborately embroidered and usually only carried by the upper classes.

After Iago has started to poison his mind, Othello has an encounter with Desdemona in which—and there’s a bitter irony here if you think of that whole business of the cuckold’s horns—he disguises his distracted behavior by telling her he has a headache. Desdemona takes her handkerchief to make a kind of pressure bandage for Othello’s forehead, but when he pushes her away, she lets it drop. So, she loses it in the very process of showing her loving concern for her husband. But, Iago will turn its loss into evidence that she is untrue, by making sure that Othello sees the handkerchief in Cassio’s hands. Iago’s aided, of course, by the human fallibility of Emilia who picks it up and then gives it to Iago just to get a kind word from him, but who fails to find out what exactly he wants it for.

This unfortunate combination of Desdemona’s own loving kindness and mere mischance may remind us of the way that people’s own virtues can undo them in the universe of tragedy. At the end of the scene in which he has advised Cassio to ask Desdemona’s aid in regaining the favor of Othello, Iago gloats, I will turn her virtue into pitch and out of her own goodness make the net that shall enmesh them all. Pitch is black tar. He will exploit her generosity of spirit for his own purposes, make white look black by arguing that she pleads for Cassio’s reinstatement because she desires him. And of course, he benefits from the fact that when Othello eventually presses Desdemona threateningly about the absence of the handkerchief, she nervously tries to change the subject by redoubling her pleas on Cassio’s behalf. Every time Othello says, “the handkerchief,” she tries to make her husband promise to reinstate Cassio as his lieutenant. And every time she mentions Cassio’s name, she unwittingly reminds Othello of Iago’s lie that he had seen the handkerchief in Cassio’s possession.

We might also recognize the sheer fertility of the human imagination, the way it can create its own monsters and turn them into reality. Relatively early in Iago’s beguiling of him, Othello says, “I’ll see before I doubt.” Two hundred and fifty lines later, he says, “Now do I see ’tis true.” But what does he see? Iago does encourage people to see things, but he makes them conjure them up in their imaginations rather than in any absolute material reality. We’ve already seen his tactics with Brabantio, the creation of a nightmare fantasy of his daughter in the arms of a bestial alien.

Othello does not succumb immediately and lock stock and barrel to Iago’s manipulation. He resists to a certain extent; he even threatens Iago with death if he is slandering Desdemona without proper cause.

“Give me ocular proof!” he commands. Make me see the truth of what you are insinuating. Iago adopts an air of helpful puzzlement: “Would you...behold her topp’d?” I don’t think I can quite manage that. The verb *topped* is a variant on *tupped* and would usually refer to animals copulating. As usual, Iago makes everything as suggestively degraded as possible. Even though Cassio’s supposed affair with Desdemona is totally unproven, the very words of Iago’s question will encourage Othello to have horrible thoughts of Desdemona with another man, something that Iago builds upon when he tells Othello a completely fabricated story.

He and Cassio have apparently shared the same quarters, and I should mention at this point that, in an age when beds were rather scarcer items of furniture than they are nowadays, it was much more common for people who were unrelated to one another to share them. Iago tells Othello:

“I lay with Cassio lately and being troubled with a raging tooth, I could not sleep. There are a kind of men so loose of soul that in their sleeps will mutter their affairs. One of this kind is Cassio. In sleep I heard him say, ‘Sweet Desdemona, let us be wary, let us hide our loves.’ And then, sir, would he grip and wring my hand, cry ‘Oh sweet creature,’ and then kiss me hard, lay his leg over my thigh, and sigh and kiss and then cry, ‘Cursed fate that gave thee to the moor.’”

His word painting agonizes Othello and Iago remarks that this may help to add substance to other proofs, but there are no proofs. There’s only this astonishingly evocative alternative reality created by Iago’s language. We don’t know that Iago ever shared a bed with Cassio. The picture he paints is so horribly effective that Othello doesn’t even pause to contemplate the nonsense of Cassio’s supposed cry, “Oh cursed fate that gave thee to the moor.” It makes it sound as if Desdemona has been married off against her will, quite contradicting Iago’s earlier discussion of the supposed willfulness of Desdemona’s choice of Othello. And finally, Iago claims to have seen Cassio carrying Desdemona’s prized handkerchief, the love token embroidered with little strawberries that she received from Othello, the token Iago himself has taken care should come into Cassio’s possession.

Othello only has hearsay evidence at this point and we get more hearsay evidence in Act 4, where Othello asks Iago if Cassio has spoken of Desdemona. “‘Hath he said anything?’ ‘He hath, my lord. But be you well assured, no more than he’ll unswear.’ ‘What hath he said?’ ‘Faith, that he did. I know not what he did?’ ‘What, what? Lie, with her?’ ‘With her, on her, what you will.’” And Othello’s own imagination does the rest.

What ocular proof does Othello have in the end? He showed an interchange between Cassio and Iago, which he does not hear. If you remember, Iago has positioned Othello supposedly to see Iago engage Cassio in a conversation about Desdemona. What actually happens is that Iago and Cassio get into some heavy-duty locker room chat about Cassio’s mistress, the besotted Bianca, while Othello watches at a distance believing they’re talking about Desdemona. He can see them. He can hear their rather lewd laughter. He can’t hear the exact words they’re saying. And this, of course, is always quite a problematic thing in the staging of the play. The director has got to make it convincing that Othello is sort of getting a sight and a general impression, but not hearing all the words. Maybe the odd word would come to him.

Now, we hear what Othello thinks is happening because we have the benefit of his agonized remarks aside, “Now he tells how she plucked him to my chamber.” But, at the same time, stage convention allows us to hear what is really being said by Iago and Cassio. And once again, pure chance helps Iago when Bianca storms in to interrupt the conversation in front of Othello’s very eyes, brandishing the handkerchief whose embroidered design Cassio has asked her to copy, so that Iago can then can rub salt in Othello’s wounds by suggesting that not only has Cassio messed around with Desdemona, but that he also values her so little, he’s given her supposed gift to his other woman. Othello sees nothing of Desdemona’s supposed infidelity. He sees only a sign for it, the handkerchief. The handkerchief, as it moves from hand to hand, becomes equated with Desdemona’s virtue, her honor, her body, her love, and Othello is invited to think Cassio now possesses those, just as he possesses the token of Othello’s affection, the handkerchief.

Let's return to Othello's agonized articulation of his dilemma. "I think my wife be honest, and I think she is not. I think that thou art just and think thou art not. I'll have some proof." He has his moment of choice. He chooses to accept secondhand knowledge and hearsay as proof, to believe Iago and to give his allegiance to Iago. And when he does so, it is as if he enters into a kind of terrible, alternative marriage with Iago.

At the very end of Act 3, scene 3, Othello invokes the powers of darkness. In another of the play's deep ironies, he's turned into the thing that he had proved to Brabantio he wasn't: "Arise, black vengeance from the hollow hell," he cries, swearing he will not rest until he has achieved his revenge and Iago asks the heavens to bear witness that he will follow any order of Othello's to aid him in this. "I am your own for ever," Iago declares, offering a terrible parody of the marriage sacrament as the two men exchange vows.

Othello swears to murder Desdemona, whom he now calls the fair devil and, so doing, re-invokes the language of black and white. Desdemona has become a kind of whited sepulcher, a marble edifice with rotteness and decay within, a woman whose pale, pale skin conceals a heart of darkness. This fair devil, though, is just another monster of Iago's creation, when in reality, Iago is the fair devil, his ostensibly honest outside covering his black lies.

The very particular effect of Desdemona's supposed infidelity on Othello has, in fact, already been articulated by the general in black and white terms. Earlier in the play, faced with Iago's insinuations, he declared, "My name that was as fresh as Dian's visage, is now begrimed and black as my own face."

Dian's visage—the phrase evokes the virgin goddess Diana, patroness of the moon. My good name, says Othello, which was as pure and white as the face of the moon has been rendered filthy. The black/white imagery is very telling here because Othello had wanted to distinguish his identity, his name, and his reputation from his skin color. He seems, in fact, to have internalized the white Venetians' easy assumption about the significance of black outsides. He now considers his good name utterly blackened in a manner that reinforces the cultural connotations of his skin color. But, since it is Desdemona who has supposedly done the dark deeds, why not speak of her blackened name here? Why not say something like "Her name is now as black as my face"? In fact, the printer of a 1630 quarto edition of the play changed the pronoun from the way it appears in the very first printed version of the work to offer this interpretation, as if he thought it would make more sense that way. But, if we stick with that earlier text, with Othello saying "my name," we might want to take Othello at his word and ask, why does Desdemona's action so change his identity, so blacken it, that his only recourse is to destroy her?

It is a teasing, complicated moment. As I've already suggested, it reminds us of Othello's physical blackness. Iago had already manipulated Othello into thinking that the very fact that Desdemona had married a black man suggested there was something perverse and unnatural about her. Now, Othello himself suggests that somehow Desdemona's actions are blackening him in a new way, both tainting his reputation and turning him into an object of abhorrence and mockery—a nightmare version of the shadowy barbarian or naturally debased creature he may fear, at some level, that the white Venetians always think that he is.

Yet, something else that might help to explain what's going on here occurs earlier in Act 3, scene 3, when Othello, in agony, cries out, "Oh curse of marriage, that we can call these delicate creatures ours and not their appetites." The position that Othello finds so cursed is presented as a general situation, but not a universal situation. It is a gendered dilemma; his "we" refers to male human beings only. It invokes the anxieties of a world where men may call these delicate creatures "ours," be the owners of a woman's body, but are also faced with the fact that even if their society gives them authority over their wives, they may still never know the woman's desires, never own her will completely. They cannot control her secret appetites.

Othello is seemingly appalled by a new recognition that men may never be able to control the desires of their women, never be able to keep their bodies loyal to one man, and never be quite sure that the territory of a wife's body is not invaded by others, and for Othello, this is terribly important because he has invested his identity in Desdemona. He had said to Brabantio, "My life upon her faith." He had said to her, "When I love thee not chaos is come again."

Now, he doubts her faith, and it is not just that he loathes the fact that no man can really be certain that he possesses a woman wholly. It is also that he, Othello, cannot bear being identified by others as a man who has failed to possess Desdemona exclusively. He can't bear the kind of vulnerability that the position of a deceived husband brings. This is the blackening of his name that so horrifies him, his new identity as the husband of a faithless wife, his new identity as a despised cuckold.

In Act 1, scene 3, he had already canvassed the possibility that his love and desire might threaten his warrior virtues. Now, he thinks he has been exposed as one who has given his love to one who has betrayed him and he feels, as a consequence, that he is no longer a warrior. Desdemona's transgression impinges upon his identity. It is as if a threat of female infidelity is also a threat against the masculine sense of self. Othello seems to think he can only be a real man when he is utterly confident of controlling Desdemona's affections. This is why he believes his name to have been darkened. He says, at one point, "I had been happy if the general camp had tasted her sweet body, so I had nothing known. Oh now forever farewell the tranquil mind, farewell content, farewell the plumed troops, and the big wars that makes ambition virtue. Othello's occupation's gone." He had suggested a tension between his identity as a warrior and his identity as a husband. Now that he's a betrayed husband, he's no longer a warrior. Othello's occupation's gone.

The logic which shapes his conclusions here is dependent on the particular nature of the cultural forces that have made him what he is and the very particular way he has gone about constructing his identity and he now feels the only way to end Desdemona's power to hurt him, to cripple his identity, is to kill her. He can only think of reestablishing his control over her body in that most extreme fashion.

The critic Carol Neely, who has written a very fine account of the politics of gender in this play, has noted that there's another person in this play for whom Cassio's coming into possession of Desdemona's handkerchief becomes a cause for jealousy—the Cypriot woman, Bianca. Bianca, whose name, interestingly, is Italian for white, and she's labeled a whore by her society. She's an unmarried woman who supports herself by making her favors available to the Venetian garrison in Cyprus and she is, at present, Cassio's mistress. Cassio gives the strawberry-spotted handkerchief to her after he finds it lying about his lodging and he asks her to copy its design. She suspects it is a gift from another woman, and as I've already noted, ends up throwing it back in Cassio's face. In fact, Bianca goes on the rampage. "What did you mean by that handkerchief that you gave me? I was a fine fool to take it. A likely piece of work that you should find it in your chamber and know not who left it there. This is some minx's token."

Neely points out that when Bianca's jealous, she has it out immediately and explicitly to Cassio's face, something Othello never does with Desdemona until the very moment he's about to kill her. Afterwards, her affections are unchanged. She ends up inviting Cassio to dine with her that night. Nor does she try to discover the identity of her rival or to get revenge. Bianca is treated as a pretty contemptible object by all the men in the play, including Cassio himself, but she deals with her jealousy much less destructively than they do.

Othello's response to his jealousy is not to confront Desdemona, but to strike up an unholy alliance with Iago, to bond with him and resolve to kill Desdemona. There is a body of argument that defends Othello's action. Some critics have noted that Othello has little experience in matters of the heart. He has lived a life of action in male company and has had no chance to spend much time with women. He automatically trusts the good soldier whom he's probably known much longer than Desdemona. His soldier identity determines a lot of his responses. But, if we accept the logic of these arguments, we might also at least consider the possibility that it would be a very bad general who made an important strategic decision on

the flimsy evidence that persuades Othello to destroy his wife. Iago's fine spun case would certainly never have persuaded Hamlet, for example.

As Othello enters into this fiendish bond with Iago, we might also ask just what it is about Othello's psyche and about the world that Othello inhabits that makes the ostensibly obvious or understandable move for him the choice to trust Iago not Desdemona, for Othello's tragedy is as much shaped by his choice to ally himself with Iago as his decision to kill his wife. Neely suggests that the central opposition in this play is not so much Iago versus Othello as men versus women. For one of the things Iago has done is incorporate Othello within a community of men who can deplore the fact that "we can call these delicate creatures ours and not their appetites," men who yearn to possess a woman wholly and yet are terrified of the female agency and female desire, which may endanger that absolute possession. This is a world where men seek to control women's bodies and their speech. Othello exacts the ultimate control over a woman's actions when he suffocates the body he fears has betrayed him and silences the tongue with which Desdemona protests her innocence.

Incidentally, some readers of the play criticize Desdemona's apparent passivity, her patience under Othello's verbal cruelty towards its end, but in terms of the cultural prescriptions of early modern Europe, she is doing exactly what a virtuous woman is supposed to—that is, to sustain her husband's cruelty with patience.

There is a particularly horrific sequence in Act 4 when Othello interrogates Emilia as if she was the madam of a brothel and Desdemona one of her stable of women for sale. He goes on to verbally assault Desdemona as if she were indeed the most debased of women. After he has left Desdemona in a state of near collapse, Emilia speculates that some busy and insinuating rogue has devised a slanderous story about her lady, that Desdemona is the victim of some spiteful villain determined to do her wrong. Shakespeare is pressing the irony of the situation to the limit as Emilia gets so, so close to the truth without imagining it could be her own husband who's done this. But, Desdemona simply and swiftly responds, "If any such there be, heaven pardon him."

Her words are astonishingly generous given what she has just suffered at her husband's hands. And it can only make us ponder the scene in which Othello takes his own terrible vow to slay his wife. Heaven pardon her are not words which rise to his lips. It suggests a striking gap—a gap that Neely writes about at some length—between male and female perspectives in this play. Male stories about women, as we have seen, tend to be anxious, distrustful, suspicious. Female attitudes towards men tend to be rather over generous because even the shrewd Emilia doesn't apparently anticipate, when she dutifully delivers over that handkerchief to her husband, that he could want it for some evil purpose.

Men and women in this play can seem at times like two different races, speaking different languages. In the gap that opens up between them, the tragedy moves to its climax and to the awful revelations that await Othello and it is there that I shall be taking us in my next lecture.

Lecture Ten

Othello IV—Tragic Knowledge

Scope:

This lecture focuses on the play's final act, beginning with a close reading of the soliloquy in which Othello contemplates the murder of his sleeping wife and positions himself as both her judge and her executioner. It discusses the relentless process by which Othello's eyes are opened to Iago's deceptions, emphasizing in particular the alternative perspective on Desdemona offered by her loyal waiting-woman, Emilia. The lecture also juxtaposes Iago's refusal to offer an explanation of his actions with Othello's own attempts to make sense of events that conclude in his suicide. What *does* Othello "know" by the end of his tragedy—and should we permit him to have the last word on his own experience?

Outline

- I. *Othello* ends more abruptly than any other tragedy of Shakespeare.
 - A. After the hero commits suicide, nobody eulogizes him.
 - B. Lodovico's remark (looking at Othello and Desdemona's bodies on the bed)—"This object poisons sight"—reminds us that the spectacle of a black man embracing a white woman has been presented as a kind of poison from the very beginning of the play.
 - C. This suggests that Iago's poison is still working.
- II. In the last scenes of the play, Othello finds it difficult to process any information that contradicts his own transformed (and tainted) vision of the universe.
 - A. His language turns Desdemona's body into a text of his own writing in the brothel scene.
 - B. He also rewrites his own identity, presenting himself, in the play's last act, not as a murderer but as an agent of heavenly justice carrying out a ritual sacrifice.
 - C. In his stately soliloquy, as he prepares to kill the sleeping Desdemona, he insists that he is at once cleansing the world of her and purging her soul.
 - D. When Othello offers Desdemona the chance to confess her sins and she insists upon her innocence, he silences her by killing her.
 - E. He is astonished that there is no cosmic response to his fulfillment of heaven's purposes.
- III. The revelations of Act 5 rewrite the story of which Othello considered himself to be the avenging hero, and he must make sense of what has happened.
 - A. He raises the possibility that Iago is a devil—but is left confronting the problem of human evil.
 - B. Iago refuses to explain his actions, declaring "what you know you know."
 - C. This leaves us asking: what *does* Othello know at the last?
- IV. Othello attempts to process his "tragic knowledge" in a final summation of his experience.
 - A. His very last words have him reenacting a long-ago stabbing of a Turk: he divides his identity between the valorous servant of the state and the enemy alien as he kills himself.
 - B. But before he reaches that moment of self-purgation, he gives his own version of his story.
 1. He characterizes himself as one who loved "too well" but begs the question of why his love could not encompass mercy and forgiveness.
 2. He characterizes himself as "one not easily jealous" and implicitly places murderous responsibility upon the man who "wrought" him from his proper state.

- V. If we look more closely at Othello’s choice to believe Iago rather than Desdemona, it is helpful to contrast his behavior with that of Emilia.
 - A. Emilia’s instinctive and immediate response to being told that Iago has given Othello proof of Desdemona’s infidelity is to declare that her husband lied and that Desdemona was true.
 - B. Emilia refuses to accept Othello’s self-definition as agent of divine justice.
- VI. Act 5 offers further evidence of male responses to “transgressive” female speech.
 - A. When Desdemona briefly revives and selflessly denies that Othello has killed her, Othello declares her a damnable liar.
 - B. When Emilia challenges Othello’s account of Desdemona’s infidelity, he threatens her with violence.
 - C. When Emilia speaks out and demonstrates Iago’s guilt, he calls her “whore” and kills her.
- VII. The selfless speeches with which both Desdemona and Emilia end their lives contrast strikingly with the self-centeredness of Othello’s last speech.
 - A. Othello claims the right to write his own history, to explain his actions, and to kill himself on his own terms.
 - B. Othello’s narrative offers a story in which Iago is not named and Desdemona is invoked only by metaphor: it is as if he is the only player in the drama.
- VIII. This returns us to the question of Othello’s “tragic knowledge” and of what he “knows” at the end of the play.
 - A. Having originally personified himself as divine justice, he now insists on the utter blackness of his sin and assumes that after his death, the spirit of Desdemona will hurl his soul to hell.
 - B. His vision of Desdemona is once again phrased in black and white terms and ignores her last forgiving words.
 - C. Emilia has insisted upon Desdemona’s absolute love for him, but Othello does not ever seem to recognize that such love would not refuse forgiveness.

Essential Reading:

Shakespeare, *Othello*.

Supplementary Reading:

Neill, “Unproper Beds: Race, Adultery and the Hideous in *Othello*,” in *Shakespeare’s Middle Tragedies: A Collection of Critical Essays*, David Young, ed., pp. 117–145.

Questions to Consider:

1. Reread the scene in which Emilia attends on her mistress before Desdemona retires to bed. How does it develop or complicate the mood of the unfolding tragedy?
2. Do *you* find Othello’s summing up of his own tragic experience at the end of the play persuasive and accurate?

Lecture Ten—Transcript

Othello IV—Tragic Knowledge

Othello ends more abruptly than any other tragedy of Shakespeare's. After the hero commits suicide, nobody eulogizes him. There's no equivalent to Fortinbras saying that Hamlet would have made a fine king and bidding his soldiers give him a warrior's burial. The Venetian emissary, Lodovico, looking at the spectacle of Othello and Desdemona lying dead on their marriage bed, simply says: "The object poisons sight. Let it be hid" and then starts giving orders for the appropriation of Othello's wealth by Desdemona's uncle Graziano and the torturing of Iago to death.

The object poisons sight. Of course, the vision of the black man embracing the white woman, whether in love or in death, has been presented as a kind of poison from the start of the play—from the moment that Iago fills Brabantio's mind with a degraded vision of his daughter making love to Othello, a vision that fuels all his prejudices. Lodovico's response to the bloodstained bed with its dead bodies may recall to us Iago's threat to engender a monstrous birth and bring it to the light. Now, the image of Othello and Desdemona in their final embrace—and let us remember that Othello kisses Desdemona as he dies—is to be hidden as quickly as possible from the respectable gaze of Venice. Iago's poison is working to the very last.

Even if we try to forget the extremity and pathology of Lodovico's reaction, this is nevertheless an almost unbearable play. As I said three lectures earlier, I find it the most painful of Shakespeare's tragedies to see staged and, in particular, the last two acts, in which we move inexorably towards Othello's destruction of Desdemona and his subsequent horrific enlightenment.

In the last scenes of the play, there's relatively little talk between Iago and Othello. Once Iago has successfully impregnated his master's mind with various horrors, Othello becomes unable to process any information which contradicts his transformed vision of his universe in general and of his wife in particular. Indeed, his own language, like Iago's, now attempts to transform reality to fit into his worldview. Thus, we have the horrible encounter of Act 4, scene 2, in which he behaves as if his wife is a whore and he is one of her clients. As Desdemona is reduced to tears by his vicious words to her, he accuses her of the rankest kind of promiscuity, and as he looks upon her white face, he asks, "Was this fair paper, this most goodly book, made to write whore upon?" He's horrified that her white skin may now be a kind of blank page for men to write upon her a new identity as a prostitute. But, it is he who has turned her body into a kind of text and he is rewriting her to fit into the story he believes is unfolding, the story of her promiscuity and infidelity.

So, Othello is now utterly caught up in this story of his own making in which he will not be Desdemona's murderer, but an agent of heavenly justice. During the scene in which he speaks to her as if she were a woman of easy virtue, he'd cried out, "Heaven truly knows that thou art false as hell." He took it upon himself to speak for heaven, to speak for God himself. You might compare this to Hamlet telling Gertrude that God has designated him his scourge and minister, the one who punishes wrongdoers and who ministers to diseased souls in Denmark. And indeed, when Othello enters Desdemona's bedroom in the play's last scene, he enters in his role as minister of divine justice. He is no longer the crazed figure of Act 4. His language is again as stately and dignified as when we saw him in Act 1. As his wife sleeps, he soliloquizes. "It is the cause. It is the cause, my soul. Let me not name it to you, you chaste stars. It is the cause."

The cause of his actions is Desdemona's purported infidelity and he won't even name it in case he blackens the pure lights of heaven. "Yet, I'll not shed her blood, nor scar that whiter skin of hers than snow and smooth as monumental alabaster. Yet she must die, else she'll betray more men. Put out the light and then put out the light. If I quench thee, thou flaming minister, I can again thy former light restore should I repent me, but once put out thy light, thou cunningest pattern of excelling nature, I know not where is that Promethean heat that can thy light relume. When I have plucked thy rose, I cannot give it

vital growth again. It needs must wither. I'll smell thee on the tree." And he kisses her. "Oh, balmy breath that dost almost persuade justice to break her sword. One more, one more." And, he takes another kiss. "Be thus when thou art dead, and I will kill thee and love thee after."

He's about to do a terrible thing and he articulates it in unbearably tender verse. He has reorganized his universe to accommodate the notion of Desdemona as mortal sinner. He is now her judge, confessor, executioner, acting more in sorrow than in anger, punishing her body in order to purge, cleanse, and save her soul. He claims to be cleansing the world. She must die, else she'll betray more men, and he is still half hypnotized by the whiteness of the flesh that he can no longer believe reflects her moral condition. He cannot refrain from kissing her. He has given himself, godlike, the power over life and death. "Put out the light," he says. Iago has made him an uncreator. If he quenches the torch he carries, he can illuminate it again, but once he puts out the light of Desdemona's life, there will be no going back, there will be no reanimating her.

He links himself to a personification of Justice. And his wife's breath smells so sweet, he might almost be swayed to spare her "to break the sword of justice." And he also sees himself as Desdemona's confessor. After she awakes, he keeps asking her to admit her sins, to offer repentance. He insists on the ritual of penitence before execution. I would not kill thy soul, and we might remember, of course, that a condemned criminal is always given access to a priest so that he or she can undergo confession before execution. Only now, as Othello prepares to kill his wife, does he actually speak directly to Desdemona of Cassio and of her supposed gift of that handkerchief to him, and when she denies she has been false, he won't listen. When she cries out that she never loved Cassio except within the proper bounds of friendly decency, he responds, "By heaven, I saw my handkerchief in his hand. Oh perjured woman! Thou dost stone my heart and makes me call what I intend to do a murder, which I thought a sacrifice."

If she doesn't confess her sins, she'll turn his heart to stone and force him to do brutal murder where he thought to do ritual sacrifice and refusing to hear her pleas, he smothers her. Once she is dead, Othello, still believing he is heaven's minister, cannot believe that his action hasn't produced a cosmic reaction. "Methinks it should be now a huge eclipse of sun and moon," he says. The entire universe should be responding to the deed. But, he will learn all too soon that he hasn't been fulfilling the heavens' purposes. He has merely been the pawn of Iago.

When I discussed the ending of *Hamlet*, I noted how important it is for the prince that the true story of his actions lives on after him. He urgently desires that Horatio report him right. I used this to raise the question of whether the complicated experience represented by the play can be circumscribed by one unambiguous narrative articulated by a figure within the play's action. Othello doesn't have a Horatio. He is isolated, groping for truth, as the last act of his tragedy turns the drama, in which he thought he was the avenging hero, topsy-turvy. He is now obliged to make sense of the other plot that Iago has placed him in—the plot in which he's not a servant of heavenly justice, but the dupe of Iago's hellish malevolence.

When Othello has his last confrontation with Iago, he says, "I look down towards his feet, but that's a fable." For Othello, the only possible explanation of what's happened is that Iago is the devil. That's why he's trying to find the cloven hooves that the fables tell us the devil can never disguise, whatever shape he takes. That's why he looks down at Iago's feet. But, of course, Iago isn't a devil; he's a man. Othello and the audience are left confronting the problem of human evil, asking what could motivate a human being to bring such horrible events into being?

Othello finally turns to the other Venetians and says, "Will you, I pray, demand that demi-devil why he hath thus ensnared my mind and body?" He gets no answer. Iago himself says only, "Demand me nothing. What you know, you know. From this time forth I never will speak a word." That's his last line in the play. If Iago gave us no coherent rationale for his malice against Othello at the play's beginning, he'll equally give us no explanation of his destruction at the end. "What you know, you know"—which leaves us asking, what does Othello know at the last? I'd like to take a couple of runs at this question and

sandwich between them some consideration of an alternative perspective offered by the speeches of Iago's wife, Desdemona's waiting woman, Emilia in the last act.

Literary critics writing on tragedy often suggest that the extremity of suffering of the tragic protagonist leads to a kind of tragic knowledge, an enlightenment concerning the workings of his or her universe, which makes some kind of sense out of his or her experience. And, indeed, Othello does offer his own final narrative of the significance of his experience—the Othello version, we might call it—and he takes control of his story by providing his own end to it. Addressing the assembled company, he makes his narrative coterminous with the orchestration of his death on his own terms. “Soft you, a word or two before you go. I have done the state some service, and they know it. No more of that. I pray you, in your letters, when you shall these unlucky deeds relate, speak of me as I am. Nothing extenuate, nor set down aught in malice. Then must you speak of one that loved not wisely, but too well. Of one not easily jealous, but, being wrought, perplexed in the extreme. Of one whose hand, like the base Indian, threw a pearl away richer than all his tribe. Of one whose subdued eyes, albeit unused to the melting mood, drop tears as fast as the Arabian trees, their medicinable gum. Set you down this. And say besides that in Aleppo once, where a malignant and a turbaned Turk beat a Venetian and traduced the state, I took by the throat the circumcised dog and smote him—thus.” He reclaims his identity as soldier servant of the Venetian state. He ends with a reminiscence of the past, before he even married Desdemona. His action, while in North Africa, in Aleppo, in killing a Turk who assaulted a Venetian and slandered the state of Venice, and even as he describes his action in killing that Turk, thus he impales himself on his own sword.

So, why is he talking in the last minutes of his life about this encounter with a Turk many years ago? We may by now have almost forgotten the presence of the Turks as the enemy menacing Cyprus when the play opened, but they've got a symbolic presence in the language of the play as representative barbaric aliens. It is as if Othello ends by splitting himself into two people, the civilized defender of Venice who kills the savage barbaric alien, and that same alien, for it is himself that the noble Venetian Othello now kills. He murders the murderer that Iago made him into, destroying, purging, exorcizing that aspect of himself. It's also telling that he has already linked himself to another kind of barbaric other from a Eurocentric point of view in his comparison of himself to the Indian who threw away a pearl, just as Othello destroyed his own pearl without price, Desdemona.

Before he arrives at this moment of self-purgation, he first lays out what he feels to be his story, seeking to dictate the terms in which his actions are to be explained and interpreted. To borrow the language of *Hamlet*, he's unfolding himself. He starts by addressing the horrified Venetians who are onstage as his audience, instructing them what they must say of him. Set down this. And then he moves into the third person, offers an illusion of objectivity, again dividing himself, as if sitting in judgment upon another.

First, he says, they must speak of one who loved not wisely, but too well. Too well. He means his love for Desdemona was so great that when he knew her to be false, he could only kill her, because his whole identity was predicated on her virtue and faith. But, loving too well might bear another interpretation. To love too well could also be to forgive all, to show mercy. Why was this kind of love not available to Othello?

He describes himself as one not easily jealous. Does this sum it all up? Not easily jealous, but being wrought, perplexed in the extreme, he says. That verb wrought, here, indicates he's worked upon, even transformed by somebody else. He has become something remade and he thus transfers the moral onus to Iago who has wrought him, manipulated him from his natural state into a madness of jealousy. It's almost as if he is pleading not guilty by reason of insanity, an insanity that is the creation of somebody else. But, in choosing to believe Iago, rather than making a leap of faith and trusting in Desdemona, was he indeed not easily jealous?

Some readers of this play—I include myself among their number—find it terrifying just how easily jealous Othello is. This is not to deny the consummate skill Iago employs in poisoning his mind, but it is

to suggest that Iago's machinations are equaled by the terrible vulnerability of Othello to Iago's persuasion, his frightening predisposition to transform Desdemona from goddess into whore. As a contrast to this, listen to Emilia in an impassioned exchange with Othello earlier in the last scene. He has informed her that he has killed Desdemona because of what Iago has told him about her adulterous doings and that his action is not blameworthy. "Oh I were damned beneath all depth in hell but if I did proceed upon just grounds. Thy husband knew it all." Emilia, horrified and bemused, several times repeats blankly, "My husband?" until, eventually, Othello explodes. "He, woman, I say thy husband, dost understand the word? My friend, thy husband, honest, honest Iago." And Emilia explodes back: "If he say so, may his pernicious soul rot half a grain a day. He lies to the heart." And when Othello tries to silence her protestations and threatens violence, she goes on: "Thou hast not half the power to do me harm as I have to be hurt. Oh gull, Oh dolt, as ignorant as dirt."

Even when she's told her own husband has proved Desdemona's guilt, Emilia declares her faith immediately and absolutely for Desdemona. There is nothing comparable here to Othello's agonizing over the rival claims of Desdemona and Iago's honesty. Emilia's instincts will not let her believe that Desdemona was false. Weighing her against her own husband, she immediately rewrites "honest, honest Iago" as a man with a pernicious soul. Othello has claimed he would be damned if he proceeded on any other than just cause, but Emilia won't accept his self-definition as an agent of divine justice, but calls him "gull"—a fool and a sucker—"dolt, as ignorant as dirt."

Emilia's reward for speaking out, of course, is first to be shouted down by Othello, then to be murdered by her husband. The whole issue of whose voices are heard, believed, acted upon, and validated is crucial in this play. Othello will not hear any of Desdemona's protestations just before he kills her. His smothering of her voice is emphasized even more keenly when Desdemona revives briefly and speaks once more before she is gone for good. "A guiltless death I die," she says. When Emilia asks who has killed her, she says, "Nobody, I myself. Farewell. Commend me to my kind lord." "My kind lord"—she, in effect, forgives Othello, absolves him, tries to save him, but look what happens then.

Othello will have nothing of it. He tells Emilia, "She's like a liar gone to burning hell. 'Twas I that killed her." Othello calls Desdemona a liar who is bound for damnation and, as we've seen, he similarly tries to silence Emilia as she challenges his self-assumed identity of heavenly revenger.

When the other Venetians have come into the room and Emilia reveals that it was she who took the handkerchief and gave it to Iago, Iago's response is to call her a whore, just as Othello has called Desdemona a strumpet when she claimed she never gave Cassio the handkerchief. Tellingly, when Desdemona and Emilia speak what their men don't want to hear, they are labeled whores. As if the openness of one bodily orifice becomes interchangeable with the looseness of the other. Othello kills Desdemona to control her sexuality. Iago kills Emilia to shut her mouth. I should observe at this point that in the 16th century and the 17th century, our society punished women who were thought to talk too much almost as harshly as women convicted of prostitution. Prostitutes were whipped, sometimes even branded. Women convicted of being scolds or nagging wives were locked for hours in horrible iron bridles, called scolds bridles.

Emilia, like Desdemona, dies a selfless death. Desdemona tried to hide her lord's guilt in her final utterance. Emilia, killed by her husband for defending Desdemona's honor, reiterates her lady's innocence in her own last words. "Moor, she was chaste. She loved thee cruel moor. So come my soul to bliss, as I speak true." Their deaths contrast interestingly with the dramatically impressive, shocking, poignant, but absolutely self-centered death of Othello, in which he simultaneously lays claims to the right to write his own history, to explain his actions, and splits himself, as I said before, into the noble Othello and the savage barbaric Othello, the former killing the latter.

In the long speech Othello delivers before he kills himself, no other character in his drama is actually named. Iago isn't mentioned; he is the unnamed person who wrought Othello and made him a killer. Desdemona only appears in the metaphor that makes her the pearl that Othello threw away.

A final thought, in looking at Othello's actions as the play ends, after he has learned of Desdemona's innocence, we might think again of Iago's "What you know, you know," and ask whether Othello ever knows Desdemona truly. Having personified himself, at the start of Act 5, scene 2, as divine justice, he now goes to the other extreme and insists that he is a kind of super sinner, already damned. Looking at the body of his dead wife, he says, "Now how dost thou look now? Oh ill-starred wench, pale as thy smock! When we shall meet at count this look of thine will hurl my soul from heaven, and fiends will snatch at it."

His vision of Desdemona has once again been articulated in black and white terms. She's now utterly pure and utterly separate. She is a supremely virtuous soul who, if they meet again after death, at the day of count—that is, the Day of Judgment—will give him a look that will cast him into eternal damnation. As if she has become a cruel and unforgiving God. Has he heard Desdemona's last loving, forgiving words? Has he heard Emilia's dying confirmation of Desdemona's absolute love for him? "She loved thee, cruel moor," says Emilia. Would love, as embodied in Desdemona, act like that, refusing to forgive, sending the sinning beloved to perdition?

But, Desdemona and Emilia's voices, the voices which testify to Desdemona's love and her forgiveness, go unheard. Othello continues to be locked in his black and white vision in which Desdemona is either black as pitch or so pure she couldn't possibly forgive him. There's a poignant irony here, since as a black-skinned man Othello himself has always been made vulnerable by such a viewpoint, but he can't seem to escape it. Indeed, he dies in those terms, divides himself into enemy alien and noble warrior, another kind of black and white, at the end.

In Othello's imaginative universe, which insists on such extreme oppositions, such schematic dualities, some middle term is missing. I'd suggest to you, it is love.

Lecture Eleven

King Lear I—Kingship and Kinship

Scope:

In *Othello*, much of the play is devoted to the *process* by which its hero makes a destructive choice; *King Lear*, by contrast, explores the *consequences* of the rash choices that Lear makes at the work's beginning. This lecture begins by discussing the love test Lear devises to divide his kingdom between his daughters. It then addresses the implications of the protagonist's double identity as king and father and of the play's entanglement of political action with family strife.

This tragedy offers a double plot in the parallel stories of Lear and his daughters and Gloucester and his sons: two imperceptive fathers fall victim to the machinations of "unnatural" children. After some consideration of the Gloucester plot, the lecture addresses the slippery connotations of the word *nature* within the action of the play and concludes by examining the sequence of events whereby Lear denounces his "unnatural" daughters and alienates himself from the world in which they flourish.

Outline

- I. The public dimension of Lear's tragedy is particularly emphasized in this play.
 - A. Lear's capricious actions as an old man, facing death and greedy for love, are also those of a king and have national consequences.
 - B. The love test that Lear believes will reconfirm his power over his children's lives is to have drastic and far-reaching repercussions.
- II. The making of irrevocable choices in this play occurs very early.
 - A. As the play opens, Lear rashly and unreflectingly chooses to divide his kingdom, to disinherit and banish the daughter who truly loves him, and to banish his most loyal follower, Kent.
 - B. Cordelia's decision not to play Lear's game is equally swift, as is Kent's attack on Lear for his actions toward her.
 - C. Cordelia's actions affirm her own sense of the integrity of her love and of the proper duty of a daughter but are interpreted by Lear as disloyal and transgressive.
- III. Lear's actions are implicitly and explicitly challenged from the very start.
 - A. The king of France makes it clear that Lear is blind to Cordelia's virtues.
 - B. Even Cordelia's sisters, who have benefited from Lear's rashness, recognize his folly.
 - C. Kent unceremoniously chastises his king: "What wilt thou do old man?... See better, Lear...."
- IV. Lear cannot see that he is transforming himself from a king to an impotent old man.
 - A. He attempts to retain the title and prerogatives of a monarch, while divesting himself of regal power and royal responsibility.
 - B. When he is treated less than respectfully at Goneril's castle, his court Fool points out that he has reversed the parent-child hierarchy and given his older daughters power over him.
 - C. This revises the fantasy of being totally loved and indulged by a daughter-turned-mother that had shaped his expectations of Cordelia.
 - D. The Fool's constant harping on Lear's own folly eventually provokes Lear's first faint admission that he did Cordelia wrong.

- V. *King Lear* has a complex double plot that aligns Lear's relations with his daughters with the Earl of Gloucester's dealings with his sons.
- Both men learn to "see better" the hard way, after trusting the wrong children.
 - Shakespeare juxtaposes Lear's rash choice with Gloucester's credulous response to the illegitimate Edmund's suggestion that Edgar, his legitimate heir, is plotting against him.
 - Gloucester believes Edgar to have behaved "unnaturally," just as Lear believed Cordelia to have behaved "unnaturally."
- VI. The question of what constitutes natural or unnatural behavior in this play may be related to its larger exploration of the very nature of *nature*.
- To behave "naturally" in the world of this play is ostensibly to behave in a humane fashion. But the nature of nature is always up for grabs.
 - When Edmund invokes Nature as his goddess, he opposes her laws to the cultural customs that make him—as an illegitimate (or "natural") son—unable to inherit his father's lands.
 - Edmund wants to be disencumbered of society's rules and moralities. His nature is a proto-Darwinian nature, knowing no altruism, no ties of loyalty or love.
- VII. The inexorable process by which Lear himself is stripped down to a "state of nature" begins with his Act 1 confrontation with Goneril.
- Realizing that he no longer has any authority to wield against his daughter, he is increasingly vulnerable to the uncontrollable emotions her "filial ingratitude" arouses in him.
 - When Goneril asks him to dismiss half of his train of attendants, Lear invokes nature's cruelest powers to punish her for her "unnatural" behavior.
 - His curse does not strike Goneril, however: it is her father who will suffer most immediately.
 - Lear's subsequent confrontation with Regan at Gloucester's castle shows that he is still trying to quantify love (in this case, according to how many followers each daughter will allow him).
- VIII. When it becomes clear that Regan and Goneril both wish to reduce him to a condition of complete dependency, Lear explodes.
- He cries out impotently for revenge but is able neither to articulate what he wishes to do nor to enact it—and he recognizes himself to be on the verge of madness.
 - When he flees to the barren landscape beyond the castle and into a fierce storm, the cruel nature he called down upon Goneril is now raging both within him and without.

Essential Reading:

Shakespeare, *King Lear*.

Questions to Consider:

- How much responsibility does Cordelia bear for the events of 1.1., and how might you instruct the actress playing this role to behave and speak in this scene?
- Consider the scenes in which Edmund manipulates Gloucester and Edgar into believing the worst of each other. Do we have another Iago here, or is there something different to be found in Edmund's tactics of persuasion?

Lecture Eleven—Transcript

King Lear I—Kingship and Kinship

Writers who have offered theories of tragedy have often suggested that their tragic protagonists' experience should have a public, as well as a private dimension. Their suffering or fall should not be a matter of just one person coming to grief, but involve or have reverberations within a whole community. In *King Lear*, the public and, indeed, national reverberations of Lear's actions are made clear from the first. His every decision, however personal and capricious, has the potential to affect his whole kingdom. Lear, as king, has two identities. He's a monarch with no sons and three daughters, who must decide who is to inherit his kingdom and because two of those daughters already have powerful husbands, which of the potential factions in that kingdom he will favor. But, he's also an old man, facing death, greedy for love. As the play opens, he is about to enact a plan that seems designed to reconfirm his power over his children's lives and affections. Its consequences will be more drastic and far-reaching than he has ever dreamed.

I've noted before that the act of choosing is often a crucial component of tragic drama. Think back to *Hamlet* and *Othello* where, in different ways, the process of choosing became central to the action. We see Hamlet endlessly reflecting on his situation and reviewing his options. We see the gradual poisoning of Othello's mind and his agonized articulation of his dilemma to Iago. "I think my wife be honest, and think she is not, I think that thou art just, and think thou art not." Whom is he to trust? There's no equivalent of this in *King Lear*, no agonized self-interrogation, no preliminary soliloquy; Lear acts violently and irrationally from the first. Within a single scene, he makes a series of disastrous choices. He chooses to divide his kingdom and let go the reins of power. He chooses to disinherit Cordelia, the one daughter who really loves him. He chooses to banish his most loyal follower, the earl of Kent.

Other people's choices are no less swift. Cordelia has only a couple of brief asides before she shows Lear she won't play his game. Kent doesn't pause before he attacks Lear for rejecting Cordelia. The action of this play will focus much less on the process of choosing than upon the consequences of choices and especially the far-reaching and devastating consequences of the choices Lear makes at the very start.

We begin Act 1 with a love test that is rather reminiscent of something out of a folk or fairy tale. There is, indeed, a folktale in which a king asks his daughter to say how much she loves him and banishes her for her apparent callous impertinence when she says she loves him as much as meat loves salt. Later, in disguise as a kitchen maid, she presents him with a tasteless unsalted dish of meat and her father weeps as he realizes what his apparently lost daughter meant.

Lear claims that his children will win their inheritance in proportion to how successfully they demonstrate their love, but his test is fixed from the start. Although it seems as if the daughters are to win Lear's bounty in proportion to their loving speeches, when after Goneril and Regan have spoken, Lear turns to Cordelia, he says: "What can you say to draw a third more opulent than your sisters? Speak." Lear expects his favorite to do best and he has already set aside the most generous portion for her. But Cordelia, who is never going to win the Miss Congeniality award, refuses to follow Lear's script, refuses to quantify her love. Love, for her, has nothing to do with staged declarations. We've already guessed what will happen because of the remarks she has made aside. When Goneril has finished declaring her love, Cordelia sadly remarks, "What shall Cordelia speak? Love, and be silent." And after Regan's protestations, Cordelia declares, "I'm sure my love's more ponderous than my tongue. It's more substantial than any words I could give to it."

So, we are less surprised than Lear when in answer to his question she offers her resounding, "Nothing, my lord" and then qualifies her denial. "I cannot heave my heart into my mouth. I love your majesty according to my bond, no more, no less." According to my bond. What is her bond? How does she define her filial duty? Well, she does so by addressing what is problematic within her sister's lavish declarations:

“Good my lord, you have begot me, bred me, loved me. I return those duties back as are right fit, obey you, love you, and most honor you. Why have my sisters husbands, if they say they love you all? Haply, when I shall wed, that lord whose hand must take my plight shall carry half my love with him, half my care and duty. Sure, I shall never marry like my sisters, to love my father all.”

She speaks to the loyalties of women who are expected by their society to switch their allegiance from father to husband. You may recall Desdemona made a similar argument to her father when he asked her to whom she owed her duty. What are my married sisters doing, Cordelia says, insisting that all their love is still placed in their father?

As in *Othello*, we have a play which starts out with an action by a young woman that her father chooses to construe as an unnatural act, a transgression. Lear’s response is swift and terrible. You might also note its utter selfishness. “Better thou hadst not been born than not to have pleased me better.” I’m struck by the fact that Lear doesn’t say you should have loved me better, but rather you should have pleased me better. We should note at once a big difference between the world of *Hamlet* and that of *Lear*. Nobody in Denmark, except Hamlet, seems to have been especially disturbed by Claudius’s hasty marriage to Gertrude, but the first scene of *Lear* is full of implicit and explicit critiques of Lear’s action.

Cordelia’s suitor, the king of France, declares, “Fairest Cordelia, that art most rich, being poor, most choice, forsaken, and most loved, despised. Thee and thy virtues here I seize upon. Be it lawful I take up what’s cast away.” While not directly addressing Lear, he makes it quite clear that he thinks Lear doesn’t realize what a jewel he’s throwing away in Cordelia. Even Goneril and Regan, who have benefited from Lear’s rashness, recognize his folly. “He always loved our sister most, and with what poor judgment he hath now cast her off, appears too grossly,” says Goneril, and Regan responds, “He hath ever but slenderly known himself.” This is not a man who has ever reflected carefully on his own actions.

Then, of course, there is the outspoken earl of Kent. “Thy youngest daughter does not love thee least,” bellows Kent. “Nor are those empty hearted whose low sounds reverb no hollowness,” and later on, “See better, Lear.” Kent has already explained his lack of ceremony on the grounds that his very uncourtly criticism is excused by the craziness of Lear’s action. “Let Kent be unmannerly,” he says, “when Lear is mad. What wilt thou do, old man?”

It’s telling that Kent, with astonishing bluntness, addresses the king as “old man” because this is to be Lear’s essential identity from now on, the identity he must learn to come to terms with. To be sure, Lear still believes he can order things on his own terms. Speaking to the husbands of Goneril and Regan, the dukes of Albany and Cornwall, he says:

“I do invest you jointly with my power, preeminence, and all the large effects that troop with majesty. Our self, by monthly course, with reservation of a hundred knights, by you to be sustained, shall our abode make with you by due turns. Only, we still retain the name and all the additions to a king. The sway, revenue, execution of the rest, beloved sons, be yours.”

He speaks with the royal “we,” as he tries to achieve the impossible. Retain the title and prerogatives of the monarch, while divesting himself of both regal power and regal responsibility. He wants the name of king, even as he reduces his support base to a train of one hundred knights. In reality, he risks being no more than a dependent old man, an old man who has trusted his welfare to those who are not likely to obey the contract he is drawing up, and Lear very quickly finds this out. Staying at Goneril’s castle, he suspects her servants aren’t treating him very deferentially. He asks her steward Oswald, “Who am I, sir?” Who the hell do you think I am? “My lady’s father,” says the man, not “my king.”

Lear’s court jester, his fool, suggests matters are even worse. The fool has been singing snippets of songs that seem to mock the folly of Lear’s actions. When Lear asks, “When were you won’t to be so full of songs, sirrah?” The fool replies, “Ever since thou madest thy daughters, thy mother, when thou gavest them the rod and pullst down thine own britches.”

Lear has reversed the usual parent-child hierarchy. This reverberates rather interestingly against what Lear himself says petulantly about Cordelia after he has banished her. “I loved her most and sought to set my rest on her kind nursery.” That is, I thought to live out my old age in her care. “Nursery” is here the loving care of a nursing mother. His fantasy of being totally loved and indulged by a daughter turned mother is transformed into the reality of heartless daughters who’ll treat him like an unloved child.

Lear’s fool is, in fact, a very wise fool. Like Kent, he is a loyal critic. Under the cover of the teasing speeches, songs, and jokes of the professional jester, he keeps tossing back to Lear the implications of his actions. Let’s take another look at the fool in Act 1, scene 4. When Lear tells Goneril she’s looking much too bad tempered, the fool says, “Thou was a pretty fellow when thou hadst no need to care for her frowning. I am better than thou art now. I am a fool, thou art nothing.” Nothing is, of course, a word that reverberates through this play.

And finally, when Lear storms out of Goneril’s castle to seek out Regan’s home, convinced she will be more loving and dutiful than her sister, the fool points out his error. “Regan is a twin to Goneril,” he suggests, “they’re as alike as two crabapples,”—two sour apples. In the scene of rather hard-edged banter that follows, there’s an odd moment when Lear, out of nowhere, says, “I did her wrong.” He doesn’t follow up or explain this statement, but it is as if, just for a moment, he confronts the mistake he has made in disowning Cordelia.

I now want to return to Kent’s remark, “See better, Lear.” There are, in fact, two old men in this play who have to learn how to see properly: Lear and one of his noblemen, the earl of Gloucester. One will go mad before he sees clearly again, and one will literally lose his eyes before he gains any insight. Shakespeare creates a double plot. We have two stories of fathers who choose to trust the wrong children, who can’t see where love really lies. The play offers theme and variation. The parallel is structurally brought to our attention because the scene in which Lear makes all his crucial choices is framed by two episodes involving Gloucester and his children.

The play begins in a leisurely manner, as two noblemen, Kent and Gloucester, speculate on the king’s intentions and one of them introduces his son to the other. Gloucester’s son, Edmund, was born out of wedlock. His older and legitimate brother, Edgar, will inherit Gloucester’s lands. Gloucester explains the situation with a kind of shamefaced bravado:

“I have, sir, a son by order of law, some year elder than this, who yet is no dearer in my account, though this knave came somewhat saucily into the world before he was sent for, yet was his mother fair. There was good sport at his making, and the whoreson must be acknowledged.”

Gloucester is both tactless and complacent, as he jokes about Edmund’s origins, and all the time Edmund stands there and hardly says a word. But, if Edmund is almost silent here, he gets the first soliloquy in the play, just like Iago does in *Othello*. You might want to think about whether there are other similarities between Edmund and Iago. Edmund’s certainly just as much a skeptic about other people’s conventional notions of wisdom and virtue, and he is equally adept at masking his real nature.

Edmund will successfully manipulate Gloucester into believing the legitimate son, Edgar, has been plotting against Gloucester’s life. He cleverly makes Edgar keep out of Gloucester’s way so that they’ll never get together and clarify matters between them. In Act 2, he persuades his father that he was wounded by Edgar for refusing to help his brother murder their father, and even as he poisons Gloucester’s mind, Edgar is fleeing the castle, still believing Edmund is on his side.

Edmund discloses the supposedly criminal Edgar’s unnatural purpose to kill his father and Gloucester embraces him, calling him his loyal and natural son. Note the pun here; a natural son is, in Shakespeare’s time, the polite way of referring to a son born out of wedlock. Now the natural son is declared the truly natural son, the one who has behaved with proper filial loyalty. The opposition between natural and unnatural keeps recurring. Gloucester and Lear decide that Edgar and Cordelia are unnatural children and

then choose to favor other children who eventually teach them what it is really like to have a really unnatural child.

Natural, unnatural—the word nature, with all its derivatives, reverberates through *King Lear*. It's a very slippery term and it is constantly under negotiation in the play. Nature can mean "Nature" with a capital N, the natural world that may or may not reflect a divine order of things. It can also, of course, mean human nature, inner nature, where to be natural is to be humane. The old word for nature is, in fact, "kind," "kind" in Middle English. To behave kindly is to behave naturally. But, the very notion of nature is always being constructed by human beings, even if they may believe that nature is in some sense prior to the culture that decides what constitutes nature. Also, it means different things to different people in the play, which brings me back to Edmund's soliloquy at the start of Act 1, scene 2:

"Thou, nature, art my goddess. To thy law my services are bound. Wherefore should I stand in the plague of custom, and permit the curiosity of nations to deprive me, for that I am some 12 or 14 moonshines lag of a brother? Why bastard? Wherefore base? When my dimensions are as well compact, my mind as generous, and my shape as true, as honest madam's issue... As to the legitimate—fine word, legitimate. Well, my legitimate, if this letter speed, and my invention thrive, Edmund, the base, shall top the legitimate. I grow; I prosper. Now, gods, stand up for bastards."

When Edmund invokes nature as his patron goddess, he opposes her in effect to those curious and petty cultural social and legal practices, which make him illegitimate, which call him bastard and baseborn. The irony in this play, of course, is that Edmund, the bastard, is a real bastard. He scorns custom, tradition, the arbitrary and idiosyncratic rules of society, both the discrepancy between the way the legitimate and illegitimate sons are treated and the very fact that the firstborn must always inherit an estate under the law of primogeniture.

You might want to note that the English law was pretty tough on bastard children in Shakespeare's time. A father might make separate provision for illegitimate children, but they had no automatic claims on the parental estate. Indeed, even legitimate younger sons suffered considerably under a system that gave the lion's share of an inheritance to the firstborn male.

Edmund believes that we should follow our own natural appetites, just as his own father had followed his in begetting Edmund. He wants to be disencumbered from society's rules and moralities. Of course, he is appropriating the notion of nature for his own purposes, ignoring that other sense of natural, which would declare it to be utterly unnatural to be plotting against his own kin. Edmund's nature is a proto Darwinian nature, red in tooth and claw, knowing no altruism, no ties of loyalty or love, where only the most ruthless survive.

But, that is yet to come. In Acts 1 and 2, we see the beginnings of the stripping down of Lear himself to the state of nature, after he divests himself of the power, which should back up his kingly identity. His altered condition becomes evident in his arguments with Goneril and Regan about his personal retinue of one hundred knights. Lear begins to realize he no longer has any authority to wield against his daughters. He also feels increasingly powerless against the uncontrollable emotions their filial ingratitude arouse in him, emotions which threaten to drive him insane. If Lear at times seems to be overreacting to his daughters' behavior, remember that at this time there was a much greater weight on public respect to be paid to parents by children. Even adult children were expected to behave with extreme deference to their parents. There's absolutely no equivalent in Renaissance England to the teenager, who, like, rolls their eyes at whatever the parent says.

In his confrontation with Goneril, when she asks him sweetly to send away half of the knights who attend on him, there's a moment of feline unmasking when she makes it clear that she is currently politely requesting what she already has the power to enforce without his approval. How can he stop her, if she chooses to banish half his followers? What army will now do his will? Lear's response is to curse her and

his speech, like Edmund's, invokes the goddess Nature herself: "Hear, Nature, hear. Dear goddess, hear. Suspend thy purpose, if thou didst intend to make this creature fruitful. Into her womb convey sterility."

Lear invokes Nature's cruelest powers. Goneril has been an unnatural child. He asks that Mother Nature deprive Goneril of her power to be a mother. Later on, in his diatribe, he begs that if Goneril does give birth, Nature should make her child an unnatural torment to its mother, so that his daughter may learn how sharper than a serpent's tooth it is to have a thankless child. But, this is a play in which people are always calling on the gods, on various cosmic forces, and it is not at all clear that anybody is out there listening. Lear's curse doesn't strike Goneril. It's he who will suffer most immediately, both inwardly and outwardly, from Nature's cruelties.

Lear storms out of Goneril's home to seek refuge with Regan, still blind to the fact that Regan and Goneril are pretty much alike. He ends up at Gloucester's castle. He doesn't himself even get to enter the fortress, but rather has a bitter confrontation with Regan, who with her husband is already in residence there and with Goneril, who has followed her father to run her own intervention.

Regan speaks the same language as Goneril did. You are an old man, you should be ruled by others; you are not king anymore. Their confrontation climaxes with another battle over the numbers in Lear's retinue. Goneril said he must dismiss fifty of his knights. Regan goes further. "If you will come to me, for now I spy a danger, I entreat you to bring but five and twenty. To no more will I give place or notice." And her father says, "I gave you all." "And in good time you gave it." "Made you my guardians, my depositories, but kept a reservation to be followed with such a number. What, must I come to you with five and twenty, Regan? Said you so?" "And speak it again, my lord; no more with me." Lear turns at this point to Goneril and says, "I'll go with thee, thy fifty yet doth double five and twenty, and thou art twice her love."

There's something tremendously poignant about this exchange. In his blindness, Lear still tries to quantify love, as he did in the disastrous love test. Here he measures love according to how many followers each daughter will allow him. Although perhaps it is not ultimately the numbers that are at issue here, but rather what keeping his knights would represent—his kingly authority, his sense of his own identity as regal father, the affirmation of his daughters' obedience to the social contract he drew up earlier.

And this is what happens. Goneril says, "Hear me, my lord. What need you five and twenty, ten, or five, to follow in a house where twice so many have a command to tend you?" "What need one," adds Regan. And then, Lear, maddened with fury and his own sense of powerlessness, explodes: "You see me here, you gods, a poor old man, as full of grief as age, wretched in both. If it be you that stir these daughters' hearts against their father, fool me not so much to bear it tamely. Touch me with noble anger, and let not women's weapons, water drops, stain my man's cheeks. No, you unnatural hags, I will have such revenges on you both, that all the world shall—I will do such things—what they are, yet I know not, but they shall be the terrors of the earth. You think I'll weep. No, I'll not weep. I have full cause of weeping. But this heart shall break into a hundred thousand flaws, or ere I'll weep. Oh fool, I shall go mad."

On the verge of insanity, he leaves the castle, goes out into the night and wind and rain. He storms off into the same cruel Nature he called down upon Goneril. Now, it rages both inside him and outside. The play enacts a brutal dynamic by which the expulsion and rejection of a child is followed by the expulsion and rejection of the father who disowned her. Lear rejected both honest love and honest service. Now, he is naked to the elements.

Lecture Twelve

King Lear II—“Unaccommodated Man”

Scope:

This lecture focuses on Shakespeare’s interest in the stripping and refashioning of identities in Act 3 of *King Lear*. Edgar, disowned by his father and disguised as a crazed beggar, and Lear, driven insane by his older daughters’ callousness and ingratitude, collide with Kent, Gloucester, and Lear’s Fool in a chaotic night on a storm-swept heath. Wild and fragmentary interchanges between these lost or alienated figures produce a kind of theater of the absurd in which Lear rages at the storm and attempts to solve the enigma of evil itself: “Is there any cause in nature that makes these hard hearts?” The lecture explores the idiosyncratic dramatic juxtapositions and oppositions out of which Shakespeare creates his new society of fools and madmen; it also sketches out some of the larger questions that are forced upon Lear and Gloucester by the extremity of their suffering.

Outline

- I. In the middle portion of *Lear*, Shakespeare puts several of his characters through a purgatorial stripping down and refashioning of their identities.
 - A. The expulsions and rejections of children are followed by the expulsion and rejection of the fathers who disowned them.
 - B. Edgar, fleeing the manhunt provoked by Edmund’s machinations, takes on the disguise of a half-naked beggar and renames himself “Poor Tom.”
 - C. Edmund’s plotting causes Gloucester to be accused of treason by Cornwall: his eyes are put out, and he is expelled from his own castle.
- II. As disguised, dispossessed, and maddened characters collide with one another on the heath, Shakespeare emphasizes the confusion created by their obsessive and solipsistic behavior.
 - A. Lear, in his madness, asks the storm to smite his enemies but also indicts it as an agent of his cruel daughters; he is absolutely fixated upon their “filial ingratitude.”
 - B. Shakespeare crafts some particularly bitter dramatic ironies in juxtaposing Gloucester’s remarks about ungrateful children with the remarks of his own banished son.
 1. Gloucester’s blindness to Edmund’s scheming is echoed in his inability to see through Edgar’s disguise.
 2. Only when he is literally blinded will Gloucester receive the information that will force him to “see” that Edgar was slandered.
- III. Lear’s obsession with the sins of Goneril and Regan consumes his being.
 - A. On seeing Poor Tom’s wretched state, he assumes that he has been beggared by his daughters.
 - B. In a hut on the heath, he has the supposed mad beggar and his own fool preside over a surreal mock arraignment of Goneril and Regan.
 - C. Lear’s preoccupation with his ill treatment extends to a desire to anatomize the origins of evil itself: “Is there any cause in nature that makes these hard hearts?”
- IV. Lear is also fascinated by Poor Tom, the Bedlam beggar.
 - A. For Lear, Tom’s near-naked and self-mutilated body represents humanity stripped bare of all trappings of civilization (in contrast to his daughters, whose rich clothes and beauty hid their bestial natures).
 - B. The sight of Tom reinforces Lear’s earlier meditations in the storm about the vulnerability of the

poorest in society to nature's cruelties.

- V. Lear and Gloucester make related, but not identical, physical and spiritual journeys through the night.
 - A. Lear is punished for his errors with insanity; Gloucester's physical blinding repays his failure to see clearly.
 - B. Lear's aggressive madness and his defiance of the elements are inverted in Gloucester's despairing vision of human beings as the playthings of uncaring gods.
 - C. Gloucester asks that Poor Tom guide him toward Dover (where he has already dispatched Lear to meet Cordelia's invading forces). From the convergence on Dover Beach of two erring old men, Shakespeare will make one of the most powerful pieces of theater ever written.

Essential Reading:

Shakespeare, *King Lear*.

Supplementary Reading:

Dollimore, *Radical Tragedy*, chapter 13.

Questions to Consider:

1. Why does Shakespeare devote so many lines to Kent's acrimonious confrontation with Cornwall and Oswald before Lear arrives at Gloucester's castle?
2. King Lear falls into madness; Edgar pretends to be deranged. Is the language of their (real or pretended) insanity at all similar to that used by Hamlet when adopting his "antic disposition"?

Lecture Twelve—Transcript *King Lear* II—“Unaccommodated Man”

At the end of Act 2, Lear storms off into the same cruel nature he called down upon Goneril. Now, the destructive power of nature rages both inside him and outside him. As I've already suggested, the play enacts a brutal dynamic by which the expulsions and rejections of children—Cordelia, Edgar—are followed by the rejection and expulsion of the fathers who disowned them. The same night, in this same castle, Edmund will gain the information, which will allow him to usurp his father's place.

In the middle portion of the play, Shakespeare puts several of his characters through a kind of purgatorial stripping down and refashioning of their identities. The mad King Lear has been sent into Nature at its cruelest. But, we have already had this situation anticipated in the fate of Gloucester's legitimate son Edgar, framed by his half-brother Edmund so that he appears to have been plotting to usurp his father's place while Gloucester yet lives.

Edgar has already fled in fear of his life, even before Gloucester formally disowns and banishes him. We see him alone in the wild in Act 2, scene 3, a hunted outlaw. Having lost his noble rank, having been disinherited and exiled, and with the hounds on his trail, he is now stripping himself of all that remains of his former identity:

“While I may ‘scape, I will preserve myself and am bethought to take the basest and most poorest shape that ever penury, in contempt of man, brought near to beast. My face I'll grime with filth, blanket my loins, elf all my hair in knots. And with presented nakedness out face the winds and persecutions of the sky. The country gives me proof and precedent of bedlam beggars, who, with roaring voices, strike in their numbed and mortified bare arms, pins, wooden pricks, nails, sprigs of rosemary. Poor Turlygod! Poor Tom! That's something yet. Edgar, I nothing am.”

Edgar, in his own way, seems to be going back to Nature, a brutally harsh natural world in which wander bedlam beggars, half-naked, half-crazed, homeless vagabonds who mutilate themselves to win charity from those they meet. He says, “Edgar, I nothing am.” (I am no more Edgar, but also, as Edgar, I am nothing.) There's perhaps a faint echo here of the fool telling Lear he had made himself nothing. Edgar has remade himself as the lowest of the low, a crazed beggar (“Poor Tom.”) This process of at once stripping off one's identity and transforming oneself has indeed been seen even earlier in the play when Kent shows up in disguise at the start of Act 1, scene 4, so that he may loyally continue to serve his king. In a brief soliloquy, he comments, “I razed my likeness” (I erased my likeness. I razed off my likeness)—presumably by shaving off his beard.

There's one other character who will have his identity erased and transformed. In Act 3, not so very long after disinherited Edgar, seeking to escape his father's vengeance, has become Poor Tom the bedlam beggar, Gloucester himself is going to undergo a terribly similar experience. Edmund, who is very good at manipulating paper trails, uses one letter to frame his brother and another to ruin his father, to make Cornwall, Regan's husband and Gloucester's overlord, turn against him. The letter, described to him in confidence by his father, concerns a faction in England that is now working with Cordelia, who by marriage is queen of France, to reclaim Lear's rights from the incursions of his daughters. So, in the background of the very personal sufferings of the various wanderers in the storm, larger political upheavals are taking place. Once Edmund suggests that Gloucester is in cahoots with the French invaders, and when it becomes known that Gloucester has gone into the storm to offer comfort to Lear against Cornwall's orders, the duke declares Gloucester a traitor. He gives his rank and lands to Edmund, and in one of the most terrible scenes in Shakespeare's plays, Cornwall himself puts out Gloucester's eyes. Expelled from his own castle, Gloucester experiences in reality the condition Edgar has taken upon himself as a disguise—blinded, homeless, he's reduced to a mutilated beggar.

In Acts 3 and 4 Shakespeare will take Gloucester and Lear on brutal journeys that finally bring them together on the beach at Dover, near to the mustering point of Cordelia's invading forces. For now,

however, I want to look at the storm scenes on the heath that precede this meeting, scenes in which the play's dramatic structure offers a series of moving, ironic, and even horrific collisions between people and between different perspectives. Shakespeare organizes the wild wanderings of his characters like a complex orchestral score. I'm going to focus now on some of the play's suggestive juxtapositions and also examine the obsessions that drive Lear himself.

So, let's just catalog the people who are wandering this brutal terrain of the storm-swept heath. We have a dispossessed, deranged king, Lear. We have a disguised lord; he banished Kent. We have a king's fool. We have a dispossessed son disguised as a beggar who claims to be possessed by demons, Edgar, and we have the father who banished that son, Gloucester—two men in disguise, a madman, a fool, and an unseeing father who is soon to be blinded in reality. All of them are stumbling around in the darkness and storm in which Gloucester does not recognize Kent and no one has any idea that the mad beggar is Edgar. Lear insists that Edgar, too, has been reduced to the state he's in by cruel daughters and Edgar, in his mad beggar disguise, is quite likely to call the other men by the names of demons and evil spirits.

The characters' ignorance of each other and their fragmentary conversations—conversations in which speakers often pursue their own obsessions or role play in surreal ways—all of these suggest a world gone crazy, full of anarchy and confusion in which everyone is locked in the prison house of his own fears or fantasies or resentments. Let's start with Lear, raging against the elements:

“Blow, winds, and crack your cheeks. Rage, blow. You cataracts and hurricanoes, spout till you have drenched our steeples, drowned the cocks. And thou, all shaking thunder, smite flat the thick rotundity of the world. Crack nature's moulds, all germens spill at once, that make ingrateful man.”

He begins by challenging forces of nature to do their worst to him and to smite his enemies and to destroy everything in the universe that goes to produce the forces of ingratitude that have driven him over the edge. Then, still addressing the forces of the storm, he upbraids the cruel agents or ministers of Nature for seeming to be at the service of his cruel daughters, for all too conveniently producing a storm to supplement the women's spite. Invoking the elements he says, “Here I stand, your slave, a poor, infirm, weak, and despised old man, but yet I call you servile ministers, that have with two pernicious daughters joined your high engendered battles against a head so old and white as this.”

The very forces of nature, he claims, are now in league with his pernicious daughters. But, later on, when Kent is begging him to take shelter in a hovel he has found, Lear declares himself immune to the elements because the storm outside can do nothing to him in comparison with the storm in his own being. “Thou thinkst 'tis much that this contentious storm invades us to the skin. So it is to thee, but where the greater malady is fixed, the lesser is scarce felt...The tempest in my mind doth from my senses take all feeling else save what beats there. Filial ingratitude. Is it not as this mouth should tear this hand for lifting food to it? But I will punish home. No, I will weep no more. In such a night to shut me out. Pour on. I will endure. In such a night as this. Oh Regan, Goneril. Your old, kind father, whose frank heart gave all—That way madness lies; let me shun that; no more of that.”

His image of a mouth tearing at its own hand for giving it food, of a body at war against itself, suggests his horror at realizing that his daughters, the flesh of his own flesh, are not indeed under his control, and not continuous with his own will. He has assumed that, like extensions of himself, they would do his bidding. They turn out not only to be utterly separate from his will, but to be his antagonists, and he is absolutely fixated upon what has been done to him. It consumes his world. He rages at his own impotence, and as he agonizes over his daughters' cruelty, he's all too aware of the insanity that's about to possess him.

And woven into the spectacle of Lear descending into madness are other collisions in the dark. The hovel proves to be inhabited by Poor Tom, the crazed beggar who is constantly babbling of the fiend he says torments him, when Gloucester turns up, pursuing Lear on his personal rescue mission, a lone man

brandishing a lighted torch in the darkness. Edgar—Edgar as Tom—cries out, “This is the foul fiend Flibbertigibbet.” Edgar, acting in character as the mad beggar, insists this new arrival is some night-walking demon, but for us, it’s as if he is all too accurately venting his pain on the father who has behaved like a capricious devil to him.

The ironies of the situation are compounded when Gloucester speaks to Lear. He compares the cruelty of Lear’s daughters to what he thinks he knows about Edgar’s treachery. “Our flesh and blood is grown so vile, my lord that it doth hate what gets it.” He speaks of our own flesh and blood hating the person who begets it, fathers it, even as his son Edgar raves next to him. Gloucester seems to be doomed to say things that are rendered bitterly ironic by circumstances of which he is ignorant. He will later refer to the warnings of the man he calls, “poor banished Kent,” while the disguised Kent is standing at his side. But, at present, his mind is on his own apparently ungrateful child. “I had a son,” Gloucester goes on, “now outlawed from my blood. He sought my life, but lately, very late, I loved him, friend. No father his son dearer. Truth tell thee, the grief have crazed my wits.”

His report that Edgar’s actions, or at least the actions he thinks Edgar has carried out, have crazed his wits gives us a doubling of Lear’s own condition with the extra twist that the same Edgar then says, “Tom’s a-cold.” This is to be his repeated refrain, “Tom’s a-cold.” Edgar, of course, is practically naked to the storm, but also presumably chilled to the bone by his father’s hasty judgment upon him, the father who has not seen and will not yet see.

Of course, Edgar’s wretchedness in this scene is counterbalanced later by Gloucester’s own agony. A few scenes later, bound and tortured and blinded by Cornwall and his henchmen, Gloucester calls out for help from the son he thinks loves him. “All dark and comfortless, where’s my son Edmund? Edmund,” he declares, “will revenge him.” And it is then that Cornwall reveals that it was Edmund who betrayed his confidence.

Gloucester learns the truth, sees what has really been happening at the very moment that Cornwall plucks out his eyes. “Oh my follies!” he says. “Then, Edgar was abused.” Edgar was slandered; Edgar was framed.

If Edgar, on the heath, pretends to be possessed by various demons, Lear is obsessed by the ingratitude of his daughters. He’s monomaniacal on the subject. When he sees Edgar for the first time, his first words are, “Hast thou given all to thy two daughters? And hast thou come to this? Couldst thou save nothing? Didst thou give them all?”

His obsession climaxes in the mock arraignment of his own daughters in Act 3, scene 6—a trial at which he makes the mad beggar and his own fool the presiding justices. Lear makes his deposition in a kind of parody of legal procedure. “Arraign her first, ’tis Goneril, I here take my oath before this honorable assembly, she kicked the poor king, her father.” But, even as they stage a mock trial, Lear wants to go further than merely putting somebody to the question. In the midst of the very, very black comedy of the scene—in which Lear’s obsessions, and Poor Tom’s ravings, and the fool’s wry jokes are all jostling together, and Edgar is offering an occasional remark aside in his own identity and can barely hold back his tears—in the middle of all this, Lear hits upon the nub of the matter. “Let them anatomize Regan,” he says. “See what breeds about her heart. Is there any cause in nature that makes these hard hearts?”

I should note, parenthetically, that Shakespeare is upping the level of irony even higher here. In the throes of his obsession, Lear does not acknowledge his own hardheartedness, the callousness with which he cast off his best loved daughter, Cordelia. But, in his madness on the heath, he wants to anatomize Regan, not just to explore her actions philosophically or judicially, but to dissect her out to find just what it is that renders her so unfeeling, to find a scientific explanation for what it is in human nature that makes people behave so cruelly to one another. At the time of this play’s writing, we actually have the beginnings of empirical science, when medical researchers are publishing new volumes showing their detailed anatomies of the human body. But, Lear wants to go further, beyond bones and muscles and nerves. Why

do human beings behave so appallingly to other human beings? What lies at the root of their evil? It is, of course, a version of the question Othello asks of Iago in the last scene of his tragedy, but this is only Act 3 of this play. Lear will have much more time to worry away at the problem.

Even before Lear attempts to put his older daughters on trial, he has become more and more fascinated with Edgar, as he plays out his role as Poor Tom, the bedlam beggar. Edgar is enduring the storm almost naked. The fool jokes that Tom's hypothetical daughters have at least left him a blanket or we'd have all been shamed. The beggar is stripped to his skin. Edgar's playing the role of a crazed pauper, the worst kind of beggar, the kind of beggar you pay to go away when he thrusts his deformities in your face. And in disguise as Poor Tom, Edgar offers a vision of humanity, at its nearest to animal existence. Lear asks Tom what he's been before he fell into beggary. Edgar, elaborating on his new and fictional identity, replies he was a serving man at court who lied and deceived and fornicated with the best of them. He goes on to describe himself: "false of heart, light of ear, bloody of hand, hog in sloth, fox in stealth, wolf in greediness, dog in madness, lion in prey." Of course, he's now reduced to something like the state of the beasts to which he compares himself.

Lear has been obsessed with the bestiality of his daughters. They are supercivilized court ladies on the surface, well groomed, richly dressed, yet behave like animals to him. When Lear is raging at Goneril, he calls her a serpent, a wolf, a vulture. He later describes Goneril and Regan as being "dog-hearted," tigers, not daughters. Now, Lear is confronted with a human being who is visually barely distinguishable from an animal. "Is man no more than this?" he asks. "Consider him well. Thou owest the worm no silk, the beast no hide, the sheep no wool, the cat no perfume. Ha! Here's three of us, sophisticated. Thou art the thing itself. Unaccommodated man is no more, but such a poor bare, forked animal as thou art."

"Unaccommodated man"—man stripped bare of all the trappings of civilization. Lear, in his own frenzy, wants to join Poor Tom in this stripped down state. Addressing his own garments, he says, "Off, off, you lendings." He has to be stopped from stripping himself. But, with or without clothes, Lear himself is pretty near to this stripped down naked state. His royalty won't protect him from the elements. He and we are forcibly reminded of humanity's vulnerability once the fragile protections of civilization are taken away. The sight of Edgar also reinforces a lesson Lear has already begun to learn in the storm. Before the encounter with Edgar, we see Lear, brooding on the cruelties of nature, for perhaps the first time in the play thinking of someone other than himself:

"Poor naked wretches, where so ever you are, that bide the pelting of this pitiless storm. How shall your houseless heads and unfed sides, your looped and windowed raggedness, defend you from seasons such as these? Oh, I have taken too little care of this. Take physic, pomp. Expose thyself to feel what wretches feel, that thou mayst shake the superflux to them and show the heavens more just."

Take physic pomp. The rich and powerful who live in pomp and pride should take physic, should medicate themselves, by exposing themselves to what the lowest members of society experience. Only such an experience will provoke them to behave more justly to such wretches by giving them some of their own "superflux," their superfluous possessions. This is one of the speeches in *Lear*, which explains why the play was actually rather popular in Soviet Russia, as it could be—the speech could be—seen as a sermon on the need for the redistribution of wealth.

Let's return now to the separate paths trod by Lear and Gloucester. Although buffeted by the storm, Lear's sufferings are primarily psychological. His punishments for his errors occur in the turmoil and agony of his mind. Gloucester's punishment is ultimately inscribed upon his body. He failed to see clearly; he loses his eyes in most brutal way. Cornwall has this terrible line as he squeezes them out, "Out, vile jelly." Then, he says, "Let him smell his way to Dover." One of the most frightening productions of the scene actually did not show the eye putting-out on stage. It was happening just off stage, but a group of servants are watching it happen, and you saw the agony and the misery on their faces reflect what was happening to their master.

At the start of Act 4 the blinded Gloucester, thrown out of his own castle, tells the old servant, who is trying to care for him, to leave. But, you cannot see your way, the man says, and Gloucester replies, “I have no way and therefore want no eyes. I stumbled when I saw.”

There’s a poignant despair in his words “I have no way.” His knowledge of what he has done to Edgar deprives him of any sense of a path to follow, a future to enter into. He has, at the same time, lost any sense that he is making his way through a meaningful or just universe. Brooding on what he has learned of Edmund’s betrayals he declares, “As flies to wanton boys are we to the gods, they kill us for their sport.”

He imagines a universe full of uncaring deities, where human beings are just playthings to be tormented by cruel gods, gods who are as capricious and uncaring as little boys pulling the wings off flies. Certainly, the heavens don’t seem in any great hurry to intervene to help either Gloucester or Lear. But, of course, it’s more complicated than this. Gloucester has also implied his own culpability, his own responsibility for his plight. “I stumbled when I saw.” He, after all, chose to trust Edmund rather than Edgar. But, faced with the horrors of his condition and his knowledge that he has so wronged Edgar, he despairs.

Like Lear, he has become fascinated by the vision of human wretchedness summoned up by the mad beggar, Poor Tom, he met on the heath. This seems to explain why he asks his servant that this same Poor Tom now be his escort as he goes into exile. But, even as he unwittingly requests the help of his own loving son, he hints that further existence would be unthinkable. He begs his new guide Tom to take him to the edge of the great chalk cliffs of Dover beach. “From that place I shall need no leading need.” He intends self-extinction.

Gloucester’s last action on the heath had been to make arrangements for Lear to travel to Dover in the hope that he could be united there with those who still love and support him. He’s now en route to Dover himself. Out of the collision of these two erring old men who have been stripped naked and thrust over the borders of common experience into something rich, and strange, and terrible, Shakespeare will make one of the most powerful pieces of theater ever written. We shall look more closely at this encounter in my next lecture.

Timeline

Major Events in English Political History, the Theater, and Shakespeare's Life

- 1558Elizabeth I comes to the throne.
- 1561–1562*Gorboduc* (Thomas Sackville and Thomas Norton): first English play in blank verse.
- 1564Birth of William Shakespeare.
Birth of Christopher Marlowe.
- 1569Elizabeth quashes a major rebellion in the north of England led by supporters of her Catholic rival (and a claimant to the English throne), Mary Queen of Scots.
- 1576James Burbage builds the first permanent playhouse (called The Theatre) on the south bank of the Thames. Eventually, seven playhouses are erected, but usually only two or three are in operation at any given time. Companies made up of young boys play at two indoor theaters.
- 1577Francis Drake circumnavigates the globe.
- 1581The Master of the Queen's Revels is empowered to approve (and censor) all plays intended for public performance.
- 1582Shakespeare marries Ann Hathaway.
- 1583Birth of Shakespeare's daughter Susanna.
- 1584–1585Sir Walter Raleigh annexes Virginia for the English crown; failure of the Roanoke colony.
1585.Birth of Shakespeare's twin children, Hamnet and Judith.
- 1587*Tamburlaine* (Christopher Marlowe).
The Spanish Tragedy (Thomas Kyd).
Execution of Mary Queen of Scots, mother of James VI of Scotland (who will later become James I of England).
- 1588Defeat of the Spanish Armada (a large invasion fleet sent against England).
- Late 1580s.....Shakespeare is now in London working as both an actor and a playwright.
- 1589–1593Shakespeare's earliest plays, including *Henry VI*, parts 1, 2, and 3; *Richard III*; *Comedy of Errors*; *Love's Labor's Lost*; *Titus Andronicus*.
- 1592*Doctor Faustus* (Christopher Marlowe).
First mention of Shakespeare by another author (insulting reference to him as an "upstart crow" in a pamphlet by Robert Greene).
- 1593Marlowe killed in a tavern brawl.
- 1593–1594Playhouses closed for many months because of a plague epidemic.
Shakespeare writes *Venus and Adonis* and *The Rape of Lucrece*.
- 1594–1600Shakespeare writes some of his best known comedies and histories, including *A Midsummer Night's Dream*; *Merchant of Venice*; *As You Like It*; *Much Ado About Nothing*; *Richard II*; *Henry IV*, parts 1 and 2; and *Henry V*.

- 1594Shakespeare listed as a joint stockholder of the acting company called the Lord Chamberlain’s Men; he will remain with this company for the rest of his career.
- 1596Death of Hamnet Shakespeare.
Romeo and Juliet.
Shakespeare successfully applies to the College of Heralds for a coat of arms for his family.
- 1597Shakespeare buys New Place, the second largest property in Stratford (over the next decade, he purchases a significant amount of additional land in Stratford).
- 1598Shakespeare listed as one of the “principal comedians” in Ben Jonson’s *Every Man in His Humour.*
Complimentary mention and listing of many of Shakespeare’s plays in Francis Meres’s *Palladis Tamia.*
- 1598–1599The Globe Theatre is built for the Lord Chamberlain’s Men. Used by the company until the closing of the theaters in 1642.
- 1599*Julius Caesar.*
- 1600–1608The Children of Saint Paul’s (one of the “boys’ companies”) active on the indoor stage of Blackfriars Theatre.
- 1600–1601*Hamlet.*
- 1601Failed rebellion of the Earl of Essex, previously a favorite courtier of Elizabeth I.
- 1603Death of Elizabeth I; James I succeeds to the throne.
The Lord Chamberlain’s Men become the King’s Men.
- 1603–1604Lengthy closure of the theaters because of plague epidemic.
- 1604*Othello.*
- 1605*King Lear.*
- 1605Discovery of the Gunpowder Plot, a Catholic conspiracy to blow up the Houses of Parliament while King James was presiding.
- 1606*Macbeth.*
Parliament passes an act to regulate and censor the language of stage plays.
- 1606–1607*Antony and Cleopatra.*
- 1607Captain John Smith settles Jamestown.
- 1607–1608*Pericles.*
- 1608*Coriolanus.*
Shakespeare listed as one of the joint owners of Blackfriars Theatre (where his company will now play during the winter months).
- 1609Publication of Shakespeare’s *Sonnets.*
- 1609–1610*The Winter’s Tale* and *Cymbeline.*
- 1610–1611Shakespeare retires to Stratford.
- 1611*The Tempest.*
Publication of the King James Version of the Bible.

- 1612–1613*The Two Noble Kinsmen* (with John Fletcher).
- 1613Destruction of the Globe by fire.
- 1614Building of the second Globe.
Shakespeare involved in land disputes in Stratford.
- 1616Death of Shakespeare.
- 1623Publication of the First Folio of Shakespeare’s plays (edited by his actor colleagues John Heminges and Henry Condell and entitled *Mr. William Shakespeare’s Comedies, Histories and Tragedies*). It contains 36 plays, of which 18 had not been previously published.
- 1625Death of James I; accession of his son Charles I.
- 1642During the English Civil War, Parliament closes the theaters and bans public playacting. There is no public theater in England until the restoration of Charles II in 1660. None of the old playhouses survives the period of the Interregnum.

Glossary

agency: Most simply, the power to act freely and, by extension, to take responsibility for one's actions. In the imaginative universe of tragedy, characters often struggle to assert their agency in the face of forces (social, political, or metaphysical) that might inhibit their desires; alternatively, they may speak in ways that mystify or deny their agency, their responsibility for their deeds.

amphitheaters or public theaters (such as the Globe Theatre used by Shakespeare's company): Large buildings erected outside the city limits of London from the 1570s on for the performance of plays. They were polygonal in shape and had a stage that thrust out into an area where the "groundling" spectators might stand; one could pay a higher price to sit in galleries surrounding the yard. The original Globe had room for about 3,000 people. By contrast, *hall theaters* or *private theaters* (such as Blackfriars) were smaller, enclosed playing spaces in which performances did not take place only in natural light and where none of the audience stood. Seats were considerably more expensive in these theaters, and the companies who played in them originally consisted entirely of boy actors.

anagnorisis: Aristotle's term for a moment of charged recognition in a tragic plot.

aside: A remark made by a character speaking to himself or herself while in the company of others and, by convention, not heard by anybody else on stage.

blank verse: The verse form in which many Elizabethan and Jacobean dramatists composed much of their plays. It consists of unrhymed lines and is usually structured as iambic pentameter: that is, its rhythmical base consists of five groups of two syllables, in each of which an unstressed syllable is followed by a stressed syllable (dee-DUM). A skilled poet will, however, offer many variations on this basic pattern.

body politic: The state imagined as an organic system comparable to the human body—the image is common in the political philosophy of Shakespeare's day.

catharsis: Aristotle's term for a tragedy's emotional effect on its audience—in particular, its power to purge the strong emotions (especially pity and fear) that it has created in the spectator.

chorus: In classical Greek drama, the chorus was a group of actors not directly involved in the action who, at intervals, offered a commentary on what was unfolding on the stage. In Shakespeare's day, the "chorus" is a single actor who sometimes speaks the prologue of a play.

conceit: In early modern usage, a concept or idea or thought or image.

courtesan: A high-priced and rather high-class prostitute (Venice was famous for its courtesans).

dramatic irony: The term *irony* refers to words (or perhaps a situation) in which two levels of meaning are held in tension; when dramatic irony is at work, the audience, because its members have knowledge of a situation or of a character's actions or intentions that goes beyond that of other characters on the stage, perceives a special resonance in what is done or said that is unavailable to the characters over whom they hold the discrepancy of awareness.

Elizabethan: Pertaining to the period when Elizabeth I was ruler of England (1558–1603).

enjambement (sometimes spelled *enjambment*): We see enjambement in a poetic text when a line of verse does not stop syntactically at its typographical end but continues over the line break to complete itself in the next lines; a very common phenomenon in blank verse.

equivocation: To equivocate is to speak in a manner that is deceptive or ambiguous or involves the conscious deployment of double meanings (cf. the witches in *Macbeth*).

foil: A character positioned to provide contrast with another character. For example, Laertes-as-revenger is a foil to Hamlet-as-revenger.

folio: A large and expensive book format in which the sheets of printing paper that make up the work are folded just once. The first collected edition of Shakespeare's plays (published in 1623) used this format and is usually referred to as the First Folio.

Fortune: The personification of the principle of chance as it affects human events. "Lady Fortune" was often depicted as turning a wheel on which characters might rise (in prosperity, fame, or happiness) but would necessarily fall again.

gender: A term that points to identities that are socially constructed as "masculine" or "feminine" (as opposed to a merely biological definition of one's sex). Lady Macbeth, for example, "genders" compassion and pity as (problematically) feminine characteristics when asking the spirits of darkness to rid her of these emotions.

genre: Literary genres are different kinds or categories of literary works (for example, comedy, tragedy, epic); fairly specific artistic conventions (or audience expectations) are associated with given genres.

hamartia: Aristotle's term for the "error in action" that dooms a tragic protagonist; "tragic flaw" is an inadequate translation of this term.

honor: This word has a particular inflection in Shakespearean English when it is attached to a woman. It refers to her virginity (if she is unmarried) or her absolute sexual fidelity (if she is married).

interiority: The inner psychological state of a character—in Shakespearean drama, it is most obviously disclosed by way of the soliloquy (or, more briefly, by way of an aside).

Jacobean: Pertaining to the reign of James I of England (who was also James VI of Scotland); James ruled from 1603–1625.

Moor: Term used in the late 16th and early 17th centuries to describe any North African, whether Arab or sub-Saharan.

providential design: *Providence* is a term associated with Christian theology; it encompasses the notion of divine guidance or care. If one believes in a providential design, one believes that people act within a universe in which life is patterned and shaped in a meaningful way by a loving deity and in which their choices and actions have their own significance in the "big picture."

purgatory: In Roman Catholic doctrine, a place for the punishment and purification of the souls of those who had died in a state of grace: an intermediary stage before admission to heaven.

Puritans: Radical members of the Protestant faith. English Puritans wanted to reform the Anglican faith (the official and moderate version of Protestantism upheld by the monarchy after 1558) and move it even further away from the doctrine and ritual practices of Catholicism.

quarto: An inexpensive book format used to publish single plays; the name refers to the fact that a quarto was sewn together from multiple large sheets of printing paper folded twice to produce "gatherings" of four double-sided pages. Quite a few of Shakespeare's plays exist in individual quarto editions.

revenge tragedy: A type of tragedy first made popular by Elizabethan dramatists, in which the protagonist takes it upon himself to enact revenge for crimes his own society is unwilling to recognize or unable to punish. Such plays tend to involve the corruption of the revenger by his murderous pursuits and the bloody deaths of many characters.

Senecan tragedy: Tragedies written during the Elizabethan period in imitation of plays written by the Roman poet Seneca. Seneca's plays were written in five acts, were characterized by both emotional and

physical violence (although the latter took place offstage in his works), and were prone to rhetorical extravagance. There is a significant overlap between Senecan tragedy and revenge tragedy.

soliloquy: A speech delivered by a character while alone on stage; characters often examine their feelings or reflect upon or interrogate their actions in soliloquy.

theater of the absurd: Drama that depicts the absurdity of the human condition; it usually questions conventional theological or philosophical ways of explaining or ordering the universe. In absurdist drama, isolated and usually powerless characters struggle to make sense of a bewildering cosmos. Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* (1954, English version) is a famous example of this kind of drama.

tragedy of fate: A tragedy in which the actions of the protagonists are represented as being predetermined to a considerable degree by larger metaphysical forces.

tragedy of state: A tragedy with a good deal of overt political content, in which the actions of the characters will determine the fate of a state or realm. The proper uses (and the abuses) of power are often debated in the action.

tragic knowledge: The special insight or vision sometimes granted to the tragic protagonist: perception clawed from supreme suffering. It is possible, to be sure, that the "knowledge" achieved by this character might be interrogated by audience members who hold a larger awareness of the complete action of a play.

tragic protagonist: The central character in a tragedy. Not necessarily the "tragic hero" (protagonists aren't necessarily male, and tragic protagonists may, in fact, be officially villains—e.g., Macbeth).

transgression: In tragedy, this might be equated with Aristotle's "error in action," but the term has the specific sense of an action that separates one from ordinary experience and puts one "beyond the pale." The definition of "transgressive" behavior is not necessarily an absolute one: it is often socially determined, for example, when Brabantio deploras Desdemona's "unnatural" act of marrying Othello.

virtus: Latin word that is roughly equivalent to "virtue" but also has gendered connotations of specifically "manly" behavior: courage, the faithful performance of public responsibilities to the state, and so on (cf. Cominius's public commendation of Coriolanus).

Shakespeare: A Biographical Note

William Shakespeare was born in the provincial town of Stratford-upon-Avon in 1564, the eldest son of John Shakespeare and Mary Arden. John Shakespeare's father had been a small farmer, a tenant of Mary's prosperous landowning family; he himself was, for many years, a thriving glove-maker and tanner who held several important official positions in local administration, including that of alderman. When William was about 12, his father's business went into decline and John Shakespeare was no longer active in civic affairs: he accrued heavy debts and defaulted on a mortgage he had taken out on a tract of land that was part of his wife's inheritance. He appears, however, to have recovered his respectability in later years, perhaps aided by his financially successful son. In 1596, an application made by William for the Shakespeares to be granted their own coat of arms was approved by the College of Heralds; this would have officially marked the family as "gentry."

William Shakespeare did not attend university, but as the son of a respectable tradesman, he would have been educated for up to 10 years at the quite prestigious local grammar school. *Grammar* here means Latin grammar: William would have read the works of Cicero, Seneca, Virgil, and Ovid and would have had some training in rhetoric and oratory. He might also have had his first exposure to theater during these years: records show that traveling companies of players quite regularly performed in Stratford.

It is not clear what trade or profession Shakespeare followed between leaving school and moving to London. We do know that in November 1582, at the age of 18, he married Anne Hathaway, who was 8 years his senior. Anne was already pregnant; Shakespeare's daughter Susanna was born 6 months after the marriage. In 1585, Anne gave birth to the twins Judith and Hamnet (Hamnet would die young in 1596). No records have been found of Shakespeare's doings from this point until his arrival in London, although it has been suggested that he found employment as a country schoolmaster. In his *Groats-Worth of Wit* (1592), Robert Greene, surveying the literary scene in London, mocks "an upstart Crow" who, with "his Tygers hart wrapt in a Players hyde, supposes he is as well able to bombast out a blanke verse" and "is in his owne conceit the onely Shake-scene in a countrey." Greene here parodies a line taken from Shakespeare's very early play *Henry VI*, part 3; it is clear from his remarks that Master "Shake-scene" was already quite well known, both as an actor and as a dramatist.

Our most detailed knowledge of Shakespeare's London career comes after 1594, when he became a "sharer," or joint stockholder, in the company of players called the Lord Chamberlain's Men (all acting companies had to have the patronage of a person of rank or risk being prosecuted as "rogues and vagabonds"). We do know that his long narrative poems *Venus and Adonis* and *The Rape of Lucrece* were written just prior to this, when the London theaters were closed for more than a year because of a plague epidemic. After 1594, Shakespeare wrote exclusively for the Lord Chamberlain's Men until his retirement, usually finishing two plays per year. He continued to act from time to time, and we know he participated in performances of works by his learned contemporary Ben Jonson.

Until the turn of the century, Shakespeare mainly (although not exclusively) wrote history plays and romantic comedies; his works at this time include *A Midsummer Night's Dream*; *Romeo and Juliet*; *Much Ado About Nothing*; *The Merchant of Venice*; *As You Like It*; *Richard II*; *Henry IV*, parts 1 and 2; and *Henry V*. In *Palladis Tamia: Wit's Treasury* (1598), a contemporary commentator, Francis Meres, praises Shakespeare's dramatic art and approvingly lists 12 of his plays. The playwright seems to have remained in London for much of this time, although he presumably visited Stratford during the winter when the public theaters were closed. He invested much of his earnings in Stratford properties, beginning in 1597 with his purchase of New Place, considered the second most impressive house in his hometown. In 1607, when Susanna Shakespeare married a local physician, her father was able to give her a considerable marriage settlement that included more than 100 acres of land.

In 1599, the Lord Chamberlain's Men moved to the newly built Globe Theatre, the company's main home for the remainder of Shakespeare's career. All the major tragedies discussed in this course were first

performed in the Globe, although in 1608, Shakespeare's company also acquired shares in the private hall theater of Blackfriars. After James I came to the English throne in 1603, the Lord Chamberlain's Men were given royal patronage and renamed the King's Men; from then on, the company quite often performed at court, as well as at the Globe or Blackfriars.

In the final stage of his career, Shakespeare produced complex hybrids of comedy and tragedy—plays whose striking use of spectacle may have exploited the superior technical facilities of the Blackfriars Theatre. In these later years, Shakespeare renewed his Stratford ties and, around 1610–1611, seems to have moved back there on a more permanent basis. (In 1614, he was embroiled in a legal case, involving the enclosure of land formerly held in common, that created significant local unrest.) Early in 1616, he drafted and then redrafted his will, showing particular care to protect the financial interests of his daughter Judith, who had recently married a man of dubious character. He made special bequests to just three of his colleagues in the King's Men and notoriously mentioned his wife only once, leaving her “my second best bed.” (Anne may well have automatically received one-third of his estate as the “widow's portion,” but the lack of even the most conventional terms of endearment in her husband's single reference to her is striking.) Shakespeare died on April 23, 1616, and was buried in Stratford's Holy Trinity Church: a verse on his tomb roundly curses anyone who disturbs his bones. Seven years after his death, John Heminges and Henry Condell, two of the three fellow players mentioned in his will, published the first (more or less) complete edition of his plays.

Bibliography

Primary Texts:

You should read Shakespeare in a good modern edition with notes and annotations. There are many complete editions of the plays, and the following are recommended.

The Norton Shakespeare: Based on the Oxford Edition, edited by Stephen Greenblatt, Walter Cohen, Jean Howard, and Katharine E. Maus. New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1997. (This edition is used by the lecturer and includes a very good general introduction.)

The Complete Works of Shakespeare, edited by David Bevington, 4th ed. New York: Longman, 1997.

The Riverside Shakespeare, edited by G. Blakemore Evans, et al., 2nd ed. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1997.

There are many good scholarly editions of individual plays. Three particular series of such editions are well thought of by many experts in the field: the *Arden Shakespeare: Third Series* (published by Thomas Nelson), the *Oxford Shakespeare*, and *The New Cambridge Shakespeare*. All volumes in these series offer full introductions and exhaustive notes. The single volumes are published in both hardback and paperback. Especially recommended are the following single editions from these series (listed with the names of their editors):

Hamlet. Edwards, Philip (Cambridge, 2003). Hibbard, G. R. (Oxford, 1987).

Othello. Neill, Michael (Oxford, 2006). Sanders, Norman (Cambridge, 2003).

King Lear. Foakes, R. A. (Arden, 1997). Halio, Jay L. (Cambridge 1992, or updated edition of 2005).

Macbeth, Braunnmuller, A. R. (Cambridge, 1997). Brooke, Nicholas (Oxford, 1990).

Antony and Cleopatra, Neill, Michael (Oxford, 1994).

Coriolanus, Bliss, Leo (Cambridge, 2000). Parker, R. B. (Oxford, 1994).

Note on variations among texts of Shakespeare's plays:

Some of Shakespeare's plays were not printed until his colleagues, Condell and Heminges, collected his works after his death in the volume we call the First Folio and which they entitled *Mr. William Shakespeare's Comedies, Histories and Tragedies* (1623). Others were printed in one or more individual editions (the *quartos*) before the First Folio appeared. We have no surviving manuscripts of any Shakespeare play and no information as to whether (in an era before copyright) Shakespeare himself was ever involved in the publication of any one of these earlier editions. There are some striking variations among the different texts. *Hamlet*, for example, wishes that his "too too solid flesh would melt" in the First Folio of his tragedy but wishes that his "too too sallied flesh would melt" in the first and second quarto editions of the play. A modern editor must often choose between different readings of the same line or even offer an interpretive correction when the printed text seems odd (so that some editors emend "sallied" to "sullied" and substitute this reading for the Folio's "solid"). *There is no single absolutely stable and "authorized version" of a Shakespeare play*. Indeed, one or two early editions, most notably the first quarto of *Hamlet*, are so wildly different from others that it has been suggested they were pirated versions based on the "memorial reconstruction" of an actor who performed in the work. If you find that a line or passage in your own text differs from that quoted by the lecturer, you may want to consult the textual notes of your edition to find out what is going on, in terms of editorial practice, at this point!

Other Primary Texts:

Christopher Marlowe's *Tamburlaine* and *Doctor Faustus*, along with Thomas Kyd's *Spanish Tragedy*, mentioned in Lecture Two, may be found in: *English Renaissance Drama*, edited by David Bevington, et al. New York: Norton, 2002.

Supplementary Reading:

Adelman, Janet. *Suffocating Mothers: Fantasies of Maternal Origin in Shakespeare's Plays*. New York: Routledge, 1992. Feminist psychoanalytic readings of mothers (absent and present) in Shakespeare's plays, with particular emphasis on the tragedies.

Bate, Jonathan. *The Genius of Shakespeare*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1998. A fine and capacious exploration of Shakespeare's life and writings—and of the qualities that have sustained his fame.

Bradley, A. C. *Shakespearean Tragedy: Lectures on Hamlet, Othello, King Lear, Macbeth*. 3rd ed. New York: St. Martin's, 1992. Originally published in 1904. A very influential work on Shakespearean tragedy: somewhat "Victorian" in nature but still interesting.

Briggs, Julia. *This Stage-Play World: Texts and Contexts, 1580–1625*. 2nd ed. New York: Oxford University Press, 1997. A lively and useful discussion of historical, social, and cultural contexts for reading Renaissance English literature.

Bullough, Geoffrey, ed. *Narrative and Dramatic Sources of Shakespeare*. 8v. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, and New York: Columbia University Press, 1957–1975. Reproduces the sources of Shakespeare's plays and discusses the ways in which Shakespeare reshaped them. A good place to find the Thomas North translations of Plutarch that Shakespeare used in writing *Antony and Cleopatra* and *Coriolanus*.

Cantor, Paul. *Shakespeare's Rome: Republic and Empire*. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1976. A useful study of Shakespeare's remaking of Roman political history.

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Danson, Lawrence. *Shakespeare's Dramatic Genres*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000. A concise discussion of the main features of Shakespearean comedy, history, and tragedy.

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De Grazia, Margaret, and Stanley Wells, eds. *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000. A reference anthology that has some particularly interesting chapters on contemporary and global responses to Shakespeare's work.

Dollimore, Jonathan. *Radical Tragedy*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984. This provocative "new historicist" reexamination of Renaissance tragedy, which includes an excellent chapter on *King Lear*, pays particular attention to the political resonances of early-modern theater.

Drakakis, John, ed. *Shakespearean Tragedy*. New York, Longman, 1992. An anthology of essays on the plays (with an emphasis on recent theoretical approaches) that also includes a preliminary chapter offering an overview of major discussions of tragedy across the last 200 years.

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Kott, Jan. *Shakespeare Our Contemporary*. New York: Norton, 1974. An iconoclastic account of Shakespeare originally dating from the 1960s and still provocative; some fine essays on the tragedies.

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Neely, Carol Thomas. *Broken Nuptials in Shakespeare's Plays*. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1993. Contains her groundbreaking essay "Women and Men in *Othello*."

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Poole, Adrian. *Tragedy: A Very Short Introduction*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2005. Concise, accessible, and historically wide-ranging survey of tragedy as a literary genre.

Schoenbaum, Samuel. *William Shakespeare: A Compact Documentary Life*. Rev. ed. New York: Oxford University Press, 1987. Perhaps the single best resource for biographical information about Shakespeare.

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Snyder, Susan. *The Comic Matrix of Shakespeare's Tragedies*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979. Examines the ways in which plot structures and conventions from Shakespeare's comedies are reshaped in the tragedies; suggestive discussion of *Othello*.

Young, David, ed. *Shakespeare's Middle Tragedies: A Collection of Critical Essays*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1993. A short anthology of some of the most influential recent articles on *Hamlet*, *Othello*, and *Lear*. Highly recommended.

Internet Resources:

Internet Shakespeare Editions, <http://ise.uvic.ca/Foyer/index.html>. Superb (and visually beautiful) reference site. Many links to well-presented material about Shakespearean contexts; excellent online reference for the plays themselves (elegantly scanned in multiple editions). You can search the texts or browse scene by scene. Includes an excellent Shakespeare-in-Performance database and many links to further reading.

Shakespeare Resource Center, <http://www.bardweb.net>. Extremely accessible and easy-to-navigate site that offers links to essays and illustrations on a good range of topics (for example, "The Globe Theatre" or "Elizabethan England"), followed by an annotated set of links to aid further research.

Films and Videos:

Following is a selected list of TV films and movies, available on video or DVD, that the lecturer has found of interest.

Hamlet

- 1948 film version directed by and starring Laurence Olivier. Black and white. Hamlet as a supremely introspective and wounded Renaissance man. Very marked cuts (Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, for example, disappear completely).
- 1980 made-for-TV film, part of the BBC/Time-Life series of all the Shakespeare plays. Directed by Rodney Bennett. Mainly remarkable for a superb performance by Derek Jacobi as the prince.
- 1990 film version directed by Franco Zeffirelli; Mel Gibson as Hamlet. Glenn Close is first-rate as Gertrude, and the closet scene is very sexually charged.
- 1996 version directed by and starring Kenneth Branagh. The whole text is filmed (or at least *a* whole text is filmed!). Updated to what looks like 19th-century Germany. Derek Jacobi is a fine Claudius, and Branagh, an interestingly aggressive prince.
- 2000 version directed by Malcolm Almereyda and starring Ethan Hawke. Contemporary setting; Hamlet is an independent filmmaker.

Othello

- 1952 version directed by Orson Welles (who plays the lead). The film was made in bits and pieces and varies wildly in quality, but some parts of it are visually astonishing.
- 1995 version directed by Oliver Parker with Laurence Fishburne as Othello and Kenneth Branagh as a nastily cheerful Iago. Some interesting moments, but the play is too drastically cut.

King Lear

- 1971 film directed by Peter Brook based on his celebrated stage production of some years before. Famously idiosyncratic—and a particularly brutal version of the play. Paul Scofield is a very fine Lear.
- 1983 or 1984 made-for-TV version of the play directed by Michael Elliot and starring an old and frail (although still, at times, astonishing) Laurence Olivier, whose own physical fragility gives the play extra poignancy. A superb cast; a gentler version of the play than the Brook film.
- 1998 film directed by the acclaimed Richard Eyre with Ian Holm as a tough, difficult Lear: recommended.

Macbeth

- 1948 film by Orson Welles shot quickly and on the cheap. Extremely horrible costumes. Welles is occasionally powerful as Macbeth.
- 1971 film version by Roman Polanski, made (in)famous by Lady Macbeth sleepwalking naked. Some visually astonishing moments (the opening sequence in which a battle is evoked on the misty margins of the sea is splendid), but the acting tends to be bland.
- 1978 filmed-for-TV version of a studio theater production by the Royal Shakespeare Company, directed by Philip Casson, based on original direction by Trevor Nunn. Possibly the best film of any Shakespearean tragedy; Ian McKellen and Judi Dench are superb as Macbeth and his lady, and the claustrophobic filming style is beautifully fitted to the play.

Antony and Cleopatra

- Film directed by Jon Scofield, based on a famous 1974 Royal Shakespeare Company production. Richard Johnson and Janet Suzman offer fine performances as Antony and Cleopatra; a young Patrick Stewart is an interesting Enobarbus.

Shakespeare's Tragedies

Part II

Professor Clare R. Kinney



THE TEACHING COMPANY®

PUBLISHED BY:

THE TEACHING COMPANY
4151 Lafayette Center Drive, Suite 100
Chantilly, Virginia 20151-1232
1-800-TEACH-12
Fax—703-378-3819
www.teach12.com

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ISBN 978-1-59803-309-0

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Shakespeare's Tragedies

Scope:

This course will explore Shakespeare's six mature tragedies: *Hamlet*, *Othello*, *King Lear*, *Macbeth*, *Antony and Cleopatra*, and *Coriolanus*. (Because the course focus is on the period from 1600 to 1608, in which Shakespeare produced his most compelling tragic dramas, and because it does not address "tragedies of fate," *Romeo and Juliet* is omitted.) The course goals are as follows: to offer an introduction to tragedy as a literary genre and to outline the main characteristics of Shakespearean tragedy; to acquaint students with themes that Shakespeare almost obsessively revisits and reconfigures across the span of the major tragedies; to historicize the plays by suggesting some ways in which they might speak to the anxieties and preoccupations of the playwright's 17th-century audience; to offer detailed and thought-provoking explorations of individual plays on their own terms; and to illustrate the power and audacity of Shakespeare's poetry and stagecraft.

These lectures suggest that Shakespeare's tragedies repeatedly address tensions between the will and desires of the individual and the constraints emanating from his or her society. The plays are consistently interested in the relationship between public and private life and in the emotional fissures within what one might anachronistically call dysfunctional families. Throughout the course, we will examine the different kinds of power under negotiation in Shakespeare's tragic universes: political power, erotic power, the power of language and the imagination, and the power of theater itself ("the play's the thing / Wherein I'll catch the conscience of the king!"). The lectures will also explore the larger philosophical and theological questions raised by Shakespeare's characters when they ask what non-human forces control their universe. Is there providence in the fall of a sparrow, as Hamlet declares—or do the gods kill us for their sport, as the despairing Earl of Gloucester suggests in *King Lear*?

The course will have a lot to say about tragic agency: lectures will consider who does or does not get to make significant choices in the imaginative space of these plays—and who does or does not get to reflect upon their actions. We will also ponder the slippery borderline between action and transgression. We might think of transgression as being coterminous with *tragic* action, and we will keep revisiting the question of what constitutes transgression in Shakespeare's works—what does it mean to overstep the boundaries of permitted action, to challenge the norms of one's society, to put oneself beyond the pale? And why have audiences found the dramatization of that moment of transgression (and its consequences) so consistently fascinating across the centuries? The course will also ask whether women can figure as tragic protagonists in Shakespearean drama (all but one of these plays are named after male heroes): several of the lectures will explore the role played by female transgression in the imaginative economy of the tragedies.

The course is bracketed by three "framing lectures": two preliminary ones setting out literary and historical contexts for reading the plays and a concluding presentation that ends by glancing at what happened when Shakespeare, at the very end of his career, went on to write "beyond tragedy." Of the remaining 21 lectures, the three or four units devoted to each particular play will offer multiple angles of approach to the conflicts it dramatizes and the questions it raises (at times drawing connections with other works addressed in the course). The three presentations on *Macbeth*, for example, include a lecture whose starting point is an exploration of the play's resonant allusions to contemporary controversies and to the uneasy rule of England's new (and Scottish) ruler, James I; a lecture focusing on the play's gender politics and, in particular, its dramatization of competing definitions of heroic manhood; and a lecture focusing on the poetic language and plot action that links Macbeth's desire to control the future (and his preoccupation with royal and dynastic succession) to the lives and deaths of children in the tragedy. All of the lectures on individual plays will balance larger thematic considerations with careful attention to the nuances of the astonishing language in which Shakespeare's tragic protagonists give voice to their

alienation and estrangement from ordinary experience—in which, one might say, they speak the unspeakable.

In the earliest surviving analysis of the workings of tragedy, Aristotle's *Poetics*, tragedy is defined not only by its content but by its effect upon an audience: Aristotle speaks of the pity and fear it should evoke and the *catharsis* or purgation it should produce. It is a critical commonplace that the suffering of the tragic protagonist is rendered significant by the special insight or vision it allows him or her to achieve, and these lectures will regularly consider what kind of “tragic knowledge” Shakespeare's protagonists articulate *in extremis*. But they will also look carefully at the larger understanding and emotional engagement experienced by the audiences of these dramas: this course will persist in asking what kind of significance *we*, in the 21st century, might wrest out of Shakespeare's tragic spectacles.

Lecture Thirteen

King Lear III—The Stage of Fools

Scope:

This lecture continues to follow the (physical and metaphysical) journeys taken by Lear and Gloucester. Starting with a discussion of Gloucester's journey to Dover in the company of his disowned son, Edgar, and looking carefully at Edgar's thwarting of his father's suicide, it will move toward an analysis of the encounter between blind Gloucester and mad Lear on Dover Beach. What kind of "tragic knowledge" do both men win out of their suffering, and what should we make of the political strain in Lear's crazed insights as he ponders the limits (and abuses) of power and the injustice of human institutions? What are the implications of Lear's meditation on life itself as "this great stage of fools"? What does it mean when Lear eventually tells Gloucester "You must be patient"?

Outline

- I. Acts 3 and 4 of *King Lear* are extremely busy and complex in terms of plot but are dominated by certain dramatic images—such as Lear raging at the storm or the extraordinary episode in which Gloucester thinks he's leaping from Dover cliff, only to fall flat on his face on the sands.
- II. The most astonishing of these dramatic vignettes, Lear's encounter with Gloucester on Dover Beach, is preceded and accompanied by encounters in which Shakespeare continues to deploy dramatic irony to striking effect.
 - A. When Edgar declares that, because he has suffered the worst fortune can do to him, his existence can only improve, he is immediately confronted with his blinded father.
 - B. On Dover Beach, when Gloucester has finally been reconciled to bearing his afflictions patiently, Lear enters in his madness, reducing Gloucester to new wretchedness.
 - C. Lear declares that illegitimate Edmund was kinder to his father than his own legitimate daughters—while unwittingly speaking to the father whom Edmund has utterly betrayed.
- III. As they go through their purgatorial journeys, Lear and Gloucester both seize upon the disguised Edgar with particular eagerness.
 - A. In the storm, Lear appoints Poor Tom his "philosopher" and will not be parted from him.
 - B. Gloucester later asks that this particular beggar escort him to Dover.
 - C. Both seem to be fascinated by Tom as a representative of humanity at its lowest.
- IV. Edgar, guiding Gloucester to Dover, attempts to heal his suicidal despair through a kind of psychodrama.
 - A. Instead of leading Gloucester to the cliff edge at Dover, Edgar creates a picture of the precipice through his word-painting as they stand on the beach.
 - B. Gloucester's attempt to commit suicide is thwarted and Edgar, in a new disguise and deploying new fictions, assures him that he has miraculously escaped from a fiend's temptations.
 - C. Gloucester promises to bear his affliction patiently.
- V. In contrast to Gloucester, Lear never contemplates suicide. When he encounters Gloucester on Dover Beach, his rage and madness are taking him in new philosophical directions.
 - A. Lear's obsessive meditations on his older daughters climax in a speech in which their sins against him are transmuted into a misogynist and generalized vision of female sexuality.
 - B. Lear also plays out a dark parody of his own kingship, in which he offers new insights into the

alienating effects of power: these seem not unrelated to the remarks on empathy and “feeling” offered by both Lear and Gloucester *in extremis*.

- C. Lear asks what it means for sinning human beings to sit in judgment upon one another in a world where rank and riches mask vice.
- D. Throughout his conversation with Gloucester, Lear veers between insisting on his kingly identity and insisting on his own limited human nature and mortality.
- E. Finally seeming to recognize Gloucester, Lear speaks movingly of the need for patience in a world of torments.
- F. Lear identifies that world as “this great stage of fools”: he offers not so much a tragic view of life as an absurdist one.

VI. In context, Lear’s invocation of the need for patience might be interpreted in two quite different ways.

- A. Humanity is trapped in a black, meaningless farce that must simply be endured patiently.
- B. Alternatively, we must be patient because we are playing out our roles in some larger design whose providential nature is not yet revealed to us.

Essential Reading:

Shakespeare, *King Lear*.

Supplementary Reading:

Kott, “King Lear or Endgame,” in *Shakespeare Our Contemporary*, pp. 127–168.

Questions to Consider:

1. In 4.2., Albany confronts his wife about her actions toward Lear. To what extent does his indictment of her behavior differ from those we’ve already heard in the play?
2. What do you find to be the most surprising, revealing, or puzzling moments in the conversation between Lear and Gloucester on Dover Beach?

Lecture Thirteen

***King Lear* III—The Stage of Fools**

In terms of plot a good number of things happen in Acts 3 and 4 of *King Lear*, and since my lecture will be focusing rather selectively on the events of the fourth act, I'll start with a basic outline of what transpires. The weird alternative society of exiles and madmen on the storm-tossed heath dissolves when Gloucester returns to the hovel with news of a plot against Lear's life. He tells Kent and the fool to take Lear to Cordelia at Dover. Gloucester is subsequently arrested and blinded by Regan's husband, the duke of Cornwall, and learns that Edmund betrayed him. One of Cornwall's servants is so horrified by the blinding of Gloucester that he attacks and fatally wounds the murderous duke.

Edmund, meanwhile, has escorted Goneril to her home, and we deduce, has become her lover. He departs for Dover. Goneril discovers that her husband, Albany, is so disgusted with her behavior towards Lear that he has become almost alienated from her; although he will continue to cooperate with Cornwall, Regan, and Edmund in defending England against the French invasion, but he is a reluctant ally. A messenger arrives with news of Cornwall's death. Goneril, fearing the widowed Regan will now be able to grab Edmund for herself, sends her steward, Oswald, to Edmund with a letter reminding him of their mutual vows, and encouraging him to murder Albany. Oswald runs into Regan, who is very suspicious about the letter. She also tells him that if he comes upon Gloucester, it would be a good idea to kill him.

Lear arrives at Dover, but, maddened and ashamed, he can't bear to meet Cordelia who has arrived there with a French army. Edgar, a.k.a. Poor Tom, escorts Gloucester to what he claims are the cliffs of Dover, but what is in reality Dover beach. When his father survives his suicide attempt—you can't really commit suicide by hurling yourself on a beach when you are standing on it—Edgar assumes a new accent and a new identity as a passerby. He tells Gloucester he's miraculously survived the temptations of the devil to succumb to suicidal despair and he should take this as a sign that he should patiently endure his life from here on.

At this point Lear enters. There's a poignant encounter between the mad king and the blind earl on Dover beach before Lear runs off, pursued by his attendants. Oswald shows up. He tries to kill Gloucester, but is himself killed by Edgar, who then discovers on Oswald's body Goneril's adulterous and murderous letter. Meanwhile, Lear recovers from his madness and begs forgiveness of Cordelia. As Act 4 ends, his supporters anticipate an imminent battle between Cordelia's forces and those of Albany, Edmund, and Regan.

The middle of the play is packed with action, but what one tends to recall isn't so much details of plot as certain dramatic images: Lear raging at the storm; the surreal three-way conversation between Lear, the fool, and Edgar in his Poor Tom identity; Lear's mock trial of his daughters; and the extraordinary episode in which Gloucester thinks he's leaping from the cliffs of Dover only to fall flat on his face on the sands; and the agonizing meeting between the two old men on Dover beach; and Lear trying to kneel to Cordelia as he begs her forgiveness.

I began last time to focus on the journeys—journeys both physical and metaphysical—that lead Lear and Gloucester to their encounter on Dover beach. I want to look now at the astonishing encounter that then unfolds between the mad man and the blind man. What has Lear learned in his madness? What has Gloucester come to see now that he is blind?

But first I want to emphasize Shakespeare's relentless use of dramatic irony in the way he structures certain episodes, certain encounters in Act 4. As Act 4, scene 1 opens, Edgar, alone once more, contemplates his abject condition: "To be worst, the lowest and most dejected thing of fortune, stands still in esperance, lives not in fear. The lamentable change is from the best; the worst returns to laughter."

He has been thrown down to the very bottom of fortune's relentlessly turning wheel. Falling from happiness is the worst that can happen, he says, and it has happened; things can only get better. And as

soon as he says this, his mutilated father enters, his eyes gouged out, his face shrouded with a bloody bandage, led by an old man. There's a similar moment, perhaps, at Dover beach. Gloucester, it seems, has now been reconciled to bearing his affliction patiently.

And then Lear enters in his madness, reducing him to new wretchedness. And there's worse to come. Lear says, "Let copulation thrive; for Gloucester's bastard son was kinder to his father than my daughters got between lawful sheets."

The audience and Gloucester know, to be sure, just how kind Edmund was to his father. The scene is shot through with little moments of dramatic irony that teeter on the edge of horror. Eyeless Gloucester says to mad Lear, "Dost thou know me?" and mad Lear replies, "I remember thine eyes well enough."

Lear and Gloucester both go through their own purgatories. There are obvious parallels in their situations. Both chose to love the wrong children; both have failed to see. There are also parallels in some of the insights they reach in their suffering. Both of them seize upon the disguised Edgar with particular eagerness.

When Lear goes out into the storm he meets Edgar in his Tom of Bedlam identity and appoints him his philosopher, and won't be parted from him. Gloucester later asks that this particular beggar escort him to Dover. Both men seem to be fascinated by this apparent representation of the lowest common denominator of humanity.

When Edgar encounters his mutilated and despairing father, Gloucester, as I noted in my last lecture, is now comparing the condition of humanity to that of flies tormented by wanton boys. He cannot believe that there is any kind of benign divine force out there. Edgar's response to his father's despair is to become, in effect, Gloucester's spiritual counselor and his therapist, and the treatment he prescribes is a kind of psychodrama.

Gloucester asks to be led to the cliff edge at Dover. Edgar pretends to do his bidding, describing to Gloucester the view of the precipice beneath. A precipice, however—because they're not standing on a cliff edge—that is wholly the product of his imagination; the two men are on level ground on the beach itself. But Edgar says:

"Come on, sir; here's the place; stand still. How fearful and dizzy 'tis, to cast one's eyes so low!
The crows and choughs that wing the midway air show scarce so gross as beetles. Halfway down
hangs one that gathers samphire, dreadful trade! Methinks he seems no bigger than his head. The
fishermen, that walk upon the beach, appear like mice."

He creates this astonishing sense of a foreshortened perspective as when you look directly down a precipice and so that the people on the beach looked no bigger than mice.

Okay, Gloucester renounces the world, declares he cannot bear his misery any longer. He says, "If Edgar live, Oh bless him!" And then he leaps, or rather, he fails to leap. Edgar's playacting creates a fall, and then when Gloucester comes to his senses again, and Edgar becomes supposedly a new person, a passerby, he speaks of seeing Gloucester tempted by a fiend above, tempted to throw himself into the abyss and saved miraculously. "Thy life's a miracle," he says. And he describes the supposed tempter, the foul fiend:

"As I stood here below, methought his eyes were two full moons; he had a thousand noses, horns
whelk'd and waved like the enridged sea. It was some fiend; therefore, thou happy father, think
that the clearest gods, who make them honours of men's impossibilities, have preserved thee."

Gloucester now speaks with a new acceptance. "I do remember now. Henceforth I'll bear affliction till it do cry out itself, 'enough, enough,' and die."

Lear, in contrast to Gloucester, never contemplates suicide. On the heath, he rages, he interrogates the universe, he vents his anger against his older daughters. He is possessed by wrath at their ingratitude. The

storm inside him makes him barely feel the storm outside. And his very madness seems to take him into visionary territories and a kind of space of new perception even as it drives him to speak an ever wilder language.

Before considering in more detail the climactic collision between Lear and Gloucester on Dover beach, I want to take note of a curious outgrowth of Lear's constant brooding over the ingratitude and cruelty of the older daughters. When Edgar and his father first meet Lear on Dover beach, the king, in his madness, is doing his own version of what we've already seen Hamlet and Othello doing in the midst of their suffering—that is, he reflects upon, agonizes over, his sense of self, his very identity. Gloucester says to Edgar, hearing Lear's voice, "Is it not the king?" And Lear replies, "Aye, every inch a king" and then plunges into a kind of performance of his own kingship, imagining himself sitting in judgment on his subjects for various crimes. And his language and imagination takes him into some very dark territory:

"I pardon that man's life. What was thy cause? Adultery? Thou shalt not die; die for adultery! No. The wren goes to it, and the small, gilded fly does lecher in my sight. Let copulation thrive; for Gloucester's bastard son was kinder to his father than my daughters got between lawful sheets. Behold yond simpering dame, whose face between her forks presages snow... The fitchew, nor the soiled horse, goes to't with a more riotous appetite. Down from the waist they are centaurs, though women all above. But to the girdle do the gods inherit. Beneath is all the fiends'. There's hell, there's darkness, there's the sulphurous pit."

Lear starts imagining himself facing somebody who's on trial for adultery, which was a punishable offense. You could be brought to court for it in Shakespeare's day. But then he says, no, let copulation thrive. You might as well have illegitimate children, because Gloucester's illegitimate son was kinder to him than my daughters. And he starts to think more about daughters, and women, and fornication, and imagines women as these sort of hybrid creatures, looking godlike above the waist, but, below, something very different, indeed.

His indictment of his daughters gets transformed into a general indictment of promiscuous female sexuality. The heart of darkness becomes the space between a woman's legs. It's a blacker version of Hamlet's generalization, "Frailty thy name is woman." Goneril and Regan, by association, get caught up into this indictment.

Now at this moment, Lear knows nothing of any sexual crimes committed by his daughters. He only knows they are hypocritical, and heartless, and unloving, and ungrateful. He doesn't know, even though we the audience or the reader know by now, that they are both hot for Edmund and that Goneril wants to be rid of her own husband. Again, we might think back to *Hamlet* and *Othello* and ask why female transgression in Shakespearean tragedy is so often is characterized by male speakers in terms of a terrifying and threatening notion of female sexuality.

In this play, of course, the reality eventually catches up with Lear's imagination. Regan and Goneril start as coldhearted women who are greedy for power; they end up destroying themselves through their rivalrous desire for Edmund. It's as if their faithlessness to Lear has as its logical consequence a broader kind of faithlessness as well as a ruinous lust, and one might recall at this point Cordelia's telling suggestion that her father seemed to want his daughters to love him more than they loved their husbands.

But let's return now to ponder in greater detail the encounter between blind Gloucester and mad Lear. In this episode, Lear is ultimately less interested in re-addressing his daughters' crimes directly than in playing out a kind of parody or darkly comic rewrite of his own kingship.

This play is, in fact, full of performances. Think of the first scene's staged love test and Regan and Goneril's false professions of perfect love. Think of the dissembling and pretense involved in Edmund's plots against his brother and father. Think of Edgar's performance art as Poor Tom. Think of the theater of the absurd involved in the Dover cliff sequence and the surreal black comedy of Lear's mock trial of Goneril and Regan in the hut on the heath. Now, Lear the madman impersonates Lear the king. And his

madness is visionary: it seems to have given him some entirely new perspectives on the workings of power.

We've actually seen intimations of this earlier in the play. You might remember Lear on the heath, having his moment of blinding insight into the sufferings of the "poor naked wretches," the beggars who endure the cruelties of nature every day of their lives. Gloucester, too, paying Poor Tom to escort him to Dover, indicts those rich men who will not see because they do not feel the sufferings of others. The emphasis here is that suffering teaches both Lear and Gloucester to feel, to empathize with others. "You see how this world goes," says the mad king to the blind nobleman in another of Shakespeare's moments of bleak irony. "I see it feelingly," replies Gloucester. Visual sight is now less important than insight, understanding.

So what does Lear now understand? In the Dover beach scene, he keeps hammering away at what it means for human beings to sit in judgment upon one another when both the sinners and the judges are equally tainted with corruption, when only an official office, or title, or rank may separate one equally sinning human being from another.

He is thus returning us to the issue of his own double identity as king and frail old man, and this is an issue that this play has been exploring from the moment Kent says, in effect, "Listen, old man, just because you're king doesn't mean you should be allowed to make disastrous mistakes of judgment." Lear now veers wildly back and forth between naming himself king and man. He declares he is "every inch a king," but when Gloucester tries to kiss his hand Lear barks, "Let me wipe it first, it smells of mortality." (It smells of my own corruption as a man born to die.)

Veering madly between his sense of himself as king and his understanding of himself as mortal, vulnerable man, Lear contemplates the way power works in this universe, the way that high status, high office may mask all kinds of sins, rich clothes cover a multitude of vices, but without our artificial decorations of high office, we may find that humanity is perfectly beastly:

"Look with thine ears. See how yond justice rails upon yond simple thief. Hark, in thine ear. Change places and handy-dandy, which is the justice, which is the thief? Thou hast seen a farmer's dog bark at a beggar? ... And the creature run from the cur? There thou mightst behold the great image of authority: a dog's obeyed in office." And he continues, "Thou rascal beadle, hold thy bloody hand! Why dost thou lash that whore? Strip thine own back! Thou hotly lust'st to use her in that kind for which thou whipp'st her. The usurer hangs the cozener. Through tatter'd clothes small vices do appear. Robes and furr'd gowns hide all."

We make absolute distinctions between justice and thief, but how reliable are they? A dog, says Lear, is obeyed in office. The office—the high position—is not inherent in the virtues of the man; we bow down to the sign of authority, not to the ruler's integrity.

He goes on to imagine a parish officer, a beadle, punishing a woman found guilty of prostitution. In Shakespeare's time, women of easy virtue were often whipped through the streets by the local authorities. He blasts the hypocrisy of the man who punishes the crime: "Strip thine own back! Thou hotly lust'st to use to her in that kind for which thou whipp'st her." Vice is easy to see through rags, says Lear, but "robes and furr'd gowns hide all." The accessories of rank are all-important, and they can mask all sorts of evildoing and hypocrisy. And Lear, of course, has learned all too brutally what it is to try to hang on to the name of king without the appurtenances of power.

By this time Gloucester is near tears, and Edgar is amazed at what he calls Lear's "reason in madness." Then, suddenly, astonishingly, Lear's language becomes for a moment piercingly simple and lucid as he turns to his mutilated follower: "If thou wilt weep my fortunes, take my eyes. I know thee well enough; thy name is Gloucester. Thou must be patient; we came crying hither. Thou know'st, the first time that we smell the air, we wawl and cry. I will preach to thee. Mark!" We must be patient. We must bear our

sufferings patiently. This is a huge turnaround from the Lear who was so supremely rash and impatient in Act 1, scene 1.

“We came crying hither.” The baby comes into the world crying out, as if he knows that the human condition he is born into is one of suffering. We cry at birth, and what comes after, in the perspective that Lear is offering, is not going to be much better.

And Lear continues, “When we are born, we cry that we are come to this great stage of fools.” We’re born into a vale of tears, or rather, we stumble about on what Lear calls “this great stage of fools.” His image summons up a universe of people wandering around in error, in ignorance. We might recall again the errors, the lack of vision and insight, that have reduced both Lear and Gloucester to their current sorry condition of wandering. Stumbling about on a stage where some uncaring force is scripting a drama for us to play a part in that makes very little sense.

But Lear refuses to give this vision the status of tragedy. He speaks of a “stage of fools.” This is not so much a tragic view of life as an absurdist one. At this point we might remember the almost vaudevillian exchanges between Lear and his fool in Act 1. Now, it’s more usual to meet wise fools in Shakespeare’s comedies. This play is unique among the tragedies for giving such a large part to such a very wise fool. One feels as if, by the time of the Dover beach scene, Lear, in his madness, is finally catching up with the wisdom of his own fool, which is perhaps why the official wise fool, his fool, completely disappears from the play after the scene on the storm-swept heath. That fool isn’t needed any more.

A much more recent play, Samuel Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot*, has often been taken to be the very epitome of the kind of 20th-century drama which insists on the fundamental absurdity of the human condition. It refuses to find some kind of transcendent meaning in human suffering. In *Waiting for Godot*, one of Beckett’s own wise fools, Vladimir, offers his own description of the human condition. Vladimir says, “Astride of a grave and a difficult birth. Down in the hole, lingeringly, the grave-digger puts on the forceps. We have time to grow old. The air is full of our cries.” The gravedigger and the midwife are conflated, and as we grow old the air is full of our cries, the newborn baby never stops crying, which sounds not unlike what Lear was saying. But, Lear also said to Gloucester, “Thou must be patient.” What does he mean by this? Is it that we are all stuck in some black and meaningless and completely circular farce—birth, copulation, and death; birth, copulation, and death; with any amount of suffering in between—which we much simply endure patiently, a sort of absurdist position? Or must we be patient because we are playing out our roles in some bigger design that will eventually be revealed to those who have faith and patience? This would be the Christian perspective of somebody who did believe in an ultimately benevolent, if often inscrutable, God. It might remind us of some of the things Hamlet had to say at the end of *his* tragedy.

Well, Lear’s meaning is ultimately ambiguous here. In fact, as soon as he’s made his resonant remark about the stage of fools, Lear charges back into the world of madness and frenzy: “This a good block. It were a delicate stratagem to shoe a troop of horse with felt. I’ll put it in proof and when I have stolen upon these sons-in-law, then, kill, kill, kill, kill, kill, kill!” And so saying, he races away, with all of Cordelia’s attendants in hot pursuit.

“You must be patient,” says Lear to Gloucester. I suppose one question we’re left with, as we enter the fifth act of this wrenching drama, is: Does Lear himself learn patience in the end? Does anybody?

Lecture Fourteen

King Lear IV—“Is this the promised end?”

Scope:

This lecture will discuss the final stages of *King Lear*. It examines the heartbreaking reunion between Lear and his banished daughter Cordelia—and the almost immediate shattering of Lear’s newfound peace and his subsequent regression into madness. Shakespeare’s very conscious rewriting of the source material that provided the basic plot of *Lear* gives us the brutal murder of Cordelia. Her death precipitates a host of unanswered questions about the kind of cosmic justice that might be in operation in *Lear*’s tragic universe; the lecture explores some of the competing explanatory philosophies voiced by the play’s characters and addresses the work’s inexorable movement into a dramatic space where human language becomes inadequate to this task. It concludes by asking what kinds of catharsis or consolation an audience may find in the apocalyptic ending of *King Lear*.

Outline

- I. The climactic reunion between Lear and Cordelia in Act 4 teases us with the possibility of a happy ending to this play.
 - A. Cordelia’s description of her father’s sufferings suggests that we might understand their reunion in terms of the prodigal son’s reunion with his father in the biblical parable (but with the father’s and child’s roles reversed).
 - B. His madness dissipating, Lear recognizes the daughter he has disowned and claims his new identity as a “foolish fond old man.”
 - C. Lear suggests that Cordelia (unlike her sisters) has real cause to hate and abuse him, but Cordelia, in her turn, offers perfect forgiveness.
- II. This brief happiness is shattered when Cordelia’s forces are defeated.
 - A. Lear, captured with Cordelia, fantasizes of finding peace in prison with his daughter: he regresses to his earlier fantasies of her as a perpetual, loving caregiver.
 - B. Gloucester is moved to despair once more; Edgar’s new exhortation that he endure patiently until the appointed moment of death concludes with the admonition that “ripeness is all.”
 1. This invites a comparison with Hamlet’s remark on the workings of providence: “the readiness is all”—although Edgar’s remark is phrased in more ambiguous and less clearly Christian terms.
 2. To complicate matters further, the wanton killing of Cordelia at Edmund’s orders undoes any clear notion of the educative nature of suffering in this play.
- III. The play’s metaphysical and theological allegiances are difficult to judge.
 - A. It officially unfolds in pre-Christian Britain.
 - B. Its language is intermittently evocative of Christian imagery or doctrine, but its characters tend to speak of their gods in the plural or swear by particular pagan deities.
 - C. In the play’s final scene, various characters invoke a variety of metaphysical systems to explain the extremity of their experiences.
 - D. The urgent desire for such explanations befits the darkest of Shakespeare’s tragedies—a play in which Lear and Gloucester seem to be disproportionately punished for their errors.
- IV. Cordelia’s death at the very moment when the forces of evil in the play have been destroyed or have consumed one another provokes the play’s most unanswerable questions.

- A. Her murder is particularly striking because Shakespeare did not find this event in his sources for the *Lear* story—it is a conscious addition.
 - B. Shakespeare seems to go out of his way to reopen the play to more horrors, and none of the characters can make sense of Cordelia’s death: they can only ask unanswered questions.
- V. All attempts to find consolation or to restore order at the play’s ending seem to be thwarted.
- A. We learn that Gloucester died at the very moment Edgar revealed his identity to his father.
 - B. There is no reunion between Lear and loyal Kent because Lear has lapsed back into madness.
 - C. The Duke of Albany’s attempt to decide the future of the kingdom is interrupted by Lear’s reiteration of the senselessness of a universe in which Cordelia dies—and by Lear’s own death.
 - D. We end with a vision of life itself as an instrument of torture from which death is the only relief.
- VI. The ending of the play invites us to reconsider the consequences of Lear’s actions at its beginning.
- A. At the start of the play, Lear wished to regress to the “kind nursery” of Cordelia; he seems to be punished for his refusal to come to terms with his own mortality.
 - B. Lear’s suggestion that he would shed his responsibilities and “unburdened crawl toward death” was contradicted by his continued attempts to exert his will. When he has finally been stripped of everything, it is *Cordelia’s* death that he must confront before his own.
- VII. The wrenching nature of this tragedy obliges us to ask what “tragic knowledge”—or consolation—its audience might carry away from the play.
- A. We might suggest that the parameters of action within the play are not the limiting terms of human possibility and that Shakespeare’s translation of a particularly dark vision into astonishing poetry offers its own consolation.
 - B. Alternatively, we might find comfort in the play’s steady accretion and representation of instinctive acts of charity, love, and loyalty (by such characters as Cordelia, Kent, and Edgar), even if they go unrewarded.

Essential Reading:

Shakespeare, *King Lear*.

Supplementary Reading/Viewing:

Cavell, *Disowning Knowledge in Seven Plays of Shakespeare*, chapter 2.

Kirsch, *The Passions of Shakespeare’s Tragic Heroes*, chapter 5.

On video or DVD: Peter Brook’s *King Lear*.

Questions to Consider:

1. Why do you think Shakespeare chooses not to dramatize directly the scene in which Edgar finally reveals his identity to his father (the event is reported by Edgar only after the fact)? Does the play lose anything by this omission?
2. Various characters in *King Lear* ponder the workings of the universe or attribute the circumstances in which they find themselves to higher powers. Do any of the philosophies voiced in this play seem to offer a sufficient explanation for what Lear and others must endure?

Lecture Fourteen

King Lear IV—"Is this the promised end?"

Act 4 of *King Lear* offers us a very moving reunion between Lear and Cordelia, a reunion which mocks us with the possibility of a happy ending to this play. I want to start my larger consideration of what Shakespeare is about in the closing episodes of his tragedy by looking at this encounter.

Lear has been recaptured by Cordelia's knights, has been brought back to the care of her physician, and has been sleeping. Before he wakes, Cordelia has a very resonant speech in which she responds to what she has heard from Kent of her father's sufferings in the storm:

"Was this a face to be opposed against the warring winds? To stand against the deep dread-bolted thunder? ... Mine enemy's dog, though he had bit me, should have stood that night against my fire, and wast thou fain, poor father, to hovel thee with swine, and rogues forlorn, in short and musty straw?"

Someone alienated from his family, seeking shelter in a dwelling fit only for pigs, her words recall the biblical parable of the prodigal son, the young man who leaves home, wastes his whole inheritance, and is reduced to eating the food of the swine whose pigsty he shares. Indeed, we have a kind of reverse prodigal son situation here. It's not, as in the parable, a father who ends the story by welcoming back his impoverished and forlorn son, but a daughter showing absolute forgiveness to the now destitute father who cast her out.

As Lear wakes, Cordelia, like the most dutiful of daughters, asks for his blessing. "O, look upon me, sir, and hold your hands in benediction o'er me. No, sir, you must not kneel." Her last words offer as a kind of internal stage direction. They're obviously a response to the fact her father has knelt to her, which offers us a particularly powerful image, even more powerful to Shakespeare's contemporaries, because Lear kneeling to Cordelia reverses all the usual hierarchies; because a father kneels to a child, a man to a woman, a king to a subject.

And this is how Lear responds to his daughter:

"Pray, do not mock me. I am a very foolish, fond, old man, fourscore and upward, not an hour more nor less, and to deal plainly, I fear I am not in my perfect mind. Methinks I should know you, and know this man. Yet I am doubtful, for I am mainly ignorant what place this is, and all the skill I have remembers not these garments. Nor I know not where I did lodge last night. Do not laugh at me, for, as I am a man, I think this lady to be my child Cordelia."

The language of the speech is strikingly plain, in contrast to the frenzy and the eccentricity of his madness. Lear first claims the identity not of any kin to Cordelia, but of "foolish, fond, old man." But, by the end of the speech he movingly transforms Cordelia from "this lady" to "my child, Cordelia." He recognizes her. He reacknowledges her. Remember, in the play's first act he declared her no longer his daughter. But Lear still doesn't expect forgiveness. "If you have poison for me, I'll drink it," he says. "I know you do not love me, for your sisters have, as I do remember, done me wrong. You have some cause, they have not."

If her sisters, to whom he has done no wrong, have treated him so cruelly, what can he expect from Cordelia, who has all the cause in the world to hate him, who could quite reasonably offer him poison? He's still locating himself within a dog eat dog, eye for an eye, tooth for a tooth world. But, we have heard Cordelia on the subject of her enemy's dog, and she simply says, "No cause, no cause." No cause for enmity at all; she offers perfect forgiveness.

However, despite this deeply moving reconciliation, there is a battle to be fought between Cordelia's forces and those of Regan, Goneril, and Edmund. A battle which immediately brings another reversal, for Cordelia's invading forces are defeated, and Cordelia and Lear are taken prisoner. When we see them

again under guard, Cordelia is obviously fearful of what is going to happen to them, and especially fears for her father. But, for Lear, captivity holds no terrors as long as he is with Cordelia:

“Come, let’s away to prison. We two alone will sing like birds i’ the cage. When thou dost ask me blessing, I’ll kneel down, and ask of thee forgiveness. So we’ll live, and pray, and sing, and tell old tales, and laugh at gilded butterflies, and hear poor rogues talk of court news, and we’ll talk with them too, who loses and who wins, who’s in, who’s out...and we’ll wear out, in a wall’d prison, packs and sects of great ones that ebb and flow by the moon.”

He imagines a little paradise separate from all the machinations and scheming of court, a place where the power of love can at last be held distinct from the love of power, a private utopia where he would never be parted from her again. Is Lear regressing once more? This sounds very much like his earlier fantasy, way back in Act 1, of setting his rest on her kind nursing, keeping his daughter to himself as a perpetual loving care giver. But, of course it can only be a fantasy; for even as Lear and Cordelia are led away, Edmund, who emphatically wants Cordelia out of the picture, is giving one of his soldiers instructions to do away with his prisoners.

The aftermath of the battle also offers us the last doubling of Lear and Gloucester. For, just before the captive Lear and Cordelia make their entrance, we also see Gloucester’s response to the defeat of Cordelia’s forces. He, too, is regressing, returning to his earlier state of despair, no longer willing to patiently endure. He resists Edgar’s attempt to take him to safety. He says that he might as well rot here. Edgar’s half-infuriated response to this echoes Lear’s remark on Dover beach. Now, Lear had said, “Thou must be patient; we came crying hither. Thou know’st, the first time that we smell the air, we wawl and cry.” Edgar says, “Men must endure their going hence, even as their coming hither; ripeness is all.”

Ripeness is all. It suggests a kind of mature enduring of life, however difficult, until the appointed moment of death, like a ripe fruit that doesn’t fall until it is ready. You might note that Edgar’s ripening displaces Gloucester’s more pessimistic notion of rotting. Edgar offers this as a better course of action than despair. Everything will come in good time, in the ripeness of time, including death itself, which may remind you of Hamlet in Act 5 of *his* tragedy, when he says there is “special providence in the fall of a sparrow. If it be now, ’tis not to come...if it be not now, yet it will come. The readiness is all.”

“Ripeness is all,” says Edgar. “The readiness is all,” says Hamlet. Are they saying exactly the same thing? Or are Edgar’s words slightly more inflected towards the idea of merely enduring, without the consolation that some larger providential force is at work that counteracts individual evil actions and makes some kind of sense out of experience? When Hamlet surrenders his will to providence, he perhaps gets a kind of poetic justice, a version of revenge. But if Gloucester ceases to despair, if Lear learns patience, their education through suffering still doesn’t stop the play’s cruelest surprise. But more of that in a moment.

Edgar won’t allow Gloucester to return to his original despair, the despair which made him say fatalistically, “As flies to wanton boys, are we to the gods. They kill us for their sport.” But, Edgar doesn’t offer an unambiguously Christian consolation.

Now, to be sure, we are not officially in a Christian world. The ultimate source of the play is a 12th-century chronicle history about pre-Christian Britain. The action of King Lear supposedly unfolds in a pagan past. Now, Shakespeare’s language in this play is often evocative of Christian imagery or Christian doctrine. Think of the way Cordelia herself seems almost Christ-like in her loving forgiveness. Think of Edgar, disguised as Poor Tom, speaking of being pursued by the foul fiend. But the characters within the play usually speak of their gods in the plural. Edgar, speaking near the end of Act 5, says, “The gods are just, and of our pleasant vices make instruments to plague us.” Indeed the characters invoke a whole array of different deities. Lear swears specifically by Jupiter and by Apollo. Kent, stuck in the stocks at Gloucester’s castle, asks the goddess Fortune to turn her wheel. Gloucester talks about astrological forces and the movement of the planets when he’s brooding over Lear’s actions at the start of the play. And then

of course we've got Nature, capital N, a deity who seems to change shape all the time according to who is speaking, but is invoked very specifically by Lear and Edmund in particular.

In the play's final scene, various and sometimes conflicting metaphysical systems are summoned up as people try to explain the horror of their experience. Edgar speaks to his dying brother Edmund of their father's blinding and he says, "The gods are just, and of our pleasant vices make instruments to plague us. The dark and vicious place where thee he got cost him his eyes." It's a rather horrible view of cosmic justice without mercy. Edgar seems to be saying that there's some kind of balance between Gloucester fornicating illicitly in darkness, conceiving the son Edmund, and Gloucester ultimately losing his sight, being plunged into perfect darkness forever. Edmund himself declares at one point, when he's very near death, "The wheel is come full circle. I am here." That seems to speak to a universe that will be determined by arbitrary turns of Fortune's wheel. The goddess Fortune traditionally turned a huge wheel in which various people, especially kings and princes, were tied, and they would rise to the top, but they would inevitably go down to the bottom again. Edmund took his brother's inheritance and turned Edgar into a hunted criminal. Now, he in his turn has been hunted down and destroyed by the brother he mistreated. The wheel has come full circle.

So, we're offered multiple and competing ways of making sense of a universe that's perhaps more chaotic, and more dark, and more confused than in any other Shakespearean tragedy, and crueler, too.

Lear and Gloucester, who have certainly sinned but who are not, after all, murderous usurpers like, say, Claudius of Denmark, seem to be punished almost out of all proportion to their deeds; just as cruelly if not more than the much more malevolent plotters Edmund, Goneril, and Regan. And, of course, Cordelia, who has done evil to no one, is casually done away with on Edmund's orders.

Some interpreters of this play insist it has a heavily Christian underpinning in which Cordelia's perfect love and perfect forgiveness make her a sacrificial Christ figure. But, Cordelia dies as a victim of Edmund's cruel whim, and there's no resurrection—although in a moment of terrible pathos, Lear thinks he sees her breathe again even as he is on the point of death. There's no real sense of any redemptive value in her death. As Lear says, "Why should a dog, a horse, a rat, have life, and thou no breath at all?"

Nobody in the play has an answer for this question. And Cordelia's death itself comes at the play's most shattering moment of dramatic irony. At the very moment when the murderous plotting of Goneril and Edmund has been exposed, when the wicked sisters have destroyed one another, when Edgar has reclaimed his identity and his inheritance and defeated Edmund in single combat, at the moment when even Edmund himself has repented sufficiently to try to countermand his order for Cordelia's death, at this moment Lear enters bearing his dead daughter in his arms. "Howl, howl, howl, howl! O, you are men of stones. Had I your tongues and eyes, I'd use them so that heaven's vault should crack. She's gone for ever!" says Lear. "Is this the promised end," Kent gasps, looking on this scene. Is this the outcome that the defeat of villainy seemed to promise us? But, there's also another resonance to those words, "Is this the promised end?" The promised end in Christian terms is the Day of Judgment when the good are supposed to get their final reward. What we've got now is more like *Apocalypse Now*; *The Heart of Darkness*; the horror, the horror; destruction without redemption.

Shakespeare made a very conscious decision to kill off Cordelia. In an earlier play, written around 1594, which deals with the story of Lear and his daughters, Cordelia doesn't die. After Lear's death she succeeds her father on the throne of England. Shakespeare's plot revision has horrified readers over the centuries. The 18th-century man of letters, Dr. Samuel Johnson, declared that he could never reread the last scenes of that play after the first time. The death of Cordelia had horrified him so much. Other readers seem to have felt like this. In the 18th century, a playwright called Nahum Tate rewrote King Lear to give it a happy ending. Cordelia survives and marries Edgar. But, we're reading Shakespeare's play. A play that keeps appearing to end—as in the reconciliation scene between Cordelia and Lear, or the sequence giving us the triumph of Edgar over Edmund—it appears to end, only to reopen itself to more horrors. A

play which, at the same time, seems to go out of its way to frustrate any sense of satisfaction to be obtained through other, smaller-scale moments of closure or consolation.

There's one particular example that always strikes me: Although Edgar does finally reveal his identity to his father, Gloucester, we never see their reunion. It's simply reported by Edgar after the fact, and it is as much destructive as happy, since we learn from Edgar that Gloucester has died from the extremity of his emotions at hearing it was his banished son who had taken care of him after his blinding.

Another reunion we are given only to be denied is that between loyal Kent and Lear. By the time Kent finally reveals himself, Lear has lapsed back into confusion and never seems to grasp that Kent was the faithful servant who stayed with him in disguise through his sufferings.

The duke of Albany tries very hard to end the play properly. Addressing its survivors and their followers, he says, "You lords and noble friends, know our intent. What comfort to this great decay may come shall be applied. For us, we will resign, during the life of this old majesty, to him our absolute power." And he turns to Edgar and Kent and he says, "You, to your rights, with boot and such addition as your honours have more than merited. All friends shall taste the wages of their virtue, and all foes the cup of their deservings. Oh see, see!"

Albany strives to bring some new order to the darkness, to allot the proper rewards and punishment, but he breaks off at the end of his careful, measured speech. "Oh see!" He's looking upon Lear's agony as Lear embraces Cordelia's body and Lear says, "And my poor fool is hang'd! No, no, no life! Why should a dog, a horse, a rat, have life, and thou no breath at all? Thou'lt come no more, never, never, never, never, never!"

"Why should a dog, a rat, have life, and you no life at all?" The reiteration of the seeming senselessness of the universe. He calls her lovingly, almost teasingly, "my poor fool." Cordelia, perhaps, a fool for love? Was Gloucester right all along with his pessimistic "as flies to wanton boys are we to the gods. They kill us for their sport"? Albany had said, "All friends will see the wages of their virtue." Well, the wages of sin are usually death, but are these the wages of virtue?

Lear turns to one of the onlookers. Plunged into a new insanity, he has started to believe Cordelia may revive. All he needs to do is loosen her clothing and she'll start to breath again. "Pray you, undo this button. Thank you, sir. Do you see this? Look on her, look, her lips! Look there, look there!"

The utter simplicity of his diction recalls his speech in the reunion scene with Cordelia, but it is here not the language of recognition but of delusion, of happy fantasy, as he imagines her lips move, imagines that she still breathes, and even as he utters those last words, he himself falls and dies.

Nevertheless, Lear, who started the play so egotistical, so obsessed with what was due to him, is utterly focused on somebody else at the last, and as he collapses, his death is perceived by the onlookers as a kindness. Kent says, "Oh let him pass! He hates him much that would upon the rack of this tough world stretch him out longer." "The rack of this tough world." We end with a vision of life itself as an instrument of torture on which one is stretched and tormented, and death is the only relief from that torture.

Albany tries once again to impose some order on events. He tries again to sort out the governorship of the realm. He attempts to divide the kingdom between Kent and Edgar. But Kent wants nothing to do with it. He has his own priorities. "I have a journey, sir, shortly to go. My master calls me, I must not say no." And Edgar can only offer words that seem inadequate to what has passed: "The weight of this sad time we must obey; speak what we feel, not what we ought to say. The oldest hath borne most; we that are young shall never see so much, nor live so long." My sense of these closing lines of the play is one of weariness and utter diminishment. We might note that there is a circularity here. The end recalls the beginning. Somebody is attempting to divide the kingdom and his player plans are being resisted. Albany is in the Lear position. It now seems that Edgar will be the only inheritor.

But setting this aside, what are we to make of the last moments of Lear, the tragic protagonist? At the start of the play, Lear desired to indulge in a deeply problematic kind of regression. As the fool pointed out, he made his daughters his mothers, and he fantasized in particular that he would “set his rest” upon the “kind nursery” of Cordelia. In effect going back to the womb, to the nursery, being absolutely central in the life of a nurturing woman and enjoying power without responsibility; an old man seeking to go backwards when he should have been making his peace with death. His ultimate punishment is that he is forced to face death, but not in the first instance his own, instead the death of the daughter he thought to make his indulgent mother. In a final reversal of the natural order, she predeceases him. It was his intent “To shake all cares and business from our age, conferring them on younger strengths, while we unburdened crawl toward death.”

But, of course he didn’t mean it. He wanted to assert his will to the very last. Even when Lear’s wandering, crazed in the storm on the heath, he’s giving orders to the natural elements: he’s telling the lightning where to strike. The play’s final irony, then, is that through its course Lear does, yes, have almost everything stripped from him, does “unburdened crawl towards death,” but it’s Cordelia’s death he confronts at the last.

So what tragic knowledge might we, the audience, take away from this harrowing play? It’s a play, incidentally, that gets more harrowing the older you get. Aristotle wrote of the process of catharsis, the purgative experience of pity and terror that tragedy should bring. In this view, a tragic drama obliges us to imaginatively experience our worst terrors, but in so doing not only confront them but exorcize them. Is this what *Lear* is about?

Other critics have suggested that we should find a kind of consolation in the play’s very existence. They would argue that this tragedy, which offers the most pessimistic vision of the human condition of any Shakespearean tragedy, also insists that we are not just the playthings of the gods, not just beasts wandering in chaos, and confusion, and darkness in pursuit of our own selfish desires. That the play insists in its very being that the parameters of the action it actually represents are not the limiting terms of human possibility. Shakespeare’s capacity to put into astonishing poetry a particularly dark vision and to follow the logic of that vision to its end without flinching—this is where, in these critics’ accounts of *King Lear*, this is where we are to find consolation. In effect such critics insist upon the aesthetic consolations of the drama itself.

Or one might offer a slightly different take on *King Lear*, one might argue, alternatively, that for all its darkness, there is a steady, quiet accretion of acts of charity, love, and altruism throughout the play; acts of instinctive, risk-taking goodness, with no necessary hope of reward or profit. Human nature manifesting at its best and at its furthest remove from a supposedly natural tendency towards selfish self-preservation, towards destructive competition and the profit motive.

In my first lecture on this play I said that this work seemed less interested in the *process* of choice than works like *Hamlet* or *Othello*, but a swift and instinctive choice to act altruistically or generously keeps cropping up at all levels of the action. There’s Kent’s utter loyalty and love for the lord who spurns him. There’s the fool’s loyalty to his master. There’s Gloucester going out into the storm to succor Lear in defiance of Cornwall. There’s Edgar and Cordelia lovingly aiding the fathers who rejected them. Cordelia insisting there is no need for accounting and no desire for revenge. And I’ll also bring back to your attention a character who doesn’t even have a name. The servant who defies his master Cornwall, who tries to save Gloucester from blinding, who can’t sit by and hold his tongue when evil is being done, who stands up to the Duke and dies for his decency.

In the end, perhaps, it is less important that these actions be justly rewarded than that they simply take place and are represented by Shakespeare as taking place. They testify to humanity’s humanity. On Lear’s “great stage of fools,” I’d suggest, that to be a fool for love is to constitute yourself as fully human.

Lecture Fifteen

***Macbeth* I—Desire and Equivocation**

Scope:

This lecture begins by placing the tragedy of *Macbeth* within early 17th-century English political history, examining its suggestive parallels with events occurring during the reign of King James I. A glance at the controversy over the Catholic *Treatise of Equivocation* (and the Gunpowder Plot of 1605) is followed by an exploration of the play's preoccupation with the workings of ambiguous and duplicitous language. After some discussion of the witches' prophecies and Macbeth's response to those prophecies (is the universe of *Macbeth* indeed a deterministic one?), the lecture addresses the equivocal nature of Macbeth's own language and desires. What kind of hero says, "To know my deed 'twere best not know myself"?—and what are we to make of Macbeth's ability to imagine so vividly the consequences of murdering his king?

Outline

- I. The plot of *Macbeth*, like those of *King Lear* and *Hamlet*, is much concerned with questions of royal succession and the consequences of violent usurpation of royal prerogative. It is also a tragedy that seems particularly situated within the historical moment of its composition.
 - A. The procession of the descendants of Banquo in 4.1. contains direct references to the accession to the throne of England of King James I (previously James VI of Scotland), who traced his own ancestry back to Banquo.
 - B. King James had written a treatise on witchcraft—and had written at length on the authority and prerogatives of kings.
 - C. James's own father had been murdered, and his mother, Mary Queen of Scots, had been accused of complicity in his death.
 - D. The play's interest in equivocation—the making of duplicitous or ambiguously misleading statements—may allude to *A Treatise of Equivocation*, written by the Jesuit priest Father Garnet, who had been involved in the 1605 Gunpowder Plot aimed at blowing up the Houses of Parliament and assassinating King James.
- II. This tragedy has a particularly balanced and symmetrical structure.
 - A. It begins and ends with battles, both of which conclude with the death of a traitorous thane of Cawdor.
 - B. At its center, the ceremonial banquet over which Macbeth presides as king of Scotland is broken by the appearance of the ghost of Banquo, whom Macbeth has had murdered.
 - C. The plot is tightly focused on the actions of the Macbeths, and the play's unity of action is emphasized by the deployment of certain resonant images—for example, the thread of references to blood and bloodshed that runs through almost every scene.
- III. For all its clarity of design, *Macbeth* has its own murky mysteries.
 - A. The play's language is consistently entangled in ambiguity and equivocation, and Macbeth himself is, from the first, the victim of the "doublespeak" of the witches.
 - B. Macbeth, however, is not only the *victim* of devilish equivocation, but he also practices it—as in the speech he delivers after he has supposedly seen King Duncan's corpse for the first time.
 - C. Macbeth's motivation to kill Duncan at times seems oddly wavering: it is not clear that his ambition governs him.

1. Although he responds strongly to the witches' promises that he shall be king, he is also appalled by the murderous notions they seem to have planted in his brain.
 2. After he has killed Duncan, Macbeth seems to deny his own will to action as he contemplates the hollowness of what he has gained, positioning himself as the witches' puppet.
- D. The status of the witches is ambiguous: are they spokeswomen of a dispassionate, disinterested fate or actively malicious "instruments of darkness"?
- IV. It is hard to determine the moment at which Macbeth decides to kill Duncan, and Shakespeare shows his reservations at every step of the way.
- A. The first exchange between Macbeth and Lady Macbeth does not make it clear that Macbeth is fully committed to doing murder.
 - B. In Macbeth's soliloquy in 1.7., he canvasses very thoroughly all the reasons why he should not kill Duncan.
 - C. Macbeth allows himself to be pushed along by the succession of events, his encounter with the witches, his dealings with his wife, and the force of her own more clearly articulated ambition.
 - D. After he has recommitted himself to killing the king, Macbeth delivers a soliloquy in which he imagines himself directed by, rather than wielding, the ghostly dagger that leads him to Duncan.
 - E. His attempt to mystify his own agency is particularly clear in the speech he offers in response to the news that Duncan has elevated his elder son, Malcolm, to the rank of prince of Cumberland.
- V. Macbeth will eventually curse what he calls "the equivocation of the fiend"—but does he ever recognize his own equivocation?

Essential Reading:

Shakespeare, *Macbeth*.

Supplementary Reading:

Greenblatt, Introduction to *Macbeth*, in *The Norton Shakespeare*.

Mullaney, "Lying like Truth: Riddle, Representation, and Treason in Renaissance England," in *Macbeth*, Alan Sinfield, ed., chapter 9.

Questions to Consider:

1. Compare the ways in which Banquo and Macbeth respond to the witches' prophecies in 1.3.
2. Macbeth gives a very detailed account of all the reasons why he shouldn't kill Duncan—and then goes on to murder him. Does this make him more or less sympathetic as a tragic protagonist?

Lecture Fifteen

***Macbeth* I—Desire and Equivocation**

King Lear is one of the longest of Shakespeare's plays. *Macbeth* is the shortest. After the sprawl and complexity of *Lear*, this play seems much more pared down and stark in its design. It shares some preoccupations with *Lear*, however, and with *Hamlet*, too, for that matter. All three plays are very much concerned with questions of royal succession, the rights and rituals of inheritance, and they unfold the consequences of violent usurpations of royal prerogative.

Thinking about all this, let's glance first at the scene at the start of Act 4, in which Macbeth visits the three witches to attempt to gain reassurance about his future as king, and when he receives some rather double-edged prophecies about what he is to fear and not to fear. The scene concludes with a visionary procession of eight kings, who appear to be the descendants of Banquo, the former friend Macbeth has recently had murdered, and this is how Macbeth describes what he sees:

“Thou art too like the spirit of Banquo. Down! Thy crown does sear mine eye-balls and thy hair, thou other gold-bound brow, is like the first. A third is like the former. Filthy hags! Why do you show me this? A fourth! Start, eyes! What, will the line stretch out to the crack of doom? Another yet! A seventh! I'll see no more and yet the eighth appears, who bears a glass which shows me many more, and some I see that twofold balls and treble scepters carry.”

Macbeth is offered a spectacle of the kings of Scotland stretching out down the centuries, and what he sees in fact offers a very direct reference to the monarchy of England around 1606, when this play was first performed. Macbeth comments upon the fact that, far down the line of kings, there are rulers who “twofold balls and treble scepters carry.” The balls refer to the orb of office held at the coronation by a monarch. The future orbs will be twofold because the kings of Scotland will also be kings of England.

King James I, the reigning monarch in 1606, was the patron of Shakespeare's acting company; they were called The King's Men. James had been King James VI of Scotland before he was king of England. His coming to the throne in 1603 after the death of his second cousin, the childless Queen Elizabeth, united the countries as one power. His family, the Stuarts, traced their ancestry to Macbeth's friend Banquo, the man told by the witches that he would beget kings although he would not be a king. It is as if the defeat of Macbeth ensures the proper royal succession in England.

Macbeth is perhaps more filled with contemporary resonances than any of the other tragedies. If you are reading it in *The Norton Shakespeare*, you'll find there a prefatory essay on *Macbeth* by Stephen Greenblatt which addresses this topic interestingly. King James had himself written a book on witchcraft. He'd also written treatises on the authority and prerogatives of the monarch and as a ruler, he was particularly paranoid about the horrors of royal murder. Both his parents had died unnatural deaths: his father was assassinated; his mother, Mary Queen of Scots, was executed.

All of these matters find echoes in the plot of *Macbeth*, and the play's interest in duplicitous or misleading statements, in what is called equivocation, also has some contemporary relevance. In 1605, the year before its first performance, a plot had been discovered to blow up the houses of Parliament when the king was presiding there. The plotters were Catholic extremists, angered by James's non-tolerance of the practice of their faith. The Gunpowder Plot, as it's called, is still commemorated in England on November the 5th. We burn bonfires to celebrate the foiling of the plot.

One of the accused, a Jesuit priest called Father Garnet, was author of a work called *A Treatise of Equivocation*, which was secretly published around 1595. The pamphlet outlined ways in which persecuted or threatened Catholics who were being interrogated by their enemies might give ambiguous answers even under oath without acting against their consciences. You may remember the porter of Macbeth's castle in Act 2, scene 3 of this play, who drunkenly imagines himself porter of Hell Gate and imagines the various sinners who show up on his doorstep. One of them he describes as an equivocator

and wryly remarks that the man could swear on both sides of any issue, but who could not equivocate his way into heaven. I'll be exploring at some length some of the ways in which acts of equivocation shape the language and action of *Macbeth*.

But first, a few remarks about the play's design. It has a particularly balanced and symmetrical structure, begins and ends with a battle. The first battle concludes with the death of one traitorous thane, that is, a lord, of Cawdor. The second battle ends with the death of another traitorous thane of Cawdor, in this case, Macbeth himself, who acquires the title at the beginning of the play as a reward for his role in fighting off the Norwegian invasion that threatens Scotland. And almost exactly halfway through the play, the grand ceremonial banquet Macbeth gives as king of Scotland, an event which is supposed to ritually confirm him as monarch, is broken by the appearance of the ghost of Banquo, Macbeth's most recent murder victim. At the height of his apparent success, he is metaphysically assaulted by this bloody witness to his crimes, a figure which very significantly sits down in the very seat at the table in which Macbeth desires to sit. The ghost of Banquo usurps the place of the usurper.

The play's action is tightly focused on the actions of Macbeth and his wife, and the consequences for the Macbeths of their actions. There are no double plots here. And the play's unity of action is further emphasized by Shakespeare's deployment of certain images across the whole drama; particular themes and variations are perpetually repeated and reinflected. Certain verbal threads snake through the entire action. The first words of the second scene are, "What bloody man is this?" and we follow a trail of blood through the action as Macbeth is transformed from national hero, the enactor of legitimate slaughter, to a usurping butcher. Macbeth is beckoned on to murder by the vision of a bloody dagger. His wife smears Duncan's attendants with blood to frame them for the murder. "A little water clears us of this deed," says Lady Macbeth complacently, after Duncan's death; but when we see her for last time in her sleepwalking scene, she is now incessantly washing her hands, trying to cleanse them of indelible bloodstains and asking, "Who would have thought the old man to have had so much blood in him."

Indeed, one of the most terrible moments in the later stages of the play comes when Macbeth reflects that he has waded so deeply through an ocean of blood that to return would be just as difficult as to continue with his slaughters.

Everything is bleeding in this play, even Scotland itself. Macduff says, "Bleed, bleed, poor country," when he fears its true heir, Prince Malcolm, will never come to its aid. Malcolm himself personifies his land as an injured body, mutilated by a tyrant ruler. "It weeps, it bleeds; and each new day a gash is added to her wounds."

But if the play has a certain clarity of design, both in terms of its plot and in terms of the texture of images that run through the action, it's also a play which has its own murky mysteries. And I'd like to focus in on one of these, namely the mystery of Macbeth's will to commit murder, the ambiguous representation of his agency, the complexities of the relationship between his desires and their enactment.

The play, as I've already noted, is much concerned with ambiguity, with equivocation, with things that don't mean what they seem to mean, with the language of paradox. Its first scene ends with the witches asserting that "fair is foul, and foul is fair." Macbeth unconsciously but tellingly allies himself with their doublespeak in his very first speech in the play. Surveying the horrors of the blasted heath after his victory in battle, he says, "So fair and foul a day I have not seen."

Language is always behaving duplicitously in *Macbeth*. There is, of course, the kind of doubleness we label dramatic irony that manifests itself when a character unwittingly says something that later events will turn on its head. For example, Lady Macbeth says, "A little water clears us of this deed," after the murder of Duncan; but then, of course, her sleepwalking scene will prove that she can never be clear of the deed, as she endlessly tries to wash that blood from her hands.

But there is also the apparently knowing equivocation and doubletalk of the witches and the apparitions that speak for them in Act 4. The second of these apparitions says to Macbeth, “Be bloody, bold, and resolute; laugh to scorn the power of man, for none of woman born shall harm Macbeth.”

Macbeth understands by this that nobody can harm him. “None of woman born shall harm Macbeth,” and who isn’t born of a woman? But, of course, what turns out to be the case is that somebody who was not born of a woman, but was, instead, delivered by some kind of primitive cesarean section is going to be the person who can kill Macbeth. And presumably the witches know this. Macbeth, finally beginning later on in the play to comprehend the real meaning of their prophecies, cries out against “th’ equivocation of the fiend that lies like truth.”

But Macbeth is not only the *victim* of devilish equivocation; he also seems to be a kind of equivocator himself. When Duncan’s body is found weltering in its blood in Act 2, scene 3, Macbeth speaks to the assembled and horrified noblemen of Scotland:

“Had I but died an hour before this chance, I had lived a blessed time; for, from this instant, there’s nothing serious in mortality; all is but toys, renown and grace is dead; the wine of life is drawn, and the mere lees is left this vault to brag of.”

There are two possible ways of looking at this. Macbeth is giving a public performance, making the noises he’s expected to make. He insists this death is so horrific that it has emptied all life of meaning. “Renown and grace is dead”—there’s nothing serious or noble left in human experience because of the horror of Duncan’s assassination. But in so doing, he produces a double meaning he’s not in control of; because it would have been better for him had he died before the death of Duncan, and his own “renown and grace” are now dead. Alternatively, Macbeth may recognize very precisely that his own “renown and grace” are gone, and be lamenting, as it were; but the situation allows him to knowingly declare this without revealing himself. His sentiments are masked as a general expression of horror.

That last interpretation is, in fact, rather attractive, because we’ve gathered from his words in the previous scene that Macbeth knows from the start the implications of what he has done. He will have no more peace, for “Macbeth has murdered sleep.” He’ll never rest easy again; the blood guilt will never wash off.

So why does he kill Duncan in the first place? It’s often claimed his undoing is his ambition, but Macbeth’s ambition at first is a very wavering thing, and we certainly never see him savoring the pleasures of plotting to promote his own interests the way that Iago does or Edmund does. Let’s look at what he says just after the witches have declared he shall be king hereafter:

“This supernatural soliciting cannot be ill, cannot be good: if ill, why hath it given me earnest of success, commencing in a truth? I am thane of Cawdor. If good, why do I yield to that suggestion whose horrid image doth unfix my hair and make my seated heart knock at my ribs, against the use of nature? Present fears are less than horrible imaginings. My thought, whose murder yet is but fantastical, shakes so my single state of man that function is smother’d in surmise, and nothing is but what is not.”

His language has what one critic describes as a sickening seesaw rhythm as it veers back and forth, as he is both attracted and repelled by the hopes and the desires that have been brought to life by the witches’ words. He isn’t enraptured by the solicitations of the dark forces. He acknowledges his fear of the image of murder they planted in his mind. Much later, after he has killed Duncan and has been crowned king of Scotland, he seems to deny his own agency, his own will to action in what has happened as he contemplates the hollowness of what he has gained. “Upon my head they placed a fruitless crown, and put a barren sceptre in my gripe.” You’ll notice he says *they* placed, *they* put; he displaces agency onto the witches: they made me do it, or they did this to me. But all they did was speak of the future. They didn’t instruct him to do anything. They just said “Hail Macbeth, that shall be king hereafter!” But he seems to speak of himself as their puppet.

So what is the status of the witches? They're referred to by Banquo as the "weird sisters," although in one early edition of the play this gets turned into the "wayward sisters." Weird: the word derives from the Old English, *wyrd*, which means fate. Are they spokeswomen for fate, simply announcing what must be and making Macbeth, in effect, a prisoner of fate, making him Duncan's murderer because it was predetermined he should be a murderer? The suggestion here would be that even if he'd never met the witches, he'd have been king by his own murderous act. Or does the very intervention of the weird sisters, in telling him of a particular future, make him bring this future to pass? Is it their action in speaking what is supposedly his future that in fact makes him ensure that this future comes into being? Are they instruments of a dispassionate, disinterested fate, or are they indeed the actively malicious instruments of darkness running their own intervention in human lives, as Macbeth himself suggests in the Act 1, scene 3 soliloquy from which I quoted?

The play encourages us to think that their intervention is crucial, but also that the idea of murdering to gain the kingship is not new to either of the Macbeths. They speak to something in Macbeth. But Macbeth's own will to action remains ambiguous. The letter from him that Lady Macbeth reads in Act 1, scene 5 reports the encounter, and he calls her "dearest partner of greatness." But he doesn't add, "By the way, do start sharpening the daggers." But she interprets it as a summons to action on her part, and her subsequent speeches address the need to incite Macbeth to turn his fantasies into reality. At what point does Macbeth choose once and for all to murder Duncan? And why does he enter into this act, considering he seems to have reservations every step of way?

Let's look at what happens when Macbeth arrives at his castle in advance of King Duncan and the rest of the court, and he and Lady Macbeth speak together for the first time. He says, "My dearest love, Duncan comes here to-night." "And when goes hence?" she asks. "Tomorrow, as he purposes." "O never" says Lady Macbeth, "O never shall sun that morrow see!" What is tone of Macbeth's line, "Tomorrow, as he purposes"? "Tomorrow, as he purposes"—ironic, slightly sinister, or just completely bland? "Tomorrow, as he purposes." Is he innocent, bland, knowingly ironic, beginning to realize her thought? It's Lady Macbeth, not Macbeth, who says, "O, never shall sun that morrow see" and who starts plotting immediately.

The only other remark Macbeth makes before the scene ends is, "We will speak further." He's not quite verbally committed here. We never see the scene in which they speak further of whether Duncan will ever leave their castle. By the time we see Macbeth alone at start of Act 1, scene 7, he is now quite explicitly speaking of doing murder, but he's also outlining all his doubts and fears. His fears that there will be some terrible retribution in the present for what he has done and the kind of enormous catalog of every reason why he should not commit murder:

"If it were done when 'tis done, then 'twere well it were done quickly. If the assassination could trammel up the consequence, and catch with his surcease, success; that but this blow might be the be-all and the end-all here, but here, upon this bank and shoal of time, we'd jump the life to come. But in these cases we still have judgment here, that we but teach bloody instructions, which, being taught, return to plague the inventor. This even-handed justice commends the ingredients of our poison'd chalice to our own lips. He's here in double trust: First, as I am his kinsman and his subject, strong both against the deed; then, as his host, who should against his murderer shut the door, not bear the knife myself. Besides, this Duncan hath borne his faculties so meek, hath been so clear in his great office, that his virtues will plead like angels, trumpet-tongued, against the deep damnation of his taking-off."

The speech explores Macbeth's fear of a future he can't control. What will be the comeback in the here and now of his deed? Whatever violence he offers may rebound upon him. He offers the image of drinking from the poisoned cup one has offered to another. Macbeth is a Claudius who knows every possible problematic consequence of his actions in advance.

He lists his reasons against doing it. He's my kinsman. I'm his subject. I'm his host. And his virtues are such that the very universe will cry out against his murder. Macbeth's apparent moral clarity here perhaps may make us want to ask: Does his full awareness of the evil of his deed this make him more sympathetic or less sympathetic than, say, Othello, who is duped into thinking he's a heavenly agent, not a murderer?

Macbeth wants, he says, to grasp with Duncan's surcease success. His weird half pun: surcease, his death; success, noble achievement, succession to the throne, ongoing succession of events. Perhaps Macbeth thinks his success as savior of Scotland in war should justify his succeeding to the throne; but the succession to the throne and the success of his desire is dependent on Duncan's surcease. Macbeth seems to allow himself to be pushed along by the succession of events, his encounter with the witches, his dealings with his wife, and the force of her own more clearly articulated ambition—but an ambition which, as a woman in 11th century Scotland, she can only achieve through her husband.

So we might want to be wary of defining Macbeth's actions only in terms of unbridled ambition. And I do think it's significant that when he seems on the point of abandoning the murder attempt, it's not his *ambition* that Lady Macbeth invokes to change his mind, but something rather different, and I'll be examining this detail in my next lecture. And even after he agrees once more to kill Duncan, we have another soliloquy which problematizes his desires and his agency in interesting ways:

“Is this a dagger which I see before me, the handle toward my hand? Come, let me clutch thee—I have thee not, and yet I see thee still. Art thou not, fatal vision, sensible to feeling as to sight? Or art thou but a dagger of the mind, a false creation, proceeding from the heat-oppressed brain? I see thee yet, in form as palpable as this which now I draw. Thou marshall'st me the way that I was going and such an instrument I was to use.”

He is the object of the dagger's action. It's separate from him, guiding his way to murder. Of course this may be a kind of external projection of his inner desires, as he himself half recognizes. He says, “It is the bloody business which informs thus to mine eyes.” Yet he continues to speak in terms that mystify or dissociate his own agency, his own will to action. He says that “wither'd murder...thus with his stealthy pace...towards his design moves like a ghost.” Murder is personified, is itself projected as something separate from Macbeth. It feels to me like a psychologically protective measure. A bell rings in the castle and he concludes, “The bell invites me. Hear it not, Duncan, for it is a knell that summons thee to heaven or to hell.” “The bell invites me,” as if he had no other option. We've got again this separation of his action from his choice or his will.

This phenomenon is nicely illuminated by a remark Macbeth makes even earlier in the play. In Act 1, scene 4, Duncan celebrates victory in battle by elevating his son Malcolm to the title of Prince of Cumberland, official heir to the kingdom. Macbeth then speaks aside, reacting to this news. “The Prince of Cumberland! That is a step on which I must fall down, or else o'erleap, for in my way it lies. Stars, hide your fires, let not light see my black and deep desires; the eye wink at the hand; yet let that be which the eye fears, when it is done, to see.”

“The eye wink”: to close briefly and not see what the hand is doing. The sense of invisible agency, but also the idea that the “I,” punning in the sense of the first person pronoun, is closing its eyes at the hand, that Macbeth is removing himself as the agent of responsibility. We might compare this with the moment after the murder when he says, “To know my deed, 'twere best not to know myself.” I can't afford to recognize the “I” who did it. We might think of this condition of acknowledging and disowning at once, simultaneously knowing and not knowing, as the ultimate equivocation. Macbeth will come to curse what he calls “th' equivocation of the fiend” in the later stages of the play, but does he ever recognize his own?

Lecture Sixteen

Macbeth II—"Dispute it like a man"

Scope:

Lady Macbeth is the first female character we have encountered who might be called a tragic protagonist. This lecture begins by exploring her Act 1 soliloquies, looking in particular at the way she articulates her relationship with the powers of darkness and attempts to purge herself of her own femaleness. Lady Macbeth will manipulate and blackmail her husband by way of a disturbing definition of proper "manliness": a consideration of her strategies leads to a larger meditation upon what manhood might mean in the world of *Macbeth*.

Lady Macbeth's success in making a "real man" of her husband ironically encourages the unraveling of the bond between husband and wife. The second half of the lecture explores the collapse of their partnership and Lady Macbeth's unsuccessful attempt to ignore the workings of her conscience; it concludes by discussing an alternative vision of "manliness" that emerges in Act 4 of *Macbeth*.

Outline

- I. Although actions by women that are perceived or constructed by male characters as transgressive are often crucial to the unfolding of Shakespeare's tragedies, Lady Macbeth is the first female character we've met who might be called a tragic protagonist.
 - A. The two soliloquies Lady Macbeth delivers in 1.5. readdress questions concerning the will to act raised by her husband; they also suggest this play's interest in how manliness or womanliness is defined.
 - B. Lady Macbeth's soliloquies do not interrogate her own desires and motives but are addressed to others—Macbeth in the first instance and the powers of darkness in the second.
 - C. Her first soliloquy focuses on Macbeth's divided nature and identifies his ostensible excess of human feeling as problematically "feminine."
 - D. Her second soliloquy invokes the spirits of night, asking them to "unsex" her and to remove all compassion from her spirit.
 - E. She seems in the end to embrace a variation of the same self-deception Macbeth has used, asking that the consequences of her deeds be hidden from her.
- II. The larger question of what it means to act in a "manly" (or "womanly") fashion is constantly under negotiation in *Macbeth*.
 - A. Invoking a horrific image of violent infanticide, Lady Macbeth redefines "manly" action as ruthlessly keeping one's promises, however morally problematic they might be: she persuades Macbeth to accept her definition of manliness when he hesitates to kill Duncan.
 - B. Macbeth uses similarly loaded and gendered language in recruiting two ruffians to murder Banquo.
 - C. Lady Macbeth again asks "Are you a man?" when Macbeth shrinks from Banquo's ghost. His response suggests that he has now internalized her question-begging definition of manliness.
- III. It is a tragic irony of this play that in remolding Macbeth's "manhood," Lady Macbeth loses him as a partner and intimate.
 - A. In Act 3, it becomes clear that Macbeth is no longer sharing his plans with his wife; after the appearance of Banquo's ghost, we never see them on stage together again.
 - B. By this point in the play, Macbeth's language echoes the nightmarish imagery summoned up by

his wife in Act 1.

- C. While Macbeth ceases to be the partner whose conscience troubles him, his wife's newly woken horror at their deeds suggests that they have exchanged places emotionally.
- D. Lady Macbeth is left alone to face her demons; our final sight of her, in the sleepwalking scene, suggests that the bloody deeds of the past haunt her incessantly.

IV. *Macbeth* does offer us a brief (but resonant) alternative vision of “proper manhood” in the scene in which Macduff learns of the slaughter of his family.

- A. Prince Malcolm urges Macduff to “dispute it like a man” and take violent revenge; Macduff insists that he must “also feel it as a man.”
- B. In this moment, the play interrogates the notion that “manhood” should be defined only in terms of ruthless valor.
- C. The play takes us from Lady Macbeth's equating manhood with ruthlessly killing a child to Macduff's equating it with properly mourning his dead children and wife.

Essential Reading:

Shakespeare, *Macbeth*.

Supplementary Reading:

Adelman, “‘Born of woman’: Fantasies of Maternal Power in *Macbeth*,” in *Macbeth*, Alan Sinfield, ed., chapter 5.

Questions to Consider:

1. Compare the interaction between Lady Macbeth and Macbeth during the interrupted banquet scene with the interplay between the two characters on the night of Duncan's murder.
2. Why does Malcolm speak so unpleasantly of himself in 4.4. in his conversation with Macduff? Why might Shakespeare have wanted to devote so many lines to this exchange?

Lecture Sixteen

***Macbeth* II—“Dispute it like a man”**

Shakespeare’s tragic universes are officially and usually centered upon the actions and sufferings of male protagonists. But even though all but one of the plays I’m discussing is named after the male hero, the actions of female characters, especially if those actions are perceived or constructed as transgressions by the male characters, are often crucially important as catalysts in the tragic action. Let me offer a few examples.

In *Othello*, before play starts, Desdemona loves and marries Othello. Her father sees this as an unnatural action, an act of disobedience, of rebellion, and a transgression, one that is likely to foreshadow other transgressions. And one of most horrible things that happens in this play is that Iago persuades Othello to see Desdemona’s action as if from Brabantio’s point of view. Her “transgression” in marrying him is made to confirm the possibility that she may have gone on to betray him in Cassio’s arms. Iago’s transformation of Othello into a murderer is thoroughly entangled with the rewriting of Desdemona’s initial action as itself a kind of dark deed.

Hamlet: before the action starts, Gertrude marries Claudius, substitutes him for Hamlet’s father. Hamlet sees this as an unnatural act, a transgression, and it poisons his vision of the world. His difficulty in obeying the ghost’s commands is partly connected to the fact he’s more interested in chastising Gertrude than Claudius. At a crucial moment in the action he bypasses a chance to stick a dagger in Claudius and instead goes to *speak* daggers to Gertrude; a decision which leads to his killing of Polonius in her chamber, and thus triggers the play’s movement towards its final slaughters.

At the start of *King Lear*, Cordelia withdraws from the love competition staged by her father. Lear’s subsequent actions derive from his reading of her behavior as unnatural, a transgression against daughterly loyalty and love. The truly unnatural behavior of Goneril and Regan is given full rein because of Lear’s labeling Cordelia as unnatural and banishing her.

So from the very start of these plays, our reading of the tragic action centered on male protagonists is complicated by the ways in which male voices describe, define, and respond to the females who they take to be shaping their actions. Nevertheless, Lady Macbeth is the first female character we’ve met who might truly be called a tragic protagonist, or at least a tragic co-protagonist. In our first encounter with her in Act 1, scene 5, she has two long speeches alone on stage: the first after she reads Macbeth’s letter about the witches, the second after a messenger reports Duncan’s imminent arrival.

This is the first time we’ve seen a female character soliloquizing. The soliloquy is a particularly important phenomenon in tragedy. In its verbal space a character may engage in self-interrogation or self-reflection, may explore inner conflicts, or may offer a more generalized meditation on the nature of his or her experience. It’s where we gain access to a speaker’s interiority. It’s where they get to articulate their own desires or ponder their own agency. In *Hamlet*, as we noticed, the fact that neither Gertrude nor Ophelia soliloquizes means that their subjectivity and their sense of self is never privileged in the same way that Hamlet’s is. The play text does not permit them to speak themselves into being in quite the same way. Their motives, and their actions, and their very natures are to a much greater degree constructed by other speakers. And the same could be said of Desdemona or Cordelia.

In Lady Macbeth we’re getting something rather different. But interestingly, although Macbeth’s early soliloquies show him interrogating his own desires and motives, both Lady Macbeth’s soliloquies in Act 1, scene 5, are addressed not so much to herself but to others. In the first, she speaks to the absent Macbeth. In the second, she invokes the forces of darkness. There is no self-questioning here. Her second soliloquy suggests another interesting difference between Lady Macbeth and her husband. Macbeth sees the supernatural. He sees the witches, he’ll later see Banquo’s ghost. Lady Macbeth never sees any of these, but she, unlike Macbeth, explicitly invites the powers of darkness to possess her.

Let's look at her first soliloquy, the words she speaks after reading Macbeth's letter about the three witches and their teasing promises:

“Glamis thou art, and Cawdor; and shalt be what thou art promised. Yet do I fear thy nature. It is too full o' the milk of human kindness to catch the nearest way. Thou wouldst be great; art not without ambition, but without the illness should attend it. What thou wouldst highly, that wouldst thou holily; wouldst not play false, and yet wouldst wrongly win. Thou'ldst have, great Glamis, that which cries, 'Thus thou must do, if thou have it and that which rather thou dost fear to do than wishest should be undone.' Hie thee hither, that I may pour my spirits in thine ear, and chastise with the valour of my tongue all that impedes thee from the golden round, which fate and metaphysical aid doth seem to have thee crown'd withal.”

She's afraid that Macbeth's divided nature will get in the way of his achieving his ambitions. And the dizzying seesaw rhythms of her speech—“highly, holily,” the way oppositions pivot about the line ends—echo in weird ways some of Macbeth's own discourse. But she claims his nature is “too full o' the milk of human kindness” to take the fast and violent way to kingship. When she speaks the word “kind,” she doesn't just mean “nice,” “gentle.” She means it in the older sense as well, where “kind” in Middle English meant “nature.” Kindness here slides from compassion into a broader sense of natural human feeling. Her phrase “milk of human kindness,” with its suggestive equation of compassion with the milk within a mother's breasts, invokes the most natural, the most nurturing of acts—that is, breastfeeding a baby—to exemplify the pity she wants eliminated from Macbeth and herself, because he has too much of the milk of human kindness in him.

She offers a variation on this theme in her second soliloquy: “Come to my woman's breasts and take my milk for gall, you murdering ministers, wherever in your sightless substances you wait on nature's mischief!” She asks the spirits of night to come to her breasts and exchange her nurturing milk for gall—poison. Notice that Lady Macbeth gives a gender to compassion. She makes what one might think of as non-gendered human feeling problematically feminine, something weak and faulty that needs to be eradicated in both her husband and herself. Now let's look at the start of that same speech: “Come, you spirits that tend on mortal thoughts, unsex me here and fill me from the crown to the toe top-full of direst cruelty! Make thick my blood; stop up the access and passage to remorse, that no compunctious visitings of nature shake my fell purpose.” Her womanhood becomes what is merely effeminate, that which must be jettisoned for her plans to succeed. But is she really asking to lose what she has classified as problematically sentimental womanly feeling? Or is she actually asking to lose her very humanity? And what are the implications of her equating human and humane feelings only with femaleness? Her speech concludes: “Come, thick night, and pall thee in the dunnest smoke of hell, that my keen knife sees not the wound it makes, nor heaven peep through the blanket of the dark, to cry 'Hold, hold!’”

Her knife must not see the wound it makes. The consequences of its deed are to be masked from that which is doing the destroying. And we have an echo here of the words of Macbeth with which I ended my last lecture. “The eye wink at the hand; yet let that be which the eye fears, when it is done, to see.” Macbeth wants his implication in a desired outcome to be hid from the world. She wants the weapon not to see the harm it does. She seems to be embracing self-deception here. Her logic is if you don't see the consequences of your actions, you won't have to deal with them. And is the “keen knife” she speaks of a dagger in her own hands, or is it Macbeth whom she wants to be her knife and to do murder while having the results of his deed shrouded from him?

Lady Macbeth offers a new twist on the “unsex me here” speech in Act 1, scene 7, when Macbeth tries to call off the murder. She starts by mocking him for not being able to match his desires with his actions, for not daring to claim what he truly desires. Then, when Macbeth tries to silence her, she moves to a very gendered kind of manipulation. Macbeth says, “Prithee, peace. I dare do all that may become a man. Who dares do more is none.” And she replies:

“What beast was’t, then, that made you break this enterprise to me? When you durst do it, then you were a man; and to be more than what you were, you would be so much more the man. Nor time nor place did then adhere, and yet you would make both; they have made themselves, and that their fitness now does unmake you. I have given suck, and know how tender ’tis to love the babe that milks me. I would, while it was smiling in my face, have pluck’d my nipple from his boneless gums, and dash’d the brains out, had I so sworn as you have done to this.”

Shakespeare’s tragedies often seem to be organized around certain pivotal terms that are perpetually under negotiation in the play’s language and action. Nature, for example, is a term that seems to be constantly appropriated in different ways by the characters in *King Lear*.

The word whose significance is up for grabs in this play is “man.” Macbeth defined the term “man” in opposition to that which is other than human, one who carries out things unbecoming to a human. “I dare do everything that is becoming to a man,” he says. He who dares go beyond that isn’t a man at all; he isn’t even a human being.

Lady Macbeth comes back all guns blazing, saying when you dared do what we want to be done, *then* you were a man. She redefines a “real” man in opposition to a cowardly oath breaker, but she ignores the question of whether there aren’t some promises better not kept, some kinds of courage that are merely brutish. She has reduced the definition of a man to somebody who will ruthlessly keep his word no matter how terrible the action he has promised to carry out. And the gut-wrenching example she uses to assert *she* would do anything she had sworn to do involves the destruction of a nursing baby, the literal cutting off of the milk of human kindness, the killing of something supremely vulnerable and dependent. An action that would be perceived by most cultures, of course, not merely as supremely unwomanly, but as utterly inhuman. Macbeth responds, “Bring forth men-children only,” a remark which suggests he’s bought into her definition of manliness in the most extreme way, as if to be a real man is not only to destroy the feminine in oneself, but also the possibility of even engendering anything feminine.

Macbeth in fact seems to internalize Lady Macbeth’s manipulative strategies so well that he himself uses similar ones in Act 3 when he sets up the murder of Banquo and must persuade his hired ruffians to do the deed. He’s persuaded them that Banquo is behind various misfortunes that have happened to their household. “Can you look kindly on him,” he asks? “We are men, my liege,” says the first murderer, and Macbeth’s response is, in effect, to say, ah yes, but are you *real* men?

Lady Macbeth replays her “Are you a man?” technique at the banquet from hell in Act 3, scene 4, the banquet in which Macbeth is displaced from his seat by the bloody ghost of the murdered Banquo. As Macbeth directs wild speeches towards a specter she cannot see, she tries to persuade her guests he’s just suffering from a seizure, while snarling to him, “Are you a man?” and describing him as “quite unmann’d in folly.” But this time Macbeth cries, “What man dare, I dare,” declaring he’d face any fierce beast or the living Banquo with his sword drawn, but not this thing from the grave. Only when it vanishes can he say, “I am a man again.”

And indeed he is already very close to the ruthless example of manhood Lady Macbeth wanted him to be. He’s internalized her definition of manliness. When he speaks of securing his rule against all opposition he declares, “For mine own good, all causes shall give way.”

We should note that by this point in the action, Lady Macbeth is out of the loop. Macbeth is brooding on the fact that Macduff, the thane whose suspicions we have seen as early as the end of Act 2, that Macduff has not attended his coronation or come to court. But Lady Macbeth doesn’t know what is going on. She says, “Did you send to him, sir?”

One of tragic ironies of this play is that in making Macbeth the kind of man she thought she wanted him to be—pitiless, single-minded, a man who ignored all qualms of conscience and compassion—Lady Macbeth simultaneously loses him as a partner, as an intimate. He learns her lessons all too well and he leaves her behind.

Macbeth hints at his anxieties about Banquo to her at the end of Act 3, scene 2, but when she says, "What's to be done?" he replies, "Be innocent of the knowledge, dearest chuck, till thou applaud the deed." Don't worry your pretty head about these matters, just applaud the way I will settle them. A sort of variation on not seeing the wounds that one's knife makes, perhaps. Here she will only see the consequences, she will not be in on planning.

Perhaps Macbeth doesn't need her anymore because he has now fully appropriated both her language and her dark vision. But he continues:

"Come, seeling night, scarf up the tender eye of pitiful day, and with thy bloody and invisible hand cancel and tear to pieces that great bond which keeps me pale! Light thickens, and the crow makes wing to the rooky wood. Good things of day begin to droop and drowse, while night's black agents to their preys do rouse."

He echoes the words of her second soliloquy of Act 1, scene 5. He too invokes the night, demands that the tender eye of pitiful day and perhaps his own capacity for tenderness and pity be hidden. His vision of birds of darkness heralding his deeds echoes her description of the foreboding raven welcoming Duncan to her castle.

After the broken banquet scene, we never again see Lady Macbeth and Macbeth on stage together. Earlier in the play she imagined herself as literally engendering action in him. Hasten home, she said, "That I may pour my spirits in thine ear." Her spirits here are her powers of persuasion, her personal force. But in Shakespeare's time that word, spirits, could also mean semen. It's a kind of image of reverse impregnation; she takes on the male role.

In contrast, consider Macbeth after his visit to the witches to learn more of his future. He has decided to strike out at Macduff and has been further reinforced in this action by news that Macduff has suspiciously fled to England, where Duncan's exiled son Malcolm sought refuge. From this moment, he says, "The very firstlings of my heart shall be the firstlings of my hand." His literal meaning is: the very first thoughts of my heart shall be immediately acted upon by my hand. But you should note that that word, firstling, means firstborn. There are none of Lady Macbeth's spirits inciting or impregnating him here. He is now thoroughly self-sufficient so far as the conceiving and engendering of violence is concerned.

If Macbeth is transformed from the member of the couple who'd had more qualms of conscience, more forebodings about the murder of Duncan, into an ever more hardened destroyer of all that threatens him, Lady Macbeth, who began as the partner intent on suppressing all manifestations of conscience and compassion, gradually comes to occupy a state of mind comparable to that of Macbeth earlier in the play. It's as if they crossed over and changed positions.

After the murder of Duncan, it is Macbeth who foresees that he has forever murdered all peace of mind along with his king. Macbeth who hears prophetic voices saying, "Macbeth shall sleep no more." Lady Macbeth, by contrast, says, "These deeds must not be thought after these ways; so, it will make us mad." And she insists, "A little water clears us of this deed." We can wash murder off our hands. But by this time we may already suspect there are limits to her ruthless pragmatism. For one thing, she does not, in fact, carry out Duncan's murder herself. And we learn why in Act 2, scene 2, as she waits in a condition of desperate anxiety for her husband to return to her from killing his king. "I laid their daggers ready," she said. "He could not miss 'em. Had he not resembled my father as he slept, I had done't."

The woman who squashes all of Macbeth's qualms and fears is nevertheless capable of an act of imaginative empathy. And this gives us a hint of what is to come. After their coronation she's still seeking to brace her husband, to give him pep talks, to be briskly pragmatic, what's done is done. But note what she says mere seconds before Macbeth enters. "Nought's had, all's spent, where our desire is got without content. 'Tis safer to be that which we destroy than by destruction dwell in doubtful joy."

Which resonates for me very strongly against Macbeth's "All is but toys: renown and grace is dead." And she is ultimately left alone to face the demons she had tried to dismiss. When Macbeth forgot to place the bloody and incriminating weapons next to Duncan's sleeping servants and couldn't bear to go back into the chamber to face Duncan's corpse again, Lady Macbeth had sneered, "'Tis the eye of childhood that fears the painted devil." But that bloody corpse isn't just a painting of horror, and it won't go away. The last time we see Lady Macbeth, she is trapped in a nightmare which has become her perpetual reality, sleeping and waking. Her own history is a nightmare from which she cannot awaken.

In Act 5, her sleepwalking scene is witnessed by one of her gentlewoman attendants and a doctor. Every night Lady Macbeth relives the murder of Duncan. She enters carrying a candle, and we learn from a remark of her lady-in-waiting that this woman, the same woman who asked darkness to possess her, cannot now sleep without lights by her bed. This is what Lady Macbeth has to say as she walks in her sleep. For the purposes of compression I'm omitting the commentary of the two watchers:

"Yet here's a spot. Out, damned spot! out, I say!—One: two: why, then, 'tis time to do't.—Hell is murky!—Fie, my lord, fie! A soldier and afeard? What need we fear who knows it, when none can call our power to account?—Yet who would have thought the old man to have had so much blood in him. The thane of Fife had a wife. Where is she now?—What, will these hands ne'er be clean?—No more o' that, my lord, no more o' that. You mar all with this starting. Here's the smell of the blood still; all the perfumes of Arabia will not sweeten this little hand. Oh, oh, oh! Wash your hands, put on your nightgown; look not so pale.—I tell you yet again, Banquo's buried; he cannot come out on's grave. To bed, to bed! There's knocking at the gate. Come, come, give me your hand. What's done cannot be undone.—To bed, to bed, to bed!"

Her fragmentary remarks echo things we've heard before: "Fie, my lord, fie! a soldier and afeard? ... There's knocking at the gate... What's done cannot be undone... I tell you yet again, Banquo's buried; he cannot come out on's grave." But she also offers new visions: "Hell is murky... Who would have thought the old man to have had so much blood in him... Will these hands ne'er be clean? ... Here's the smell of the blood still... Macduff, the thane of Fife, had a wife: where is she now?" "Give me your hand," she says at the last, but Macbeth has long since distanced himself from her; she is alone. In the letter she read from him in Act 1, he addressed her as his dearest partner of greatness. When she dies in Act 5 (we will learn in the last words of the play that she may have committed suicide), her husband barely has time to mourn her.

The play does offer us, though, a brief but resonant alternative vision of proper manhood, in the one scene that's not set in Scotland. Macduff has come to England to persuade the exiled prince Malcolm, Duncan's son, to lead an army against Macbeth. Another Scottish lord, Ross, arrives to bring some terrible news to the self-exiled Macduff. Ross interrupts a conversation between Macduff and Prince Malcolm. He does his own rather agonizing bit of equivocating. Macduff says, "How does my wife?" "Why, well," says Ross. "And all my children?" "Well too." "The tyrant has not batter'd at their peace?" and Ross says, "No; they were well at peace when I did leave 'em." And finally he manages to relate his terrible news: the slaughter of Macduff's entire family by Macbeth. Young Malcolm intervenes, let's take revenge and take out Macbeth. And Macduff simply says, "He has no children." I never know whether that he is Malcolm, who is too young to understand the pain that Macduff is feeling or whether the he is Macbeth, who has no children and therefore Macduff cannot take the same revenge.

Malcolm then says, "Dispute it like a man." Fight it like a man. Contend against your tears like a man; the conventional notion that a man shouldn't give way to softer emotions. Take revenge like a man. And Macduff responds, "I shall do so, but I must also feel it as a man." Must feel it, must feel it to be fully human. Somebody's finally interrogating the notion of manhood as nothing but ruthless valor.

I've circled round from Lady Macbeth, equating manhood with ruthlessly killing a child if one had sworn to do so, to Macduff, equating manhood with properly mourning his dead children and wife. Children,

living and dead, born and unborn, are very, very important in structuring the larger arc of this tragedy, and I'll have more to say on this topic next time.

Lecture Seventeen

***Macbeth* III—Bloody Babes and Bloody Ends**

Scope:

Before Macbeth murders King Duncan, he imagines “pity, like a naked newborn babe,” bestriding the winds to communicate the horror of his deed to the cosmos. Children are at once both utterly vulnerable and supremely powerful in the world of this play: Macbeth’s horrible deeds are rendered pointless by his own childlessness, and other people’s children become sources of terror and objects of violence for him. This lecture explores the link between the children (real and metaphorical) of this play and a future that Macbeth cannot ultimately control. What is the larger significance of the witches’ prophecy that “none of woman born shall harm Macbeth”? What is the relationship between the play’s concern with issues of inheritance and “succession” and the nihilistic vision of existence articulated by Macbeth as his enemies close in upon him in the tragedy’s final scenes?

Outline

- I.** The tragic design of *Macbeth* offers a significant number of references to babies and children, both real and metaphorical.
 - A.** Lady Macbeth urges her husband to follow out their murderous plans by declaring that she would have killed the child at her breast had she sworn to do so.
 - B.** Macbeth, by contrast, argues that “pity, like a naked newborn babe,” will communicate the murder of Duncan to all hearers.
- II.** Metaphorically, children are presented as both infinitely vulnerable and very powerful—and real children have a particular power over Macbeth’s imagination.
 - A.** Although Lady Macbeth has nursed a child, the couple has no surviving children.
 - B.** The witches tell Banquo that his descendants will be kings.
 - C.** Macbeth’s vision of a line of kings bearing Banquo’s features confirms that his throne will be inherited by other men’s children.
- III.** After Macbeth has murdered Duncan, he no longer equates children with compassion and humanity: they now represent a threatening future.
 - A.** Macbeth attempts to destroy the children who menace his hopes (Banquo’s son, Duncan’s sons).
 - B.** He ruthlessly slaughters the family of Macduff, who has made his suspicions of Macbeth quite clear.
 - C.** Macbeth becomes the child-killer that Lady Macbeth had said she would willingly become.
- IV.** Macbeth continues to be haunted by dangerous visions of children, although they may appear in the guise of comforting specters.
 - A.** The bloody babe shown to him by the witches declares that “none of woman born shall harm Macbeth.”
 - B.** The apparition of a child carrying a green branch promises that Macbeth can be vanquished only if Birnam Wood marches upon him.
 - C.** Their prophecies, however, will testify to the witches’ equivocation.
- V.** Macbeth’s failure to master the future is made evident by the convergence of the actual fulfillment of the witches’ prophecies with manifestations of the regenerative powers of nature.

- A. The third apparition’s green branch anticipates the tree branches carried by Malcolm’s invading forces as they march on Dunsinane.
 - B. The forces of nature strike back against a figure who has been associated with nature rendered unnatural.
 - 1. We first encounter Macbeth on a blasted heath, where he meets creatures who seem neither male nor female.
 - 2. Lady Macbeth invokes the darker forces of nature to possess her.
 - 3. Duncan’s murder is accompanied by disruptions in the natural world.
 - 4. Macbeth himself is prepared to unleash a kind of natural anarchy in his pursuit of knowledge of what the future holds.
 - C. Prince Malcolm, “the sovereign flower,” is the thriving new organism who will supplant Macbeth.
 - D. Macbeth imagines the arid future he faces in terms of autumnal decay.
 - E. At the end of the play, Malcolm describes the restoration of Scotland in terms of new cultivation and growth.
 - F. Because he wouldn’t let himself be raised to fruition by Duncan, but chose to supplant him, Macbeth himself must be rooted out.
- VI.** Macbeth’s “unnatural” actions produce his own version of tragic knowledge—the nihilistic vision he offers when he is told of his wife’s death.
- A. He offers a general meditation on the pointlessness of existence.
 - B. He characterizes himself as an actor in meaningless drama that has no significant consequences.
- VII.** Macbeth’s death fulfills the last of the witches’ prophecies and brings the action full circle.
- A. Macbeth learns from Macduff that he was the “bloody babe” who was not born of woman.
 - B. Macbeth bears witness to the destruction of the “better part” of his manhood as he exits fighting.
 - C. Our last sight of Macbeth—as a ruthless engine of destruction—echoes the reports of his officially approved violence at the very start of the play.
- VIII.** It is not clear that the play’s action has moved us into an unambiguously transformed world after the death of Macbeth.
- A. Despite Macduff’s insistence on “feeling things as a man,” the final community of the play has been purged of all softer emotions.
 - B. It might be argued that we have returned to an even more exaggerated version of the warrior society and warrior values celebrated in 1.2.
 - C. Roman Polanski’s film version of the play interestingly offers a (non-canonical) closing scene suggesting that the cycle of violence will continue.

Essential Reading:

Shakespeare, *Macbeth*.

Supplementary Reading/Viewing:

Brooks, “The Naked Babe and the Cloak of Manliness,” in *Shakespeare: An Anthology of Criticism and Theory, 1945–2000*, Russ McDonald, ed., pp. 19–34.

On video or DVD: Philip Casson’s film of the Royal Shakespeare Company’s production of *Macbeth* (with Ian McKellen and Judi Dench).

Questions to Consider:

1. Lady Macduff converses with her son before the murderers arrive to kill her family. How does their dialogue comment upon or complicate the play's interest in parents and children?
2. In the last moments of *Macbeth*, Malcolm describes Macbeth and his wife as "this dead butcher and his fiendlike queen." Do you find this a just description of the play's protagonists?

Lecture Seventeen

***Macbeth* III—Bloody Babes and Bloody Ends**

I discussed last time one of the most terrifying images of this play, Lady Macbeth's declaration that she would destroy the nursing infant at her breast if she had sworn to do so. In this lecture I want to think more about the role played by babies and children in the tragedy, and ponder this in relation to the trajectory taken by Macbeth that leads him to the terrifying existential void he contemplates in the play's final stages.

Let me start by glancing back at the soliloquy in which Macbeth canvasses all the reasons why he *shouldn't* kill King Duncan. At the end of that speech, he imagines what might happen on a cosmic or metaphysical level should he kill his virtuous monarch. "This Duncan hath borne his faculties so meek, hath been so clear in his great office that his virtues will plead like angels, trumpet-tongued, against the deep damnation of his taking-off, and pity, like a naked new-born babe striding the blast, or heaven's cherubim horsed upon the sightless couriers of the air, shall blow the horrid deed in every eye that tears shall drown the wind."

Duncan's virtues will speak to the heavens of the iniquity of his murder and will rouse a kind of cosmic pity. Pity is personified by Macbeth, astonishingly, as a naked newborn babe—something infinitely tender and vulnerable—but we're also told that pity will be "striding the blast," be riding the storms and whirlwinds, and along with other couriers from heaven shall have the power to "blow the horrid deed in every eye." So pity is both infinitely vulnerable and infinitely powerful, and in Macbeth's imagination, it will force the disclosure of his iniquity. Pity's "like a naked new-born babe" and real children, indeed, have a terrible power over Macbeth's imagination within the plot of the tragedy. Although Lady Macbeth claims she has nursed a child, the Macbeths have no living children. Given the high rates of child mortality at this time, the notion of a woman who had nursed a baby, but who had no surviving offspring, would not be at all impossible.

After his coronation, Macbeth will remember all too well that the witches told Banquo, "Thou shalt get kings,"—thou shalt beget kings—"though thou be none." And of course the witches will later summon up for Macbeth that vision of a line of kings stretching to the crack of doom bearing Banquo's features. In so doing the witches make manifest what were already Macbeth's deepest fears. No sooner has he been crowned than he's declaring, in very telling language, his crown to be fruitless and his scepter to be barren, because these signs of royal office will be taken from him in the end by "an unlineal hand, no son of mine succeeding." Another man's child will succeed to his throne, and in doing murder he has imperiled his mortal soul, it seems, for the sake of Banquo's descendents.

After Macbeth has done his murder, children no longer are equated with pity, or compassion, or humanity, in his language. For Macbeth, they now represent a threatening future in which other men's heirs will sit upon his throne, and he will have damned himself for nothing. And in the second half of the play, he keeps trying to destroy children who threaten to take the future from his hands. He orders his hired murderers to kill both Banquo and his young son, Fleance. And of course the young sons of King Duncan, Malcolm and Donalbain, have very quickly decided that they are better off out of Scotland. But Fleance escapes his killers, and it is perhaps his failure to dispose of him that partly motivates Macbeth's ruthless slaughter of Macduff's children, of, as he says, all who "trace him in his line." It is as if he wishes to reduce the man he knows to be his enemy to the futureless condition of Macbeth himself. And, of course, one of Macbeth's very last options in the play is to kill Young Siward, the son of the English general who is supporting Malcolm's attempt to dislodge Macbeth from the Scottish throne. In the end, Macbeth has become the child killer that Lady Macbeth said she'd willingly become.

Macbeth continues to be haunted by dangerous visions of children, although at first he believes them to be comforting ones. When he revisits the witches to gain assurance of what lies ahead for him, two of the spirits who speak to him of the future appear in the form of children. The second apparition is the bloody

child I've spoken of before. The bloody child who tells him, "Be bloody, bold, and resolute; laugh to scorn the power of man, for none of woman born shall harm Macbeth."

And the third apparition manifests as a crowned child with a green branch in his hand, who assures Macbeth he will never be vanquished until Birnam Wood marches upon his castle at Dunsinane Hill. Now, Macbeth takes these messages as assurances of victory. Are not all men born of women? How can a wood possibly rise against him? But they prove, in the end, only to be examples of what he himself calls the "equivocation of the fiend," and there's a bitter irony in the fact that the prophecies that in the end speak to the child-killer's doom are voiced by spirits who appear in the form of children.

It's telling that the third apparition carries a green branch. That branch suggests new growth, the promise of seasonal regeneration, as if nature itself is about to strike back at Macbeth by way of the cycles of rebirth and recovery. And of course that green branch in the child's hand anticipates the tree branches taken from Birnam Wood that Malcolm's forces will be ordered to carry to mask their numbers as they march on Dunsinane Castle—and in so doing, fulfilling the apparently impossible conditions of the prophecy.

Macbeth had tried to control the future by killing children, cutting off the younger generation and with it the possibility of regeneration. He slaughters Macduff's family. He tries to kill Banquo's son Fleance. We learn from Malcolm that Macbeth has sent agents to England to try to kill him. But Fleance escapes Macbeth, and Malcolm, Scotland's green branch, comes back to claim his heritage with an army that disguises its numbers, by his order, by carrying before them green branches from Birnam Wood as they march on Dunsinane Castle. The benign forces of nature seem to strike back against unnatural deeds and against a figure who, from the very beginning of the play, is associated with nature rendered unnatural.

We first encounter Macbeth on a blasted heath, land wasted by battle whose fog and filthy air is haunted by creatures who seem neither male nor female. Banquo notes that the witches are in serious need of facial waxing: "You should be women and yet your beards forbid me to interpret that you are so," he says. A little later, Lady Macbeth invokes the darker forces of nature, the powers of death and night, to possess her, and imagines a croaking raven announcing the fatal entrance of Duncan into her castle.

After the murder, even as the body of King Duncan is being discovered, Lennox remarks to Macbeth that during the night all nature was in turmoil. Cries were heard in the air, birds of darkness clamored all night long. The earth "was feverous and did shake." Macbeth replies—this is the best understatement in Shakespeare—"Twas a rough night."

And at the beginning of Macbeth's second encounter with the witches, he demands they tell him what lies ahead, however terrible the consequences, even if they summon the most destructive forces of nature so that the seas swallow up the ships, castles topple, and the very generative principles of the universe are reduced to chaos "even till destruction sicken," he says. He is prepared to unleash a kind of natural anarchy in his pursuit of knowledge of what the future holds. So we have all these images of unnatural nature, nature in turmoil, nature disturbed in horrific ways, associated with Macbeth.

But Malcolm, whose supporters describe him as the "sovereign flower," is the thriving new organism who will supplant Macbeth. And as Macbeth himself contemplates the arid, comfortless future he faces as a result of his actions, he says, "My way of life is fall'n into the sere, the yellow leaf"—the images are of autumnal decay.

The play ends with Malcolm speaking of what he must do to restore Scotland, of the various things that he says must be planted newly with the time. Shakespeare has a particular talent for placing surprising and powerful verbs in his lines. This one offers the suggestion of new cultivation, new growth and new things that must be planted in the new time. It also echoes the very beginning of the play, in which Duncan, praising Macbeth's achievements in the battle against the Norwegian invaders, says, "I have begun to plant thee, and will labour to make thee full of growing." Because he wouldn't let himself be planted, be raised to fruition by Duncan, but rather chose to supplant Duncan and to disrupt what the play

proclaims to be the natural order, Macbeth turns into the problematic tree that must be rooted up so that Malcolm, the green branch, the sovereign flower, can sow new seeds in Scotland.

Macbeth's unnatural and murderous attempts to bring the future he desires into being lead him inexorably to his own version of tragic knowledge: the utterly nihilistic vision he offers when he's told of his wife's death. We're led to believe she committed suicide, unable to bear any longer the torments of her troubled conscience. The announcement of her death does not evoke a personal lamentation for the woman herself. Macbeth has barely two words to spare for her. Instead he moves into a more general meditation on the pointlessness of existence:

“She should have died hereafter; there would have been a time for such a word. Tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow, creeps in this petty pace from day to day to the last syllable of recorded time, and all our yesterdays have lighted fools the way to dusty death. Out, out, brief candle! Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player that struts and frets his hour upon the stage and then is heard no more. It is a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing.”

“Tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow.” The mere repetition of the word emphasizes the emptiness of the time remaining to the speaker. Macbeth offers a vision of every day we live having no more significance than any other in showing our way towards death. Dust to dust, life to death. Our brief candle of existence will be blown out all too soon, but do our flickering little lives even constitute a real illumination? Are we not, he suggests, are we not rather as insubstantial as walking shadows? At best, the actors playing out roles in someone else's script, the poor players who strut and fret their time upon the stage. And it's a pointless and meaningless script at that. Nothing more than a tale “told by an idiot, full of sound and fury signifying nothing.” For Macbeth, life has no meaningful consequences, no meaning at all, just as his kingship will have no issue, no succession.

I'm not sure, incidentally, that Shakespeare meant us to hear these words or read them and think of them as some kind of definitive summing up of the meaning of life, or at least the pessimistic meaning of life. Macbeth's language is enormously powerful, but the perspective he offers, at best grimly skeptical, at worst utterly nihilistic, is surely inflected by the particularity of his own experience. His own tale has come to signify nothing. Does this mean that everybody's story must end in the same way?

Macbeth, of course, must live to see what little he still thinks to rely upon—that is, the words of the apparitions, their prophecies, the only mantras he has left—to see these be torn asunder. And it will not be long now before he learns from Macduff that it is indeed possible for a man not to be born of a woman. Even as he reiterates to his enemy that none of woman born may kill Macbeth, Macduff declares, “Despair thy charm, and let the angel whom thou still hast served tell thee, Macduff was from his mother's womb untimely ripp'd.”

Macduff, officially a grown man, a warrior, in fact turns out to be the scariest child in the whole play: the man who was once a bloody babe, born through some primitive cesarean section, and presumably killing his mother in the process. And here's Macbeth's response, “Accursed be the tongue that tells me so, for it hath cow'd my better part of man! And be these juggling fiends no more believed that palter with us in a double sense, that keep the word of promise to our ear and break it to our hope.”

He severs all trust from the witches and their “juggling fiends” and declares that Macduff's tongue, with its unwelcome news, has cowed, has subdued, “my better part of man.” What does he mean exactly by “better part of man”? What, indeed, is the better part of his identity of a man? His manly courage, or something larger, his very soul?

But perhaps Macbeth lost his soul, the better part of his manhood, long ago, when he decided to accept that to be a real man meant ignoring the promptings of compassion and of conscience, and when he killed first a good old man, and then his best friend, and then Macduff's innocent wife and children. He is by now a ruthless, inhuman engine of destruction. Even knowing that he is doomed to die at Macduff's

hands, he refuses all thoughts of surrender and he exits fighting. “Before my body I throw my warlike shield. Lay on, Macduff and damn’d be him that first cries, ‘Hold, enough!’”

Our last glimpse of Macbeth is in fact very much in line with the way we first saw him, in the bleeding sergeant’s report of the battle against the Norwegian invaders in Act 1, scene 2. There, Macbeth was the loyal and ruthless fighting man, hacking people open from stem to stern, who was so praised for his valor. Lady Macbeth never had to look very far to find the set of values she got her husband to buy into with such disastrous results.

When we think of tragic drama, one of the things we may want to ask about the work we are reading is, does the play as a whole unfold a new or a larger vision of experience than that which is implicit in its particular imaginative universe at the beginning, or does it circle back to a reconfirmation of the value system that seemed to have been put into question at the start of its action. Do things change? Does some kind of metamorphosis of vision take place? Or is the apparently linear progression of the drama really a kind of regression?

I suggested in my previous lecture that Macduff’s insistence on feeling things “as a man” might suggest that an alternative discourse of manhood and of manly values might open up new possibilities in the world of this play. But at the same time, it could also be argued that the end of *Macbeth* returns to a more limited notion of “proper manhood.”

Poor Ross seems to have the particularly thankless task of reporting the deaths of people’s children in this play. Remember I talked last time about the hapless task he had of reporting to Macduff the slaughter of his family. As Malcolm’s forces celebrate their victory, Ross brings the news of the death of Young Siward, the son of the English general who is helping Malcolm. And Young Siward has died at Macbeth’s hands. This is the senior Siward’s laconic response: “Had he his hurts before?” That is, were all his wounds on the front—he didn’t get any on the back while running away from the enemy. “Ay, on the front,” says Ross. “Why then, God’s soldier be he! Had I as many sons as I have hairs, I would not wish them to a fairer death.” Siward is not interested in taking time to feel it as a man.

We might also note that the world we are in by the end of the play is one not only purged of the bad woman, Lady Macbeth, but also of the exemplary and more conventionally feminine, gentle, nurturing mother Lady Macduff that we see in just one brief scene before she’s slaughtered. And the two figures who are in charge of the new order are Macduff, who is now a childless widower, and also the man technically not of woman born, and Malcolm, who is unmarried and a virgin. He describes himself in Act 4, scene 3, as “yet unknown to woman.” What I’m suggesting is that the community that is recreated in the final scene is one made up of fighting men, from which all problematic femininity has been purged. The softer emotions which Macduff spoke to in Act 4 do not seem very present in our final glimpse of Macduff as he enters carrying the severed, bloody head of Macbeth.

So, have we returned to an even more exaggerated version of the warrior society and warrior values of the battle report of Act 1, scene 2, where Macbeth was characterized as “Bellona’s bridegroom”—that is, the husband of the goddess of war, Bellona? Has Macbeth now simply been replaced by a Macduff who is ready for more Macslaughter? Have things really been “planted new,” or has the wheel simply come full circle?

And I want to make a slight digression into the movies here. In the early ’70s, Roman Polanski made a film version of *Macbeth*. It was particularly notorious for the fact that, setting it in 10th century Scotland and thinking nobody had pajamas or nighties of that date, Lady Macbeth was made to do her sleepwalking scene in the nude. But, I’m not going to talk about that. I’m going to talk about something that Polanski does at the ending of the play.

Early on in Polanski’s film we meet Duncan’s sons, Malcolm and Donalbain and Donalbain hardly has any lines, but is, however, set apart visually by the fact that he walks with a marked limp. Anyway, we have the scene where the two princes decide to flee Scotland. Donalbain goes to Ireland. Malcolm seeks

refuge in England. And in Shakespeare's text, that would be the last we see of Donalbain. It's rather different in the Polanski film. The Polanski film does not end with Malcolm's speech of victory. It ends with a new vista, a mournful hillside in which we find the cave where the witches lurk. We don't see the witches, we simply see a figure climbing the hillside towards that cave; a figure with a very marked limp. That is, Polanski is suggesting that Malcolm's brother is now going to seek the aid of the witches in doing some violence himself. His movie, that is, is suggesting that the cycle of violence in Scotland will continue pretty indefinitely.

But that scene isn't in Shakespeare. He, characteristically, leaves the final verdict up to us.

Lecture Eighteen

Antony and Cleopatra I—Epic Desires

Scope:

The protagonists of *Antony and Cleopatra* are power brokers enmeshed in the complexities of imperial history. This lecture first describes the historical context in which the events of the play unfold (the heirs of Julius Caesar are fighting over the Roman Empire; Rome is threatened by internal and external enemies). The boundaries between public and private life have collapsed in this world—the personal is always the political, and Antony and Cleopatra's actions continually unfold before critical Roman eyes. Do the Romans live up to the ideals against which they measure the lovers? Do the lovers' actions match the speeches in which they mythologize and celebrate their passion? After exploring these questions, the lecture discusses the Romans' fascination with Cleopatra and Enobarbus's astonishing tribute to the Egyptian queen after the summit meeting between Antony and Octavius. It concludes by considering how the play's leisurely beginning nevertheless suggests darker things to come.

Outline

- I. Although *Antony and Cleopatra* is classified as a tragedy, it might also be read as an epic history, and it is important to know some of the historical context for its events.
 - A. The action takes place just before Republican Rome gives way to Imperial Rome; after the death of Julius Caesar, the empire is currently ruled by a triumvirate consisting of Marcus Antonius (Antony), Octavius (who will become Augustus Caesar), and Lepidus. Antony is a famous general; Octavius is a much younger man but a canny politician.
 - B. The Roman Empire is threatened by various forces, including the Parthians (attacking from Asia Minor) and the navy of Sextus Pompeius (Pompey), who is allied with Mediterranean pirates.
 - C. Antony has abandoned his Roman wife and is embroiled with Cleopatra, the queen of Egypt who had formerly been the lover of Julius Caesar.
 - D. Antony's relatives have raised forces against Octavius Caesar.
 - E. Caesar is urgently demanding that Antony return to his Roman duties.
- II. The play's first scene discloses the dynamics of the lovers' relationship and some Roman responses to their doings.
 - A. The scene is framed by the remarks of two minor characters who deplore Antony's dereliction of duty, his "dotage" on a woman they consider a strumpet, and his undoing of his heroic identity.
 - B. We see the collapsing together of public and private space as Antony and Cleopatra speak intimately in front of Caesar's messengers.
 - C. Antony refuses to read Octavius's messages, declares the supreme nobility of life to be his passion for Cleopatra, and invites the world to bear witness to the greatness of their love.
 - D. Antony celebrates Cleopatra's capriciousness and mutability in terms that set the keynote for her character.
 - E. We are invited to assess whether the Romans live up to the ideals against which they measure Antony and Cleopatra and whether the couple's love confirms the near-mythic account of it they offer.
- III. It becomes clear that Antony is torn between his Roman and Egyptian loyalties.
 - A. Antony resolves to return to Rome and describes the beguilements of Cleopatra as chains he must break.

- B. Although the play *explicitly* insists upon Cleopatra’s mutability, it offers us an Antony who is equally mutable.
 - C. Antony’s challenge throughout the play will be to balance his double identity as warrior and lover.
- IV. Our first sight of Octavius Caesar further complicates our sense of the personal and political tensions in the Roman Empire.
- A. Octavius denounces Antony’s sexual self-indulgence, his willingness to mingle with people of all ranks, and his failure to maintain a “manly” identity.
 - B. Octavius contrasts Antony’s valiant past with his current excesses; the play will continue to pursue the question of what constitutes proper and improper appetites.
 - C. Octavius’s coldness and priggishness and his dismissive treatment of Lepidus somewhat undercut his moralizing commentary.
- V. The Romans, for all their disapproval of Antony’s relations with Cleopatra, are fascinated by her.
- A. After Antony’s summit meeting with Octavius Caesar, Caesar’s aides press Antony’s sidekick, Enobarbus, for more details about the Egyptian queen.
 - B. The clear-sighted and unsentimental Enobarbus offers a lengthy description of the lovers’ first meeting that obliquely but powerfully conveys Cleopatra’s erotic powers.
 - C. The other Romans recall Cleopatra’s power over Julius Caesar.
 - D. Enobarbus declares that, even though Antony has agreed to marry Octavius’s sister, he can never abandon Cleopatra: her capacity to fulfill, then reawake desire is not to be denied.
- VI. The leisurely and meandering earlier scenes of the play create an atmosphere that does not necessarily suggest tragic drama.
- A. We have none of the claustrophobic atmosphere of *Hamlet* or the compression of the beginning of *Macbeth*.
 - B. The stage expands to encompass all of the Roman Empire.
 - C. The play must deal with the circumstantiality of history—Shakespeare is working from Plutarch’s treatment of Antony’s life.
 - D. The spaciousness of the early scenes also allows room for comedy, and the play seems to evoke multiple dramatic genres.
- VII. There are, however, hints of trouble to come.
- A. In the conversation between the soothsayer and Cleopatra’s attendants, the man’s equivocal answers offer darker glimpses of the future.
 - B. At the end of 2.3., Antony declares that although he has married Octavia for political reasons, his pleasure lies with Cleopatra.
 - C. This once more raises the question of how his desires in this matter can be reconciled to his self-claimed identity as “the firm Roman.”

Essential Reading:

Shakespeare, *Antony and Cleopatra*.

Supplementary Reading:

Sir Thomas North’s translation of Plutarch’s *Life of Antonius*, in *Narrative and Dramatic Sources of Shakespeare*, vol. 5, Geoffrey Bullough, ed., pp. 254–320.

Questions to Consider:

1. To what extent does the Cleopatra we actually see in the first two acts of this play bear out the description of her that Enobarbus offers in 2.2.?
2. What do you make of Cleopatra's treatment (or manipulation!) of Antony in the scene in which he announces his departure for Rome?

Lecture Eighteen

***Antony and Cleopatra* I—Epic Desires**

Antony and Cleopatra is classified as a tragedy, but because of its chronological and geographical sweep, its interest in empire building, and its concern with fame, reputation, and the construction of personal mythologies, it might equally well be read as a kind of epic history. And, like the classical epics of Homer and Virgil, it thrusts us emphatically into the middle of an already complicated story. So let's look at a bit of background.

We're on the threshold between republican Rome and imperial Rome. Octavius Caesar, one of the major characters in this play, will go on to become the emperor Augustus. The play opens a few years after the assassination of Julius Caesar in 44 B.C. The Roman Empire is currently ruled by a triumvirate: three men share power. Marcus Antonius, Antony, is a man in his 40s, a successful and charismatic general. He had defeated, at the Battle of Philippi, the assassins of Julius Caesar, the men who had feared that Caesar would take absolute power and that there would be no more Roman Republic. Octavius Caesar, Julius Caesar's nephew and official heir, is a chilly young man of 23, not exactly a party animal, but a very canny politician. Lepidus, the third triumvir, is a less impressive figure, all too conscious of being stuck between two dangerous, powerful men, and desperately trying to keep them from outright conflict.

The political situation is tense. The Roman Empire is under multiple threats. In Asia Minor, the Parthian Empire has risen against Rome. Closer to home we have Sextus Pompeius, referred to as Pompey in this play. He's the son of Pompey the Great, who was Julius Caesar's great political and military rival. Pompey the Great was defeated by Julius Caesar and killed at his orders. Pompey Junior, out for personal revenge, is in league with sea pirates, and his fleet controls the Mediterranean Sea. Meanwhile, Antony, the general on whom Rome relies, is embroiled with Cleopatra, queen of Egypt.

You should also note, incidentally, that Cleopatra, a woman in her late 30s, had not only been Julius Caesar's lover and had borne a child to him, but had also had an affair with Sextus Pompeius's older brother. People in this play are carrying around a lot of baggage. They're haunted by the events of recent history, and they inhabit a world where the personal is always the political.

Antony has abandoned his Roman duties and his Roman wife, Fulvia. He has remained in Egypt and has refused to answer Octavius's requests for military assistance. The disgruntled Fulvia, along with Antony's brother, has been doing her own dabbling in power politics. Those two have raised forces against Caesar, but Fulvia has recently died. And as the play opens, the news of all of these most recent developments reaches Antony.

The messages from Rome, however, never even get looked at in Act 1, scene 1. Shakespeare instead offers us a leisurely introduction to his two title characters in a scene which suggests above all the public and performative nature of their relationship. These people are always on stage, and this is emphasized in Act 1, scene 1 by the presence of an audience of Roman commentators on their affair. The remarks of the minor characters Philo and Demetrius frame Antony and Cleopatra's own speeches and actions. The scene begins with Philo's observations on Antony's passion for Cleopatra:

“Nay, but this dotage of our general's o'erflows the measure. Those his goodly eyes, that o'er the files and musters of the war have glow'd like plated Mars, now bend, now turn, the office and devotion of their view upon a tawny front. His captain's heart, which in the scuffles of great fights hath burst the buckles on his breast, reneges all temper and is become the bellows and the fan to cool a gipsy's lust.”

Philo's language is full of disgust for passions and appetites that seem to him out of control. His general's adoration for Cleopatra “o'erflows the measure,” goes beyond proper bounds, like a river in flood. Philo invites his companion to see what he perceives as the degeneration of Antony. He claims that the soldier who was like Mars in godlike valor is now doting on a mere woman and a brown-skinned foreigner at

that. He'll go on to say that one of the three pillars of the world, the triumvirs, has been transformed into a fool for love. "Behold and see," he says, as the lovers enter. So what do we see?

Well, we see Cleopatra and Antony enter in full flow of love talk; private and public space are collapsed together. "If it be love indeed, tell me how much," says Cleopatra. If you truly love me, tell me how much you love me. And Antony says, "There's beggary in the love that can be reckoned." He says a love that can be quantified is by definition only beggarly. My love by its very nature is greater than that, he's saying. "I'll set a bourn, how far to be beloved," says Cleopatra. I'll set a boundary or a limit on how much I am to be loved. "Then must thou needs find out new heaven, new earth." Mark Antony's romantic absolutism insists that his love transcends all measure. If she were to try to limit it, she'd have to find new worlds on which to chart it.

Antony, rapt in his own fantasies, seems to be emphatically uninterested in listening to the Roman messengers. "Let Rome in Tiber melt, and the wide arch of the ranged empire fall! Here is my space. Kingdoms are clay. Our dungy earth alike feeds beast as man; the nobleness of life is to do thus." And I think that's one of those internal stage directions that indicates he kisses her or embraces her at that point. "Is to do thus, when such a mutual pair and such a twain can do't, in which I bind, on pain of punishment, the world to weet we stand up peerless." Here is my space, all other kingdoms are just bits of dirt in comparison to this. The supreme nobleness of life is to embrace Cleopatra.

One's struck by the extravagant excessiveness, the hyperbole of his language. The rest of the world can go hang, Rome itself can dissolve into the river Tiber that runs through it, this is his universe. His emphasis on their peerlessness, they are super lovers, or there's a superb mutuality, owning the world to themselves is kind of an imperialism of the imagination. He invites "the world to weet," the world to bear witness, that he and his lover are without peer. It's telling that he demands the whole universe for an audience. This is an affair that is always being played out on the public stage. We hardly ever see our main characters absolutely alone on stage together, and the play offers almost no soliloquies. You should watch out for the rare occasions when people actually turn inward to interrogate their experience.

Now, there is of course a complete contrast between Philo's scathing opening judgment on Antony's actions and Antony's own construction of his actions, "the nobleness of life is to do thus."

It's the earliest sign of a perpetual verbal competition in the play between the way its chief characters articulate themselves and the way the Roman commentators represent them. We will have to choose whom to believe. Or perhaps, more significantly, we're going to have to assess what kind of gap there may be between speech and action in this play. Do the Romans, in fact, live up to the ideals they measure Antony and Cleopatra against? Do Antony and Cleopatra, in fact, embody in their actions the idealized version of their affair that they seem to want to speak into being?

In Act 1, scene 1, Antony doesn't only make their love a kind of empire apart, he also celebrates Cleopatra when she mockingly insists that he hear the messengers in terms that set the keynote for her character. "Fie, wrangling queen! whom every thing becomes, to chide, to laugh, to weep, whose every passion fully strives to make itself, in thee, fair and admired!"

She is the capricious teasing queen whose very action, however perverse, is somehow becoming, whatever she does. But even as Antony declares, "Here is my space," that same space is framed by the voices that insist that this is the space of transgression, a space of a betrayal of his own identity.

At the end of this opening scene, those onlookers, Demetrius and Philo, get the closing words. Demetrius asks, "Is Caesar with Antonius prized so slight?" He's responding to the fact that Antony would not see Octavius's messengers. And Philo replies, "Sir, sometimes, when he is not Antony, he comes too short of that great property which still should go with Antony." Philo's syntax is strikingly circular. He's saying even when Antony is not himself, he should still have the qualities of an Antony, but in Egypt Antony's self loss seems to a Roman onlooker to be drastic in its undoing of his greatness.

And just to make things even more complicated, the play almost immediately reveals a discontinuity within Antony himself between the man who says Rome can go hang, who articulates an absolute commitment to the emotional territory of his relationship with Cleopatra, and the Antony who is caught between two worlds. In Act 1, scene 1, he says to Cleopatra that he will hear “no messenger, but thine.” But Act 1, scene 2, shows him listening very carefully to the messengers from Rome. In Act 1, scene 1, he says, “Here is my space,” but in this next scene, he tells his friend and sidekick Enobarbus, “These strong Egyptian fetters I must break.” One moment he is making an absolute commitment of his own free will, to Cleopatra and Egypt. The next he is redefining the beguilements of Cleopatra and her Egypt as things outside himself that are impairing his will to action.

So, I’d suggest to you that if the play explicitly insists upon Cleopatra’s mutability, caprice, “infinite variety,” it implicitly offers us from the start an Antony who is, in his own way, equally mutable.

In the scene in which he tells Cleopatra he must return to Rome to deal with the political crisis unfolding there, he says he takes leave of her as her “soldier, servant”—that’s his phrase: both a warrior, and in service to his love, a lover. His dilemma throughout the play, of course, is how to balance that double identity.

In Act 1, scene 5, we see Cleopatra receiving letters from the absent Antony. Before they come she imagines him both as “the demi-Atlas of this earth,” that is, as a titanic mythical figure, but also her lover, a man who asks for his “serpent of old Nile,” who is still bound to Egypt. So there’s some irony when the letter itself has Antony speak of himself as “the firm Roman.” He invokes notions of Roman power, consistency, will to action, but others are much more reluctant to confirm Antony in any kind of stable identity as “the firm Roman.”

In our first encounter with young Octavius Caesar, we find him denouncing Antony’s behavior to the third of the triumvirs, Lepidus. Octavius describes Antony, interestingly, as his great competitor. He’s using the word competitor in its root sense, from the Latin *competere*, as somebody who is pursuing the same object as somebody else; fellow pursuer, as it were. Both of them, as members of the triumvirate, are officially looking out for the good of the empire. But the word of course has a more obvious meaning that is immediately suggestive. Caesar’s speech patterns are elitist and fastidious and he tends to speak of himself using the third person and the royal we. He criticizes Antony for his sexual self-indulgence, for his willingness to mingle with people of all ranks, for his failure to maintain a stable and hierarchical identity. He’s “not more man-like than Cleopatra,” Octavius says, and adds that the queen is not more womanly than Antony.

Lepidus is more sympathetic. He sees Antony as a superior being, whose faults are still outweighed by his virtues, but he’s promptly snubbed by Caesar. And indeed, one might contrast Caesar’s coldness with his co-triumvir with the warmth we see between Antony and his friend and comrade-in-arms Enobarbus, or even with Cleopatra’s lively banter with her ladies and her servants.

Caesar nostalgically recalls Antony’s valiant past as he stoically endured a forced march across brutal terrain in which he was obliged either to starve or eat horrible things to survive. And Caesar contrasts it with Antony’s current “luxurious [lascivious] wassails,” that is, his decadent feasting and drinking parties.

The imagery of proper and improper appetites runs throughout this play. When Pompey wishes that Cleopatra will keep Antony in Egypt, he hopes that she will “tie up the libertine in a field of feasts.” And when the Romans quiz Enobarbus later on about what went on in Egypt, they start by asking about the feasting there. Presumably Egyptian luxury and decadence is to be opposed to Roman ideals of moderation and temperance.

But we should also note that even if the Romans keep deploring Antony’s fascination with Cleopatra, many of them are nevertheless fascinated by her. In Act 2, scene 2, we have the summit meeting in which Antony, having returned to Rome, cuts a deal with Octavius Caesar. Now, I’m going to be looking closely

at the deals that are cut in that meeting in my next lecture. But for now, let's see what happens after the big guns have left the stage, and Caesar's aides and followers cluster around Enobarbus to press him for scandalous details about the goings-on in Egypt and for an account of Cleopatra herself.

This is a telling moment in the play, not least because it is Enobarbus who gets to give this version of Cleopatra. We have a potentially more objective voice to add to Antony and Cleopatra's self-mythologizing and self-promotion. We've already gathered that Enobarbus prides himself on his clear-sightedness and frank speaking. To get a handle on Enobarbus, you might imagine Lear's fool as a career army officer. Anyway, Enobarbus has a particular authority when he gives us his own perspective on Cleopatra, and what he does is describe the first time Antony saw Cleopatra, sitting in her boat on the Nile at the city of Cydnus:

"The barge she sat in, like a burnish'd throne, burn'd on the water. The poop was beaten gold, purple the sails, and so perfumed that the winds were lovesick with them. The oars were silver, which to the tune of flutes kept stroke and made the water which they beat to follow faster, as amorous of their strokes. For her own person, it beggar'd all description: she did lie in her pavilion—cloth of gold of tissue—o'er-picturing that Venus where we see the fancy outwork nature; on each side her stood pretty dimpled boys, like smiling Cupids, with divers-colour'd fans, whose wind did seem to glow the delicate cheeks which they did cool, and what they undid did."

And Enobarbus goes on with his description:

"Her gentlewomen, like the Nereides, so many mermaids, tended her i' the eyes, and made their bends adornings. At the helm a seeming mermaid steers. The silken tackle swell with the touches of those flower-soft hands, that yarely frame the office. From the barge a strange invisible perfume hits the sense of the adjacent wharfs. The city cast her people out upon her, and Antony, enthroned i' the market-place, did sit alone, whistling to the air; which, but for vacancy, had gone to gaze on Cleopatra too and made a gap in nature."

The effect is powerfully erotic, but it is an oddly decentered eroticism. We will hear, for example, that something desires the caresses of something else, but it turns out to be the water yearning for the repeated beating of the oars. Enobarbus never quite tells us what Cleopatra looks like: her person, her body and appearance, he said, "beggar'd all description," which echoes back to me to Antony's "there's beggary in the love that can be reckoned"—it's all about the indescribable. And she outdoes, says Enobarbus, any picture of Venus in which art triumphs over nature. But all these comparatives never come to rest with a strict definition of Cleopatra's beauty. What do we get instead that nevertheless creates this astonishingly beguiling picture in our minds? We are told about all the things that are contiguous with her, and everything becomes an aspect of her erotic power: the beauty of her little boy attendants, the flower-soft hands of the woman who is pretending to steer the boat, the invisible perfume that emanates from her barge and strikes the senses of those waiting on land. Cleopatra is the object of everyone's gaze. The city itself casts its people out upon her, to gaze upon her and to adore her. But at the same time she is also a kind of black hole in the middle of the picture, unspeakable, indescribable.

Agrippa responds to this, "Royal wench! She made great Caesar lay his sword to bed. He plough'd her, and she cropp'd." He gives the tribute to Cleopatra's past power over Julius Caesar, the sense of fertility defeating masculine force. She turns a sword into a ploughshare: "He plough'd her, and she cropp'd." And then Enobarbus offers this wonderful anticlimax to his description of her. "I saw her once hop forty paces through the public street and having lost her breath, she spoke and panted, so that she did make defect perfection and breathless, power breathe forth." She makes "defect perfection." There's a kind of paradox in this, that even when she's at her most unqueenly, her most unlikely, it's still an aspect of her perfection.

And then Caesar's friend Mecaenas recalls the deal that's just been cut between the power brokers, which involves Antony marrying Octavia, the sister of Octavius, and Mecaenas casually remarks, "Now Antony must leave her utterly." And Enobarbus responds, "Never; he will not. Age cannot wither her, nor custom stale her infinite variety. Other women cloy the appetites they feed, but she makes hungry where most she satisfies, for vilest things become themselves in her that the holy priests bless her when she is riggish."

That absolute negation—never, no, he won't—and the appetite issue returns. The way she infinitely feeds appetite through her infinite variety. She has the capacity to fulfill and reawake appetite without ever sating it. And then there's this infinite changeability of the woman. It's like enjoying a kind of polygamy in monogamy; to possess Cleopatra is to possess many women at the same time, perhaps a significant male fantasy.

Everything stops as Enobarbus offers his account of Cleopatra, and looking over the scenes of the play up to the middle of Act 2, one is struck by the idiosyncratic shape and rhythm of this drama, its leisurely meandering and amplitude that can take time out for a big set piece like that of Enobarbus. It feels very different from the claustrophobic atmosphere of *Hamlet*, or the compression of the beginning of *Macbeth*, or the swift movement towards irrevocable actions and decisions at the start of *King Lear*. The stage becomes coterminous with the whole Roman Empire. We have scenes in Rome, in Egypt, at the headquarters of Pompey and his pirates. There's no great sense of urgency disturbing the luxurious life in the Egyptian court, as we see in, for example, the leisurely scene with the soothsayer and the court ladies, or the gossipy byplay of the exchanges between Cleopatra and her attendants in Egypt as she awaits news of Antony.

Nor are there any major imperatives from the supernatural world, no ghosts or witches to trigger the action. And there's no Iago- or Edmund-like plotters manipulating the main characters. Antony is still torn between Egypt and Rome; he has not made any final fatal decision as Lear does in the very first scene of *his* drama.

We are dealing, of course, with the complexities of history as much as the starker design of tragedy. Shakespeare's source was Thomas North's translation of Plutarch's *Lives of the Noble Romans and Grecians* in which the action covered by this play actually took 10 years of historical time, although it appears to cover rather less time in Shakespeare's text. The spaciousness of the early scenes also allows room for comedy. We watch Cleopatra's complicated games with Antony. We hear Enobarbus's banter, the court ladies teasing each other, Cleopatra threatening to beat up Charmian for saying indiscreet things about her, well, lively past, and really beating up the messenger who brings news she doesn't want to hear. It's not only the characters whose identity is in flux; the play itself seems to want to be tragedy, epic history, and comedy simultaneously.

Which isn't to say that there aren't some suggestions of darker things to come. In Act 1, scene 2, Cleopatra's courtiers banter with the soothsayer, who offers some rather equivocal remarks. He tells Charmian, "You shall outlive the lady whom you serve." Charmian's not very impressed with this very vague prophesy. "O excellent! I love long life better than figs." The soothsayer continues, "You have seen and proved a fairer former fortune than that which is to approach." Charmian refuses to take him seriously. "Then belike my children shall have no names. Prithee, how many boys and wenches must I have?" "If every of your wishes had a womb and fertile every wish, a million," says the soothsayer, cryptically.

And of course we must also deal with the contradiction between Antony's newly allying himself with Caesar by way of his marriage to Octavia, Caesar's sister, and Enobarbus's absolute declaration that Antony will never be able to leave Cleopatra. And at the very end of Act 2, scene 3, we get the sudden demystification of Antony's own motives. That pesky soothsayer has shown up in Rome and suggested to Antony that Caesar will always be Antony's problematic and triumphant rival. Briefly left alone, Antony remarks, "though I make this marriage for my peace, In the east my pleasure lies," which, of course, raises again the question of the extent to which Antony is ever going to be able to enjoy both peace and

pleasure, and the question of how on earth his desires in this matter can be reconciled to his self-claimed identity as “the firm Roman.”

I shall be revisiting the rival claims of Egypt and Rome and the way Shakespeare both shapes and complicates the Egypt/Rome dichotomy in my next presentation.

Lecture Nineteen

***Antony and Cleopatra* II—Identity Politics**

Scope:

Antony and Cleopatra appears to be structured around a series of dualities mapped on the Rome/Egypt divide, dualities particularly embraced by the Roman characters. This lecture proposes that the stoic and martial Roman ideal that Antony is perpetually called upon to represent does not exist in tidy opposition to Egyptian flux and cunning. A close look at Shakespeare's treatment of shifty Roman power politics (and, in particular, Antony's marriage of convenience with Octavia) suggests that the dynamics of this world are rather less schematic. All of this complicates Antony's crisis of identity in this tragedy—caught between two worlds, he attempts to reconcile his notion of "Roman" honor with his "Egyptian" appetites. The lecture concludes with an analysis of Shakespeare's representation of the aftermath of the battle of Actium, focusing on Antony's attempt to recover a sense of his own heroic identity through the language of romantic absolutism.

Outline

- I.** This play seems to offer a vision of two very different worlds; their opposition is usually voiced by the Roman characters, for whom Egypt is a place of threatening otherness.
 - A.** Rome is a world ruled by men; Egypt is ruled by a woman. Rome is a place of fixed gender roles; in Egypt, the boundaries of these roles may be challenged.
 - B.** Rome insists on the individual's public duty to the state; Egypt offers a space for the pursuit of private desires.
 - C.** Rome prizes firmness and stable identities; Egypt is a place of flux and changeable identity.
 - D.** Rome prides itself on its power to conquer in war; Egypt conquers through enchanting seduction.
 - E.** The Romans regularly depict the appetites Egypt arouses and indulges as threats to Roman honor: Antony is berated for failing to behave as a stoic warrior in the service of the state.
- II.** Nevertheless, the play's action suggests some discrepancies between official Roman ideals and the reality of Roman power politics.
 - A.** From 2.1. to 3.7., we mainly see Roman men engaged in power politics; what we do not see, despite the various military threats to the empire, is any noble warfare.
 - B.** In the edgy confrontation between Caesar and Antony in 2.2., Antony, in effect, disowns Cleopatra and binds himself to Octavius through his marriage to Octavia. One scene later, he suggests that this is only a marriage of convenience.
 - C.** The negotiable nature of Roman honor is suggested by Pompey's response to his henchman's plan to assassinate the triumvirs: Pompey wishes the deed done without his knowledge but cannot risk his public reputation.
 - D.** Antony tells Octavia, "If I lose mine honor, I lose myself," when Caesar appears to have snubbed him, but after she departs for Rome to make peace between her husband and her brother, Antony returns to Cleopatra.
 - E.** We learn that despite the triumvirs' treaty with Pompey, he has been assassinated by an officer of Antony and that Caesar is in the process of removing Lepidus from the triumvirate.
 - F.** Caesar makes a good deal of political capital out of Antony's treatment of the exemplary Octavia.
 - G.** The Romans break their words, act in bad faith, and engage in sleazy power politics while insisting that *Egypt* is the alien and destabilizing focal point of subversive activity.

- III.** For all his dubious actions, Antony nevertheless seems to need constant public reaffirmation of his honor by the representatives of Rome.
- A.** He seems unable to embrace an identity that is distinct from his Roman one, despite his desire for Cleopatra.
 - B.** This affects his attempt to break with Rome and inflects his actions in the war against Octavius.
- IV.** The sea battle of Actium offers a striking example of Antony's internal conflict.
- A.** In engaging Octavius by sea, even though his land forces are stronger, Antony seeks to embrace a kind of heroic individualism independent of political and strategic considerations.
 - B.** But Antony the lover abandons the battle when Cleopatra's ship turns in flight.
 - C.** Antony's officers denounce his action as dishonorable and unmanly, as does Antony himself.
 - D.** But when he confronts Cleopatra, he speaks of his disastrous action in terms of his identity as her faithful lover and ultimately reasserts his commitment to their personal myth-making.
- V.** For all Antony's bravado, the historical-political focus of the play is narrowing to a confrontation between himself and Caesar, in which Antony still needs Rome to confirm his identity.
- A.** If Rome isn't going to confirm his identity by offering him a flattering mirror, then Antony must rely on Cleopatra to do so.
 - B.** Antony's self-division is still very much at issue as the play moves toward its close.

Essential Reading:

Shakespeare, *Antony and Cleopatra*.

Supplementary Reading:

Hirsh, "Rome and Egypt in *Antony and Cleopatra* and in Criticism of the Play," in *Antony and Cleopatra: New Critical Essays*, Sara Munson Deats, ed., chapter 6.

Questions to Consider:

1. The two scenes in Egypt in which Cleopatra speaks with the messenger who reports Antony's marriage to Octavia might equally well belong in a comedy. Why do you think Shakespeare chooses to embed these scenes within his depiction of Roman politics?
2. The Romans talk a lot about Egyptian feasting, but the one party scene we actually see takes place on Pompey's ship. What does it reveal about Antony, Octavius, Lepidus, and Pompey?

Lecture Nineteen

Antony and Cleopatra II—Identity Politics

Even before the summit meeting between Antony and Octavius in Act 2, scene 2, it has become clear that Antony is going to have to make a choice between Rome and Egypt. And it might be helpful to linger on the question of what it means to choose one over the other. The play seems to offer a vision of two very different worlds, and the Romans in particular are very keen on insisting on the absolute difference and the problematic otherness of Egypt. They regularly depict the appetites Egypt supposedly encourages and indulges as a threat to Roman honor. I'm going to start this lecture by offering an overview of some of the apparent oppositions between Rome and Egypt. I'm then going to try to complicate the picture a little bit. I'm going to ask whether the opposition between Rome and Egypt that Shakespeare shows us is as tidy and clear-cut as the one that his Roman characters insist upon.

Rome is a male world: it's ruled by men, and the only Roman woman we see, Octavia, is very much a pawn in state affairs. Egypt is ruled by a woman. We don't see Cleopatra interacting with powerful male advisors, but with her ladies-in-waiting. Men have to keep proving and affirming their Romanness. Cleopatra simply *is* Egypt. The noun becomes interchangeable with her name. Antony addresses her at one point as "great Egypt." The suggestion here is that there's simply less of a separation between public and private worlds in Egypt—continuity between your private and public identity. Rome is a place of fixed gender roles. In Egypt things are more fluid. Cleopatra, as a female ruler, is fulfilling what the Roman's would consider a man's job. Just before the sea battle of Actium in Act 3, she tells Enobarbus, who really wants her out of the war meeting, that "as president of my kingdom"—that is, as the person who presides over a kingdom—"as president of my kingdom I will appear there for a man"—as if she were a man. Earlier in the play, moreover, she describes sex games in which she dressed a drunken Antony in her garments while she borrowed his sword. "I drunk him to his bed," she says. "Then put my tires and mantles on him, whilst I wore his sword Philippan."

Rome insists on the individual's public duty to the state. Egypt offers a space for the pursuit of private desires. Rome demands self-sacrifice. Egypt affords the possibility of the satisfaction of personal appetites. Rome prizes stable identities and firmness; Antony, you'll remember, characterizes himself as "the firm Roman." Egypt is a place of flux, changeable identity, "infinite variety." The Romans speak the language of control, of keeping things within limits. For them, Egypt is a space of excess, starting with its geography and the regularly overflowing Nile River; the very fertility of Egypt is dependent on the floods that annually irrigate the Nile Delta. You need things to overflow in Egypt. Rome prides itself on its power to conquer in war. Egypt conquers through enchantment, through almost magical seductions.

Now Antony, of course, has been berated throughout Act 1 for failing to behave like the exemplary Roman warrior he once seemed to be: the faithful warrior in the service of the state, the Mars figure, the stoic soldier in control of his appetites.

But let us pause here and start to think about what Romans actually look like in this play, thinking more carefully about what they actually do in its action, as well as the way they characterize their doings.

From Act 2, scene 1 up to Act 3, scene 7, when we finally see Antony and Cleopatra together again, we get to see Roman men going about their business, with only two interruptions—the scenes in which Cleopatra interrogates the unfortunate messenger who has to bring her the news of Antony's marriage to Octavia.

What we strikingly do *not* see in those scenes, despite the various military threats to the empire, is any noble warfare, and least of all do we see Antony actually fighting. What we *do* see is politics as usual, some very shady maneuvering, and the cutting of some extremely suspicious deals.

I would like to suggest to you that although a certain ideal of Rome and of proper Roman behavior is quite pervasive in the rhetoric of the Roman men, the play's action suggests certain discrepancies between the Roman ideal and the reality of Roman power politics.

I want to start by looking at Act 2, scene 2's summit meeting between Caesar and Antony. It's an edgy confrontation from the start. The two men enter busily conversing with their aides and trying to ignore one another. At first they can barely acknowledge one another. Octavius finally accuses Antony of failing to do his duty as a member of the triumvirate and, in particular, of breaking his oaths of alliance while he was carousing in Egypt; and Antony responds violently to Caesar's words: "The honour is sacred which he talks on now." He finally declares that if he neglected his responsibilities it was "when poison'd hours had bound me up from mine own knowledge."

"When poison'd hours had bound me up from mine own knowledge"; it's a very carefully qualified apology. Those poisoned, tainted hours—drunken hours, perhaps—somehow held him captive, prevented him from knowing himself or knowing his proper course of action. The syntax he uses mystifies his agency. It's the poisoned hours that are acting on the man, and he carefully does not name Cleopatra. He doesn't say anything as obvious as "My intoxicated pleasure in Cleopatra's charms distracted me from my Roman duties." But Cleopatra, even if she is not named at this point by Antony, is hugely present in this meeting, even if no one quite wants to talk about her, at least not until Antony and Octavius have left the stage.

As soon as Antony makes this very small concession, Caesar's aides leap in with a suggestion for a new alliance between the two leaders based on a marriage between Antony, who is now a widower after the death of his Roman wife Fulvia, and Octavius's beloved sister Octavia. And when Caesar finally introduces the name of Cleopatra into the conversation, as if to suggest Antony is not exactly a widower, Antony again, in effect, disowns Cleopatra, again without naming her. He says, "I am not married, Caesar."

The whole exchange smells of a setup job. And you might notice the behavior of the two men. Antony, whom we had last seen in Egypt swearing faith and loyalty to Cleopatra, seems to erase her from the picture. At the same time, Caesar is prepared to sacrifice his sister Octavia, even though it gradually becomes clear that he loves her dearly, to a man he doesn't really trust and whom he has previously described as drunken and promiscuous. Is this Roman honor? Antony's marriage to Octavia is supposed to bind the men together as kinsmen as well as fellow political leaders, but one scene later Antony is saying, "Though I make this marriage for my peace, in the east my pleasure lies." And his remark is echoed by the talkative Enobarbus, at another summit meeting, this time between the triumvirs and the rebellious Pompey and his piratical allies. Menas the pirate, Pompey's second-in-command, is left alone on stage with Enobarbus, and Menas remarks, "We looked not for Mark Antony here. Pray you, is he married to Cleopatra?"

Enobarbus explains that Antony is now married to Octavia. And Menas says, blandly, "Then is Caesar and he for ever knit together." But Enobarbus contradicts him, "If I were bound to divine of this unity, I would not prophesy so." And Menas picks up on his tone and says, "I think the policy of that purpose made more in the marriage than the love of the parties." He posits that surely a political agenda to secure new unity between Caesar and Antony must be the main driving force behind this marriage, not love between Antony and Octavia. Enobarbus remarks, "I think so too, but you shall find the band that seems to tie their friendship together will be the very strangler of their amity. Octavia is of a holy, cold, and still conversation."

By *conversation* he here means *nature, temperament*. He's saying that Octavia is naturally virtuous, spiritually minded, modestly silent, and chaste. Menas says, "Who would not have his wife so?" Enobarbus says, "Not he that himself is not so; which is Mark Antony. He will to his Egyptian dish again"—that image of something to feast upon. He means Cleopatra, of course, but summoning up the appetites that Egypt satisfies.

Enobarbus offers us a very frank analysis here. He will also note that Antony, as he said “married but his occasion here.” That is, he acted to suit the moment and married out of self-interest. But it’s a double-edged act of security. He has already imagined Octavia, who is supposed to bind them together, strangling their friendship. For, if Antony abuses or insults Octavia, Caesar is sure to take revenge. It has indeed occurred to me, when I’m feeling most skeptical about Octavius’s motives as represented by Shakespeare here, that perhaps Caesar is hoping for Antony to act badly towards Octavia in a way that will allow him to break with Antony once and for all.

All right, let us recall that during the summit meeting, Antony responded violently to the accusation that he had broken his promises to Caesar. He said that Caesar was casting aspersions on his sacred honor. Let’s think a little more about the business of honor and about keeping one’s oaths. Antony is desperately sensitive to any accusation that he behaved dishonorably. And yet his sense of honor doesn’t preclude him from contemplating returning to Egypt almost as soon as he has agreed to become Caesar’s brother-in-law. I’d suggest to you that “honor” is a term that is up for grabs in this drama, that is always under negotiation and often interrogated by the play’s action. It tends to be invoked as if it is an absolute and stable value, but it turns out to be much more fluid than one would expect.

We can see this at the banquet to celebrate the treaty between the triumvirs and Pompey on board Pompey’s ship in Act 2, scene 7. People are starting to get pretty wasted. Lepidus is drunkenly interrogating Antony on the nature of Egyptian crocodiles. At this juncture, Menas pulls Pompey aside and points out he’s got the rulers of the world, the triumvirs, all on board his galley, and they have almost no followers with them. What if Menas were to give the order to set sail, and then, when the triumvirs had nowhere to run to, turn his men upon them and kill all three? This is Pompey’s response:

“Ah, this thou shouldst have done and not have spoke on’t! In me ’tis villainy; in thee’t had been good service. Thou must know, ’tis not my profit that does lead mine honour. Mine honour, it. Repent that e’er thy tongue hath so betray’d thine act. Being done unknown, I should have found it afterwards well done, but must condemn it now. Desist, and drink.”

It’s not that Pompey is not attracted by Menas’s ruthless suggestion. If it were “done unknown,” if it had been carried out without my knowing about it in advance, he says, I would have afterwards found it well done. It’s not that he wouldn’t like to get rid of the triumvirate, but he cannot deal with the idea of being thought complicit in their murder; he needs to have the public reputation of honor. And of course he’s suggesting a nasty relativity of moral value here: if you, Menas, the rather scuzzy pirate, did it alone, it would be good service to me. If I had been involved in it, it would be considered villainy. Like Macbeth, Pompey wants to enjoy the results of a dubious deed without having actual knowledge of the deed.

“If I lose mine honor, I lose myself,” Antony will later say to his new wife, Octavia. In context he’s talking about several actions of Caesar’s that seem to have slighted him; his whole sense of self is tied up with his public reputation and identity.

He permits Octavia to go to Octavius to attempt to make peace between the two men, but we don’t exactly feel hopeful on her behalf. Almost immediately afterwards, a conversation between Enobarbus and Antony’s personal body servant, Eros, discloses that Caesar and Lepidus have made new wars on Pompey (so much for the treaty), and that an officer of Antony has assassinated Pompey, and that Caesar is in the process of removing Lepidus from the triumvirate. The ground is being cleared of other possible contenders for power, leaving only Antony and Octavius confronting one another.

When Enobarbus learns of Lepidus’s fall, he makes a very suggestive remark, “Then, world, thou hast a pair of chops, no more; And throw between them all the food thou hast, They’ll grind the one the other.” The word *chops* (sometimes printed as *chaps*), means “jaws” here. Enobarbus envisions the two remaining powerbrokers as a hungry pair of mandibles, and all the dead bodies in the world will not stop them ultimately grinding against one another. And, of course, since the next scene brings us the news that Antony has returned to Cleopatra in Egypt, that kind of confrontation looks more and more inevitable.

So what do we have here? Antony marrying in bad faith. The triumvirs making a treaty with Pompey in bad faith and eventually disposing of him. Caesar getting rid of Lepidus. Antony sending Octavia back to Caesar, ostensibly as peacemaker and then himself returning to Cleopatra and publicly opposing himself to Caesar in alliance with Cleopatra. And, of course, Caesar publicly welcoming back his abandoned sister in such a way as to extract the maximum PR profit from the situation. Poor Octavia doesn't even know until her arrival in Rome that her husband has returned to Cleopatra, but the Romans now have plenty of righteous anger on her behalf and plenty of good propaganda at Antony's treatment of the exemplary and virtuous Octavia. Caesar's aide, Mecaenas, says, "Each heart in Rome does love and pity you. Only the adulterous Antony...turns you off, and gives his potent regiment to a trull." Antony has given his power and his rule, his regiment, over to a whore; that's the view from Rome.

But while the Romans are blasting Antony for various kinds of faithlessness, nobody in the Roman Empire keeps faith. The notion of the firm Roman, true to his word, seems to be alien to the lot of them. So perhaps those nice tidy dualities regarding Rome versus Egypt that I mapped out at the start of the lecture aren't so tidy after all. If Roman actions can encompass so flexibly such a lot of hypocrisy, self-deception, double-dealing and oath breaking, and the worst kind of politics as usual, then how authoritative is Rome's insistence that it's Egypt that is the problematic and alien and destabilizing focal point of otherness and subversion?

Mind you, we're still left with Antony's distinctly question-begging assertion, "If I lose mine honour, I lose myself." Given that he seems so emphatically to need the constant public reaffirmation of his honor by the representatives of Rome, can he ever completely embrace an identity that is distinct from his Roman one, however much he seems to desire Cleopatra, however much he is drawn to whatever the Egyptian experience represents, however little he wishes to share power with Caesar? Can Antony do without Rome?

I'd like to turn now to look at just how Antony asserts his identity and how that identity is reconstructed by various onlookers in the scenes before and after the watershed moment of the battle of Actium, which took place in 31 B.C., in Act 3. Antony's success or failure in this encounter with Caesar's forces will determine his fate. We learn that he is preparing to meet Octavius by sea, even though his land forces are stronger than his navy, simply because he has been dared to do so. We also learn he's challenged Caesar to single combat. It's as if Antony wants, above all, to enact a kind of heroic individualism, independent of political and strategic considerations. There is, of course, no way in the world that the cautious Octavius would ever let the outcome of this struggle rest on a one-on-one fight. It's perhaps part of his tragedy that Antony wants to play this role from a more heroic past in the middle of a situation in which what he needs is to be an icily cool politician.

But Antony is also still the lover of Cleopatra. He's still the soldier-servant he described himself as being just before he left Egypt in Act 1. And his double identity becomes of critical significance when Cleopatra panics and takes flight at Actium and orders her ship to leave the battle, and he abandons the battle to go after her ship. Antony's soldiers and officers offer a passionate denunciation of his actions: "We have kiss'd away kingdoms and provinces."

Cleopatra's flight at just the wrong moment is compared to the crazy running around of a cow maddened by a biting fly. Antony is described by his soldiers as the "noble ruin of her magic." But they also describe him as a "doting mallard," a besotted duck flying after his mate. Scarus concludes, "I never saw an action of such shame. Experience, manhood, honour, ne'er before did violate so itself."

From his point of view, Antony has utterly undone his proper identity by behaving as the doting lover, not the general. Antony himself echoes this in the next scene. "I have lost my way for ever," he says. "I have fled myself," he says. "I follow'd that I blush to look upon," he says. "I have lost command."

But when he actually confronts Cleopatra, he also offers a romantic revision of this, "Egypt, thou knew'st too well my heart was to thy rudder tied by the strings and thou shouldst tow me after. O'er my spirit thy

full supremacy thou knew'st, and that thy beck might from the bidding of the gods command me." He insists that the debacle is Cleopatra's responsibility. She knew the power she held over him. The implication is that it is she who is to blame for not using her power wisely. Antony continues:

"Now I must to the young man send humble treaties, dodge and palter in the shifts of lowness; who with half the bulk o' the world play'd as I pleased, making and marring fortunes. You did know how much you were my conqueror and that my sword, made weak by my affection, would obey it on all cause."

He is inordinately self-conscious of how far he has fallen from somebody who was one of the two rulers of the known world, who could enact any caprice he wished, but who must now try to save himself by cutting a deal with a man half his age from a position of desperate disadvantage. He is blaming her for his plight, invoking the manly weapon overpowered by his affection for her. My sword was overpowered by my affection for you, but you should have known this and you should have acted properly.

But what happens next? Cleopatra weeps and Antony responds, "Fall not a tear, I say; one of them rates all that is won and lost. Give me a kiss; even this repays me." Just one kiss from you repays me for all that I have suffered and am suffering. He has returned to the language of romantic absolutism of the beginning of the play, when he said, "The nobleness of life is to do thus." He declares a feast; he seeks also to re-embrace a version of Egypt as the place of revelry. And he concludes with a language of heroic individualism once more, challenging Fortune: "Fortune knows we scorn her most when most she offers blows."

But for all Antony's bravado, the historical-political focus of the play is narrowing to the confrontation between the cool, politically savvy, self-controlled Caesar and the Antony who has shown himself to be increasingly aware of the gap between his former identity and his current dire straits. Is Antony's heroic performance art going to suffice in this situation? He had once said, "Let Rome in Tiber melt"; but he *needs* Rome to confirm his identity, and Rome, at this point, isn't going to oblige. Caesar *isn't* going to accept his renewed invitation to single combat. And Caesar won't reflect back to him the image of himself that he wants to see. No way.

If Rome isn't going to confirm his identity by offering him a flattering mirror, then Antony must rely on Cleopatra to do so. Whether she responds to his needs, and who gets, in the end, to write both Antony and Cleopatra into the record—these are matters I'll be taking up in my next lecture.

Lecture Twenty

Antony and Cleopatra III—The Art of Dying

Scope:

This lecture continues to discuss the staging of identity in *Antony and Cleopatra*, focusing upon the protagonists' highly performative suicides—and the way that Cleopatra takes charge of their “poetic afterlife.” It addresses the ironies that complicate Antony’s bungled attempt to die a stoic Roman death and examines Cleopatra’s resurrection of the “heroic Antony” in the eulogy she delivers for her lover.

Cleopatra is horrified at the prospect of being led in triumph by Octavius and insists upon controlling her own fate. She stages her death as a reprise of her first encounter with Antony at Cydnus, and the lecture concludes by exploring the transformative language through which Cleopatra shapes her end, offering some thoughts on the unresolved tension between her role in the *history* of Antony and Cleopatra and her seizure of the authorship (so to speak) of their *tragedy*.

Outline

- I. Antony and Cleopatra constantly acquire new identities: they are redefined and renamed both by themselves and by other characters in the play.
 - A. Cleopatra takes her metamorphoses for granted and revels in them.
 - B. Antony is much more invested in the notion that he has one stable identity—an identity that should be conferred upon him by the praise and admiration of others.
- II. The scene in which Cleopatra seems to be negotiating with Caesar’s emissary, Thidias, triggers another identity crisis for Antony.
 - A. Cleopatra seems to embrace Octavius in the person of his messenger.
 - B. Octavius and Cleopatra both seem to reflect back to Antony images of himself that diminish him.
 - C. When he rages, “I am Antony yet!” he begs the question of whether Antony is the Roman general, Cleopatra’s lover, or a man caught between two worlds.
 - D. Antony’s identity will continue to be “under construction” for the rest of the play.
- III. In *Antony and Cleopatra*, speech is as important as action—it is, indeed, a kind of action.
 - A. Language is the medium through which characters create their own mythologies of themselves and other people.
 - B. Cleopatra does not persuade Antony of her continuing love by any proof positive that she has not cut a deal with Octavius but by the extremity of her language as she asserts her faith.
 - C. Even as the events of history move toward Caesar’s victory, Shakespeare explores the linguistic events in which Antony seeks to control his heroic identity.
- IV. When Antony faces final defeat, he is haunted again by the specter of self-loss.
 - A. Thinking Cleopatra has ordered the defection of her fleet to Octavius, he compares his visible and public identity to the shifting and evanescent shapes of moving clouds.
 - B. Unlike other tragic heroes, however, his thoughts do not move from the particular to the general: his attention is wholly directed toward his own crisis of identity.
 - C. Believing that Cleopatra has committed suicide, Antony feels that the only noble self-defining action left is to join her. He finally seeks to resolve the division within himself, declaring that it is Antony, not Caesar, who has triumphed over Antony.

- V. Antony's suicide is an awkward affair; nevertheless, after his death, Antony is re-created as supremely heroic in the language of others.
 - A. Enobarbus, who has defected from Antony's service, testifies to his noble generosity as he himself dies.
 - B. Caesar delivers a striking (if self-interested) tribute to Antony on hearing of his death.
 - C. Cleopatra eulogizes him as an imperial and godlike figure: he becomes her sublime creation.
- VI. Caesar's plan to lead Cleopatra in triumph through Rome assaults Cleopatra's sense of self.
 - A. She is unable to bear the idea that her "infinite variety" will be replaced by a new and fixed identity as Caesar's prisoner and puppet.
 - B. She is horrified at the idea of her story being mocked in the performances of the Roman actors.
- VII. Cleopatra determines to die "after the high Roman fashion" but translates this act into Egyptian terms, taking command of her last performance as she applies the asp to her breast.
 - A. She clothes herself as if for her first encounter with Antony at Cydnus, reenacting the event that Enobarbus had described in 2.2.
 - B. She longs for immortality in death and suggests that she and Antony will be married in death as they never were in life.
 - C. She greets death as her final lover, whose pain is eroticized into pleasure.
 - D. She celebrates her strategic triumph over Caesar, who will be thwarted of his victory parade.
 - E. Her language (and that of her attendants) gives her multiple new identities up to and beyond the very moment of her death: she is self-transforming to the last.
- VIII. The final scenes of *Antony and Cleopatra* describe different and simultaneous victories.
 - A. Octavius survives to take over the Roman Empire and marches into history.
 - B. Antony and Cleopatra speak themselves into legend.
 - C. Cleopatra becomes the final witness to the couple's experience and authors their tragedy—a tragedy that may part company entirely from the messy and complicated *history* of Antony and Cleopatra.

Essential Reading:

Shakespeare, *Antony and Cleopatra*.

Supplementary Reading:

Kahn, *Roman Shakespeare: Warriors, Wounds and Women*, chapter 5.

Questions to Consider:

1. Cleopatra and Octavius meet for the first and only time in Act 5. What are their agendas in the scene in which they confront each other, and does the behavior of either one of them hold any surprises?
2. Are Antony and Cleopatra indeed "tragic protagonists"—or does it make more sense to consider them as figures in a history play?

Lecture Twenty

Antony and Cleopatra III—The Art of Dying

Throughout this play, Antony and Cleopatra are always being called names. Almost every scene in *Antony and Cleopatra* generates new titles for Cleopatra. She's called gypsy, whore, strumpet, vile lady, grave charm, royal wench, a morsel for a monarch, boggler, salt Cleopatra. She is great fairy, nightingale, serpent of old Nile, Egyptian dish. She is, furthermore, most sovereign creature, great Egypt, eastern star, day o' the world, lass unparalleled, and finally, in Charmian's dying words, "a princess descended of so many royal kings." She's the heroine with a thousand faces. People are always trying to contain her under one label or another, and she's always eluding them.

Antony also attracts a multiplicity of conflicting epithets: triple pillar of the world, strumpet's fool, firm Roman, the ne'er-lust-wearied Antony, mine of bounty, Herculean Roman, a doting mallard, the adulterous Antony, old ruffian, noblest of men.

But although speakers in the play confer upon both characters any number of different and conflicting identities, the attitudes displayed by Antony and Cleopatra towards their own flux of identity are quite different. Cleopatra takes her metamorphoses for granted, but Antony is always much more invested in the notion that he has one stable identity, and one that should be conferred upon him by the praise and admiration of others.

After he wins the sea battle of Actium, Caesar refuses to deal directly with Antony as an equal, and refuses to make any kind of peace that doesn't involve Cleopatra handing over Antony to him. He also sends his messenger Thidias [Thyreus] to attempt to win her away from Antony.

Cleopatra's intentions as she toys with the messenger are not entirely clear. We don't at any point see her reflecting alone about the choices she may have. I have noted before the striking lack of soliloquizing by the main characters of this play. Is she playing along with Caesar's envoy to find out more about his intentions, or is she indeed on the point of betraying Antony?

Whatever her aims, Antony enters in time to see the young man—the emissary of an enemy, an enemy he also considers a mere boy—kissing his lover's hand, which is a moment of utter horror for Antony. Rome is no longer affirming his identity as heroic warrior, and it seems that Cleopatra is no longer affirming his identity as her heroic lover. It is as if she is embracing, in the person of his messenger, the youthful Octavius, the boy who is denying him his proper due and who won't meet him man to man. Octavius and Cleopatra both now seem to be reflecting back to Antony images of himself that diminish him, undo his manhood, render him impotent. "I am Antony yet," he rages—that is, I am Antony still—a statement, of course, which begs the question of who is Antony: the Roman general, Cleopatra's lover, the exemplary firm stoic Roman warrior, or the man caught between two worlds? For the rest of the play, Antony's identity is perpetually being rearticulated and renegotiated.

He vents his anger by whipping Caesar's messenger, but we should note Caesar's response to Antony's actions. He's not in a world of heroic individualistic self-affirmation. Caesar doesn't feel diminished by the act. He views it as a reflection of Antony's increased desperation and dismisses him as an "old ruffian."

This is a play where speech is as important as action. In fact, it's a kind of action. Language is the medium by which characters create their own mythologies of themselves and of other people. The events of history unfold relentlessly to the destined end in which Caesar will triumph and possess Rome and its empire and become the first emperor, Augustus. But Shakespeare seems just as interested in exploring the linguistic events, in which Antony seeks to control his heroic identity to the last.

Antony and Cleopatra are perpetually striving to reinvent themselves, to define themselves linguistically. Their language takes on a life of its own. At the end of the Thidias episode, Cleopatra persuades Antony of her continuing love, not by any proof positive that she would never dream of playing false with him,

but through the extremity, the extravagance, the hyperbole of her language as she says, over the course of quite a few lines, may everything I love in Egypt perish in some kind of natural apocalypse if I am false to you. Her vision of a future Egypt in which her progeny and her people “Lie graveless, till the flies and gnats of Nile have buried them for prey” is poetically astonishing, but ultimately beside the point. And yet it suffices for Antony. “I am satisfied,” he says.

In the scenes that follow, Antony does reclaim to some extent his identity and reputation as the generous, charismatic leader of men. We see this in the speeches to his attendants at his last feast, when we see him saluting each servant personally. We see it in the personal praise and encouragement he offers his troops, and we see it most strikingly in the generosity of his response to the news of Enobarbus’s defection to the enemy. He doesn’t curse his friend. He sends Enobarbus’s personal hoard of booty after him to Caesar’s camp, and he orders that a letter be sent with the treasure, saying he wishes Enobarbus will never have cause again “to change a master.”

But when he faces final defeat, Antony is haunted again by a nightmare of self-loss. His fleet has gone over to Caesar, he thinks at the command of Cleopatra. Shakespeare’s source, the classical historian Plutarch, does not make it clear whether this was, in fact, the case, only that Antony thought it to be so. Shakespeare has Cleopatra say nothing of it, nor does her flight to her own monument suggest she’s already struck a deal with Octavius. What’s dramatically important here is simply that Antony believes it to be so.

So Antony is alone with his personal servant—his servant who’s called Eros, which was a historical fact, but seems a very suggestive coincidence, given that Eros is in some sense presiding over proceedings here. And Antony muses, “Sometimes we see a cloud that’s dragonish; a vapour sometime like a bear or lion; a tower’d citadel; a pendent rock.”

And he describes to his servant the way in which the cloud shapes dissolve into new forms and the shape that seemed so clear before becomes “indistinct, as water is in water.” Then Antony asserts:

“My good knave Eros, now thy captain is even such a body. Here I am Antony, yet cannot hold this visible shape, my knave. I made these wars for Egypt and the queen—whose heart I thought I had, for she had mine...—she, Eros, has pack’d cards with Caesar, and false-play’d my glory unto an enemy’s triumph.”

I cannot hold this visible shape. It seems significant that Antony’s meditation on his loss of a fixed identity is also about a *visible* identity, one constructed by other people’s eyes. I made these wars for Egypt, but she’s deceived me, abandoned me for Caesar. I’m nothing. I can hold no stable identity any longer. I must diffuse, as those cloud shapes.

One of the things we have already seen in our explorations of Shakespearean tragedy is that even in the extremity of the situation of the tragic protagonist, his thoughts will tend to move from the particularity of his situation to general reflections on the human condition. Hamlet declared, “There’s a special providence in the fall of a sparrow. If it be now, ’tis not to come; if it be not to come, it will be now; if it be not now, yet it will come; the readiness is all.” Lear told Gloucester:

“Thou must be patient; we came crying hither. Thou know’st, the first time that we smell the air, we wail and cry.” Macbeth insisted, “Life’s but a walking shadow, a poor player that struts and frets his hour upon the stage and then is heard no more. It is a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing.”

Now this scene in *Antony and Cleopatra*, with its slow, reflective beginning, suggests that such a moment is at hand, but, tellingly, Antony’s thoughts do not move to the general. He does not, for example, use the mutating cloud shapes to suggest the changeable nature of experience as a whole, the flux and chaos of the human condition. His attention is wholly on the particularity of his own identity crisis. There’s a kind of cosmic narcissism about the chief characters of this play.

When Cleopatra, fearing Antony's wrath, has her attendant misleadingly report her death at her own hands, Antony feels the only noble self-defining action left is to join her in death. "The long day's task is done and we must sleep." But he doesn't only want to die as Cleopatra's faithful lover; he also wishes to die a Roman death.

Now, the Romans—unlike, for example, 16th-century Christian Europeans like Shakespeare—had no cultural prejudice against suicide. And for those in particular who were devotees of the Stoic philosophers, the notion of taking the ultimate control of one's own destiny when life had become intolerable or when one was faced with degradation at the hands of others, this was entirely acceptable, even noble. And this is the kind of control that Antony desires. But he is not allowed to die completely on his own terms. His servant Eros outdoes him, by carrying out his own death using the sword with which he's been asked to help his lord to die. And after Eros has fallen and Antony attempts to finish his life, he is unable to give himself a clean death. He only wounds himself mortally. And when he begs his soldiers to finish him off, they refuse, they can't bear to do so, and one of them even steals his sword and carries it to Caesar, in the hope of earning himself some mercy.

There's some irony here. In a play where the Roman men are always talking about how Cleopatra robs men of their swords, how she undoes their martial valor and virility, it's actually a Roman *man* who finally takes Antony's sword away from him.

When Antony, near death, is finally reunited with Cleopatra in the monument where she's taken refuge, his last move of self-assertion seeks to resolve the division within himself. I am not dying basely, he says. I'm not putting down my arms in the face of the enemy. "Not Caesar's valour hath o'erthrown Antony, but Antony's hath triumph'd on itself." And he finally declares himself to be "a Roman by a Roman valiantly vanquish'd."

It feels rather like a variation on a theme we've seen in *Othello*, in which the noble Othello disposed of the ignoble Othello in the very act of killing himself. So we might want to ask, Is this the Roman Antony killing off the Antony who turned against Rome, killing off the Antony who failed to be wholly Roman?

One thing is clear: If the messy physicality of staging a valiant suicide is less than elegantly managed by Antony, he will go on to fare better after his death in the language of others. Cleopatra's response to his passing insists on the cosmic resonance of his departure: "The crown o' the earth doth melt. My lord! O wither'd is the garland of the war; the soldier's pole is fall'n; young boys and girls are level now with men; the odds is gone; and there is nothing left remarkable beneath the visiting moon."

Everything has been leveled, everything noble has fallen, nothing stands out as worthy of remark beneath the gaze of the circling moon, now Antony is dead. The world is void of anything wonderful now that he is gone.

Her speech begins a dramatic progression by which Antony in the later stages of the play is repeatedly recreated as supremely heroic in the language of others. The further we move from the disorderly reality of his last hours, the more superhuman he becomes. It's a process which actually begins even before his death, with the words of Enobarbus—Enobarbus, who abandons Antony for very pragmatic reasons, foreseeing his defeat, but who is himself defeated by Antony's generosity and dies with Antony's name on his lips.

Even Caesar, on hearing of Antony's death, no longer speaks of the "old ruffian" but of a lost hero, who is brother, competitor, mate in empire, but, he also adds, somebody who was too close, somebody whom it was necessary to subtract from the universe in order that Caesar might come into full being as Caesar. He says, "We could not stall together in the whole world." It's another moment in which a Shakespearean verb is enormously suggestive. The image is of two horses in the same stall, who cannot possibly coexist, one of whom is going to kick the other to death. They cannot live together. To be sure, even as he glorifies Antony at the last, Caesar implicitly glorifies himself as the man who defeated the great warrior he's in the process of eulogizing.

The reinvention of Antony climaxes when we see Cleopatra magnifying his postmortem reputation, as she praises her lover in conversation with Caesar's officer Dolabella:

"I dream'd there was an Emperor Antony. O such another sleep that I might see but such another man! ... His face was as the heavens, and therein stuck a sun and moon, which kept their course and lighted the little O, the earth... His legs bestrid the ocean. His rear'd arm crested the world. His voice was propertyed as all the tuned spheres, and that to friends. But when he meant to quail and shake the earth [orb], he was as rattling thunder. For his bounty, there was no winter in't; an autumn 'twas that grew the more by reaping. His delights were dolphin-like; they show'd his back above the element they lived in. In his livery walk'd crowns and crownets; realms and islands were as plates dropp'd from his pocket."

The Antony she evokes is a colossal figure, a natural force. "His face was as the heavens." His generosity was infinite: there was no winter in his bounty, it was always autumnal and fruitful, and like a dolphin, leaping above the waves, he transcended the element in which he lived. He was larger than life in all ways. A ruler of half the world, he could give realms and islands to subject monarchs with the casual largesse of a rich man reaching into his pockets to scatter coins for beggars.

She dreams there was an Emperor Antony. She dreams him into being as the emperor he never quite was. He's her dream, her heroic creation. She makes him emperor of the world. Dolabella, the senior Roman officer who hears her reverie, is in some sense Cleopatra's last conquest. He is so moved by her and by her words that he betrays to her what Caesar intends to do with her—that is, lead her in his triumphal march when he returns to Rome.

It is important to realize why this would be a consummate nightmare for Cleopatra. She describes her worst fears to Iras:

"Now, Iras, what think'st thou? Thou, an Egyptian puppet, shalt be shown in Rome, as well as I. Mechanic slaves with greasy aprons, rules, and hammers, shall uplift us to the view... Saucy lictors will catch at us, like strumpets...the quick comedians extemporally will stage us and present our Alexandrian revels. Antony shall be brought drunken forth, and I shall see some squeaking Cleopatra boy my greatness i' the posture of a whore."

She and her ladies-in-waiting will be made a cheap spectacle in Octavius's triumph for the populous to gawk and leer at as if the women were mere streetwalkers. Shakespeare has his Cleopatra express horror at the idea that her story will be burlesqued by the quick comedians, the clever actors, and that she'll see "some squeaking Cleopatra boy my greatness in the posture of a whore." She imagines a boy actor doing some awful parody of her greatness, making her nothing more than a whore. To boy my greatness; it's another amazing Shakespearean verb coinage: to turn my greatness into some boy's foolish performance. It's an astonishingly bold meta-theatrical moment, a moment when the play contemplates its own nature as a play. Shakespeare creates Cleopatra, who on the stage of Shakespeare's Globe Theatre would be played by a boy actor, and he makes her express her disgust at the idea she should be impersonated by a boy actor.

It's unthinkable for the woman who was in charge of all her many metamorphoses, who rejoiced in her infinite variety, who takes such pride in her own performance art, to have her identity fixed in Rome and on Caesar's terms, reduced to his prisoner and his puppet, a showpiece in a victor's triumph. But Cleopatra is going to write the last act of her story in such a way that she will not ever be confined by Rome's terms and she will never be the queen confined within the Roman vision of her as a whore; will never be put on display by Octavius; will be never chastened, confined. She will die, she says, "after the high Roman fashion," but, in fact, although she does stage a noble suicide and thus follows Roman precedent, she translates her Roman death into Egyptian terms. She dies in her own way. Much earlier in the play, she remarked that Antony had nicknamed her his "serpent of old Nile." In applying a real Nile

serpent to her breast, in using the asp's poison, she has a serpent of old Nile kill the serpent of old Nile. It's her variation on Antony's "a Roman by a Roman, valiantly vanquished."

Her preparations for death are very telling. To Charmian and Iras she says, "Show me, my women, like a queen. Go fetch my best attires. I am again for Cydnus, to meet Mark Antony."

She'll reenact her very first encounter with him, the one we previously heard reported by Enobarbus. Death is Cleopatra's final metamorphosis, and she is going to make very, very sure that death becomes her. "Give me my robe. Put on my crown. I have immortal longings in me. Now no more the juice of Egypt's grape shall moist this lip... Methinks I hear Antony call; I see him rouse himself to praise my noble act... Husband, I come."

Her immortal longings: she longs for immortality in death. She's enacting a kind of self-created apotheosis, a movement towards godhead. And she does something she's never done when Antony was alive: she calls him husband. They will be married in death.

Iras falls dead after her mistress kisses her farewell, and Cleopatra asks, "Have I the aspic in my lips?" Do I have the asp's poison on my lips? "Dost fall? If thou and nature can so gently part, the stroke of death is as a lover's pinch, which hurts, and is desired."

Seeing her attendant die so easily, Cleopatra imagines death not as cruel and harsh, but as her last lover, whose touch is pain eroticized into pleasure. Death that hurts, and is desired.

And as she applies the asp to her breast, she celebrates her victory over Caesar, whom she'll make an "ass unpolicied," reducing him to an idiot whose statecraft will be rendered useless by her actions.

Cleopatra continues even now to take on new identities. She has positioned herself as the woman claiming godhead, the wife of Antony, the woman to whom death will be a lover, the ruler who will outmaneuver Octavius at the last.

And after the queen at last succumbs to the asp's poison, Charmian tells death he has cause to boast, for, "in thy possession lies a lass unparallel'd." There's a nice sonic contrast between "lass unparallel'd" and Cleopatra's insulting epithet for Caesar, "ass unpolicied." Charmian goes on to offer the final rave review of Cleopatra, the great performance artist. When Caesar's soldiers burst in and see what has happened, one of them says, "Is this well done?" and Charmian, on the point of death herself, replies, "It is well done and fitting for a princess descended of so many royal kings."

There's a lovely balanced tension, in those last phrases that Charmian uses of her lady. She calls her a "lass unparallel'd." Lass is a homely word for a woman; I think of a country wench when I hear of it. But if Cleopatra is lass unparallel'd, she is also a princess descended of so many royal kings, who has died in a way that is worthy of her high ancestry. Her identity is in oscillation to the very end.

Two kinds of victory can be seen in the final acts of the play. Octavius survives to take over the Roman Empire, and marches into history as Emperor Augustus. Antony and Cleopatra speak themselves into legend, which is something, I'd suggest, they've been seeking to do from the moment Antony asked the world to bear witness to their peerlessness. Even Caesar accedes to this. Looking at the bodies, he says, "She shall be buried with her Antony. No grave upon the earth shall clip in it"—he means shall embrace in it—"a pair so famous."

It's easy to be enslaved by the extraordinary poetry of Act 5. Cleopatra's final performance is so astonishing, that one may almost forget to ask whether the heroic versions of herself and Antony she leaves behind in memory are actually the same as the willful, intermittently destructive, extraordinarily narcissistic human beings we've seen in action through the play.

The play is based on the underlying facts of history, as reported by Plutarch. The historical record declares that Antony predeceases his lover. The facts of history allow Shakespeare to choose to give pretty much all of Act 5 over to Cleopatra after her lover's death. It is she who is the final storyteller, the

final mediator of their experience. She bends reality to her own ends. I'd suggest to you that as she plays her part in the messy and complicated history of Antony and Cleopatra, she gradually becomes the author of the tragedy *Antony and Cleopatra*.

For she is the poet who makes Antony the emperor he never was and plays out her final and most impressive role on her own terms; who claims back the power of metamorphosis of infinite variety that Caesar would have stolen from her. Her language takes control at the end of their story, which is why for me this play is, perhaps, misnamed. I personally think of it as *Cleopatra and Antony*.

Lecture Twenty-One

Coriolanus I—The Loner and the Mob

Scope:

Coriolanus is a play focusing on the public life of Rome: most of its major scenes unfold in the marketplace. This lecture begins by looking at the social contracts underpinning the governance of early Republican Rome and the relationship among the patricians, plebeians, and tribunes. It then touches upon Shakespeare's Renaissance recasting of Rome's "body politic" and suggests the implications of Coriolanus's insistent self-definition in terms that are independent of communal approval. A close inspection of the protagonist's actions on the battlefield in Act 1 reveals a particularly alienated species of "heroism." The lecture concludes by discussing Coriolanus's unfittedness for the political rituals he must enact, after his successes in war, to win the popular mandate necessary for gaining the consulship.

Outline

- I. The action of *Coriolanus* unfolds some 450 years before the action of *Antony and Cleopatra* and is informed by a particular set of historical conditions.
 - A. Rome is a relatively new republic that is at war with other city-states; Caius Martius will win the additional name of Coriolanus through his victory over the Volscian city of Corioles.
 - B. Rome is ruled by its nobles, the patricians, but civil unrest has forced the patricians to grant limited representation to the plebeians: two tribunes are spokesmen for the common people.
 - C. The most important office a patrician can hold is that of consul—chief magistrate. A man who has fought nobly for Rome is eligible to be nominated as consul but must also secure the vote of the common people in a ritual of humility carried out in the marketplace.
- II. This is a play of public life; we have few scenes in private spaces.
 - A. *Coriolanus* opens in the marketplace at Rome, and the central scenes, in which the hero stands for consul, take place there; at the play's end, Coriolanus dies in the marketplace of an enemy city.
 - B. We never see Coriolanus alone with his wife, Virgilia, and he has only two soliloquies; we rarely see him make a non-public utterance.
- III. Coriolanus is an unintrospective hero with a fixed sense of his own identity: On the two occasions when he attempts to act against his sense of self, the results are disastrous.
 - A. When he solicits the support of the plebeians to become consul, Coriolanus acts in a manner that ultimately contributes to his banishment from Rome.
 - B. When he is persuaded by his mother to abandon both his revenge against Rome and the new identity he has forged for himself in exile, his action provokes his murder.
- IV. Coriolanus's investment in asserting a kind of heroic independence, defining his identity on his own terms, is in its own way problematic.
 - A. Coriolanus is part of a community: he cannot sequester himself from its values and opinions.
 - B. His notion of what constitutes supremely "Roman" behavior is ultimately interpreted as treachery by other Romans.
 - C. He does not realize that he can remain in the community of aristocrats only by acting in ways that favor patrician dominance, even if these contradict his own ideals.
 1. His peers have entered into a social contract that makes the seeking of a popular mandate a traditional and integral part of "patrician" behavior.

2. Other patricians (such as Menenius) are more clear-sighted about reconciling their larger political agendas with the conciliatory gestures that will win popular support.
 - D. Cominius's nomination of Coriolanus for the consulship both affirms his valor, his *virtus*, and begs the question of whether this is the only "virtue" a consul must possess.
- V. The first scene of the play offers a striking contrast between Menenius's and Coriolanus's interaction with a rebellious and hungry mob.
- A. The plebeians declare Coriolanus (still called Caius Martius at this point) their particular enemy, whose services to his country have been mainly to satisfy his own pride.
 - B. Before Coriolanus enters, Menenius banters amiably with the plebeians, defending the status quo in his fable of the revolt of the body's members against the belly.
 1. Menenius's story implicitly concedes that there is an organic relationship between the patricians and plebeians.
 2. He employs a popular political philosophy of Shakespeare's own day: the idea of the *body politic*.
 - C. When Coriolanus arrives, he immediately speaks insultingly to the plebeians.
 1. He describes them as scabs on the body politic or inhuman and bestial organisms.
 2. He emphasizes their cowardice, declaring that anyone who deserves greatness deserves their hate.
 - D. Ironically, Coriolanus will himself be described as a monstrous or diseased part of the body politic by the tribunes Junius Brutus and Sicinius Velutus.
- VI. The early scenes of the play reveal Coriolanus's virtues to be those of the pathological loner (as a warrior, he has none of Antony's personal charisma).
- A. During the campaign against Corioles, he denounces the cowardice of the common soldiers; after threatening and insulting his troops, he enters the city alone.
 - B. Although his men eventually rise to the occasion, Coriolanus can persuade only by example, not by heartening rhetoric; he presents himself as their weapon rather than their comrade.
 - C. Coriolanus carries out his martial deeds to confirm his own identity on his own terms, not to build connections with his community or win social approval.
 - D. When he is nominated for the consulship, he begs to be excused from the custom of showing his scars to the plebeians in the marketplace and soliciting their support.
- VII. Coriolanus fears, above all, having to "act" a part that contradicts his own sense of self.
- A. Where Hamlet is intermittently concerned that he is merely "acting," Coriolanus's natural bent is toward unthinking, violent action.
 - B. Menenius, recognizing that theater is an aspect of politics, urges him to accede to Rome's customs, but Coriolanus deplors the prospect of staging himself before the Roman mob.

Essential Reading:

Shakespeare, *Coriolanus*.

Supplementary Reading:

Cantor, *Shakespeare's Rome: Republic and Empire*, chapter 1.

Sir Thomas North's translation of Plutarch's *Life of Caius Martius*, in *Narrative and Dramatic Sources of Shakespeare*, vol. 5, Geoffrey Bullough, ed., pp. 505–548.

Questions to Consider:

1. Coriolanus is not the only patrician character whom we see interacting with the plebeians; how might one differentiate the behavior of Cominius, Titus Laertius, and Menenius from that of Coriolanus?
2. Does Shakespeare's depiction of the patrician and plebeian characters suggest that his own sympathies are more strongly attached to either class?

Lecture Twenty-One

Coriolanus I—The Loner and the Mob

My last tragedy is *Coriolanus*, which is probably the least well known of the tragedies I've been talking about. Although an interesting play and often very powerful in performance, it's perhaps one of Shakespeare's most political plays, in the sense that the body politic, the community as a whole, is on view almost throughout the action. One of the commonplaces often offered about tragedy from Aristotle onwards is that the tragic action is of a particular magnitude that the actions or transgressions or suffering of one individual may have reverberations across a whole community. In both *Macbeth* and *Hamlet*, there's plenty of reference to the larger entities of Scotland and Denmark. In *Macbeth*, for example, the disaffected nobles describe Scotland itself as a diseased or bleeding body. In *Hamlet*, Marcellus worries that something is "rotten in the state of Denmark." But we see very few Scots or Danes outside the ruling classes. In *King Lear*, in the midst of the storm on the heath, Lear ponders the condition of the poor naked wretches who live all their lives in the misery he's now experiencing. But the only poor naked wretch Lear actually claps eyes on is the beggar Poor Tom, who is, of course, really Edgar, a disguised aristocrat.

In *Coriolanus*, by contrast, the citizens of Rome are major players in the action. *Coriolanus* takes place about 450 years before the action of *Antony and Cleopatra*. Shakespeare is once again using Plutarch's *Lives of the Noble Grecians and Romans* as his source. Rome is a relatively new republic, which hasn't yet acquired an empire. It's still at war with other city-states in the country we now call Italy. Rome's enemies in this drama are the Volscians, whose military leader is Tullus Aufidius. Our hero, whose birth name is Caius Marcius, will win the additional name of Coriolanus from his victory over the Volscian city of Corioles.

Rome is not exactly a democratic republic. It's ruled by a class of nobles, the patricians, who make up its senate, but because of civil unrest, the patricians have had to grant limited representation to the common people, the plebeians. They've had to give them spokesmen to sit on the senate's proceedings, and these men are called the tribunes, and in this play, the tribunes are the characters Sicinius and Brutus.

The most important high office a Roman patrician can occupy is that of consul, that is, chief magistrate. There are only two consuls at any one time, and they exercised supreme authority within the republic, and that's why the question of whether or not Coriolanus gets to be consul is such a big deal. In republican Rome, you don't qualify for this job by doing well in law school. To be nominated, you have to have fought nobly for the city. This gives you eligibility, but you can't get the high office by the approval of the patricians alone. There's an established custom that the would-be consul must secure the vote of the common people, and he does this by literally bringing himself down to their level. The prospective consul must stand before the plebeians, before the mob, in a ragged garment of humility and display the scars he has gained in defending his city as he solicits their goodwill.

In order to be consul, Coriolanus must perform this ritual in the marketplace. Now, we should note the importance in this play of the marketplace, the place of negotiation, of public interchange and commerce of all kinds. *Coriolanus* opens in the marketplace at Rome; the climactic middle scenes where Coriolanus stands for consul and is eventually banished by his own people take place there. And Coriolanus dies in another public space, the marketplace in a Volscian city, in Act 5.

This is emphatically a play of public life. We have few scenes in private spaces. We never see Coriolanus at home alone with his wife Virgilia. We rarely see him make a non-public utterance. He has only two soliloquies in the play, one of them very short. We see very few of his private thoughts. He is indeed remarkably unintrospective. He's the very opposite of Hamlet so far as this is concerned. And if *Hamlet*, at least according to Laurence Olivier's film and his interpretation of the drama, is a play about a man who cannot make up his mind, *Coriolanus* is a play about a man who cannot change his mind. His sense of his own identity is so fixed and absolute that for him even to try to act in a way that denies his sense of self has disastrous results.

Coriolanus is asked to act against his own notion of what constitutes his proper selfhood twice in this play. The first occasion comes when he must stand in the marketplace and ask for the support of the common people in his bid to be consul. The second occasion arises when he has been sent into exile, after he has recreated himself as the scourge of Rome and is on the verge of destroying his city and at that point is asked by his mother to abandon his revenge. His actions on the first occasion lead to his banishment from Rome. His actions on the second occasion lead to his death.

We should be aware that in absolute, moral terms there's nothing sinister about either of the actions Coriolanus is asked to perform. He doesn't have to decide whether or not to murder his king, or kill his uncle, or to believe the man who is inciting him to suspect and destroy his wife. When Coriolanus asks the commoners what is the price of the consulship, he is told, the price is "to ask it kindly." The people already know of his noble deeds in war which have made him eligible for the position. All they require of him is that he solicit their support courteously.

Later on, when Coriolanus accedes to his mother Volumnia's request that he spare Rome, he's not in absolute terms committing evil. He's in fact doing what should come naturally to anybody who recognizes the bonds of kinship. It is only because his very presence at Rome's gates is predicated on his desire to eradicate all those loyalties from his identity that his action proves fatal to him. And also of course because he's now entered into alternative contracts with Tullus Aufidius, contracts which assume his complete alienation from his city.

Coriolanus is perpetually attempting to reassert a kind of heroic independence, to be indebted to no human being, to define his identity on his own terms. For him, the very fact that he has done what he has done in battle should earn him the consulship. He shouldn't have to be dependent on the voices of the plebeians. Indeed, he can hardly bring himself to accept the praise even of his peers, the patricians. But his claim to such extreme independence inevitably leads him to self-destruction. Coriolanus is part of a community—and like it or not, he can't detach himself from the values of that community. He cannot keep his identity separate from the perspectives of other people, people who are likely to perceive him differently, or to construct his identity in alternative ways. We see this when Coriolanus makes clear his desire to deny any voice in state affairs to the commoners. He believes he is defending a course of action he perceives as supremely Roman—he doesn't seem to believe the commoners to be real Romans in the way that the patricians are—but his behavior in this matter is construed by other Romans, notably the tribunes, as traitorous. And it becomes clear that, as a patrician, Coriolanus can only remain in the community of aristocrats by continuing to act in ways which favor patrician dominance in Rome, even if such actions run counter to his ideals of aristocratic behavior.

The fact that Rome is governed by its aristocracy suggests that the state supports the notion that the patricians are the people who are innately, naturally, best fitted to rule. But the reality of Roman politics, exemplified by such customs as the prospective consul having to sue for the people's favor in the marketplace, this reality suggests that the patricians need some kind of popular mandate. The other nobles in the play have made their peace with this circumstance. Indeed they have made the seeking of the popular mandate a noble tradition, a custom which is now seen as an integral part of patrician behavior. And of course people like Coriolanus's ruthless mother, Volumnia, and his amiably resilient friend Menenius are shrewd enough to know that what you say to win popular support may have nothing to do with how you use your power once you've gained it.

Let's now look more closely at Coriolanus's character, at the kind of man who ends up torn between his repudiation of the values of his city and his inability to alienate himself utterly from his people. I want to start with the scene in which Coriolanus's friend and fellow warrior Cominius nominates him for the consulship. Cominius says, "It is held that valour is the chiefest virtue, and most dignifies the haver. If it be, the man I speak of cannot in the world be singly counterpoised." Valor is the chiefest virtue, virtue perhaps bouncing off its Latin root, *virtus*, which is really not our sense of virtue; it's more like a certain kind of dutiful, noble, courageous behavior, and it's associated with manliness, virility—*virtus*.

But valor isn't the only virtue the consul must have. Coriolanus is like a relic from a more primitive culture, in which the most valiant warrior would automatically be the leader of a people. But the other patricians are committed to much more complex social and political relationships with the populace. The syntax of Cominius's remark is worth noting. "It is held" to be the case that bravery is the noblest virtue, he says, the one that most elevates its possessor. If this is the case, he says, the man I'm speaking of has no equal in the world. Because of the "if" construction, his words leave room for qualification, for disagreement. What if it is not the case that valor is the uniquely superior virtue? And what if raw courage in battle doesn't necessarily have anything to do with the ability to hold one's own in the arena of politics?

Having raised these questions, let us now glance back earlier in the play, to the moment in the first scene when Coriolanus makes his entrance, or rather at the moment of Caius Marcius's first entrance; he has not yet won his other name in battle. Rome is wracked by civil unrest. A famine has left the plebeians nearly starving and has also convinced them that the patricians are hoarding grain and refusing to share it with the common people. The citizens consider Caius Marcius their particular enemy. He may have fought nobly for his country, one of them says, but he only did it to please his mother and to satisfy his own pride. Mind you, it's not a little thing for our hero to want to please his mother. The lady Volumnia is one of the most fiercely demanding and daunting women in all of Shakespeare, and I'll be coming back to Volumnia in my subsequent lectures.

In the first scene of the play, Coriolanus does not enter immediately. He's preceded on stage by Menenius, his friend, who faces down the rebellious plebeians, the mob, through negotiation. Whatever Menenius thinks of the plebs and their demands, he suggests by his behavior that he feels an obligation to communicate with them, to use language as a tool of persuasion. He has, in fact, been conversing with them for some one hundred lines when Caius Marcius comes on stage, and Menenius says, "Hail, noble Marcius!" and receives the briefest of acknowledgments before Marcius launches into a rant against the plebeians. So, Menenius says, "Hail, noble Marcius!" "Thanks. What's the matter, you dissentious rogues, that, rubbing the poor itch of your opinion, make yourselves scabs?" Coriolanus wields language like a bludgeon to beat down his hearers. This is not a man who is ever going to need therapy in order to get in touch with his anger. He continues:

"What would you have, you curs, that like nor peace nor war? The one affrights you; the other makes you proud. He that trusts to you, where he should find you lions, finds you hares; where foxes, geese. You are no surer, no, than is the coal of fire upon the ice, or hailstone in the sun... Who deserves greatness deserves your hate, and your affections are a sick man's appetite, who desires most that which would increase his evil."

The images he invokes are significant. The plebeians to him are like aspects of disease, especially some kind of nasty skin disease afflicting the body politic. They're also animals: curs, hares, geese. What's emphasized in all of this is their utter separateness from his sense of what is noble and indeed what is human.

We've got a kind of paradox here. Coriolanus is famed as a patriot, a defender of Rome, but, for him, Rome is uniquely its patricians. He won't concede that the state is also the commoners.

When Menenius is confronting the angry plebeians, he defends the status quo by telling his fable of the revolt of the various limbs of the body against the belly and of the belly's insistence that, although it receives nourishment from all the other organs, it's not a mere parasite, it also regulates and distributes the necessities of life and makes the whole system work properly. Menenius is, of course, intent on defending the fact that the patricians seem to receive all the fruit of the labors of others, but his fable at least admits there is an organic relationship between patricians and plebeians. He in fact employs that metaphor I've invoked before, the metaphor that shapes what was also a popular political philosophy in Shakespeare's own era: the Renaissance notion of the body politic, the state that is literally incorporate, where each part of the organism has its own role to play.

Coriolanus has no such vision. He imagines the commoners as scabs, excessive incrustations on the body politic, the manifestations of a disfiguring disease. And when he's not imagining the plebs as a kind of disease of the state, he portrays them as a monstrous body, a freakish beast with multiple heads and many clamoring destructive tongues, inhuman, bestial. His scathing language completely denies the fact that the commoners' labor is necessary to the patricians' privileged existence.

To be sure, from another point of view, it's Coriolanus himself who is the monstrous or diseased portion of the political body. One of the citizens' two representatives, the tribune Sicinius, will later say, "He's a disease that must be cut away." Now, in response to this, Menenius says, "O he's a limb that has but a disease; mortal, to cut it off; to cure it, easy."

Now notice that Menenius doesn't simply reply, as Coriolanus would, no, you're the disease. He invokes Sicinius's own terms of argument and attempts to use them to make a case for Coriolanus. No, he's not the disease that must be purged; he's a crucial part of the body politic that happens to be sick. He is curable, but the whole body will die if you amputate him.

Coriolanus's uneasy relations with the larger entity of the body politic make it unsurprising that his virtues are those of the pathological loner. On many occasions he barely manages to be civil to his patrician peers. He's a brilliant warrior, but he's completely unlike Antony, who is followed in part because of his personal charisma, his treatment of his troops as comrades, his willingness to establish individual camaraderie with his soldiers. Look at Coriolanus in contrast. Act 1, scene 4 opens in the middle of the campaign against the Corioli, and things are not going very well for the Romans, who are in retreat; and Marcius enters, cursing his plebeian troops:

"All the contagion of the south light on you, you shames of Rome! You herd of—Boils and plagues plaster you o'er, that you may be abhorr'd further than seen and one infect another against the wind a mile! You souls of geese that bear the shapes of men, how have you run from slaves that apes would beat! ... Mend and charge home, or, by the fires of heaven, I'll leave the foe and make my wars on you."

As usual, he speaks of the common soldiers by way of images of disease (although this time he's wishing vile diseases upon them). As usual, he imagines them as subhuman entities, the souls of geese that barely look human. As usual, he seeks to spur them on by insult and threat. He charges through the gates of the besieged city alone. When he reemerges hard pressed, the troops finally come to his support at the command of the other general, Titus Lartius. Coriolanus acts singly. He can only persuade by his example in action here, not by the words which would establish a connection with his listeners.

Two scenes later he does stir another group of soldiers to follow him, but, tellingly, he does it by asking them to be like him—to make their bodies as wounded and blood smeared as his; to wear blood as a kind of war paint. "If any such be here—as it were sin to doubt—that love this painting wherein you see me smear'd; if any fear lesser his person than an ill report; if any think brave death outweighs bad life and that his country's dearer than himself; let him alone, or so many so minded wave thus, to express his disposition, and follow Marcius."

And later as they do surge to support him, he asks, "Make you a sword of me." He is their weapon, not their comrade.

Coriolanus carries out his martial deeds to confirm his own identity on his own terms, not to build connections with his community, not to win social approval. He won't stay in the senate house when Cominius praises his battle valor, but neither does he expect that he should have to speak for his deeds, that he should have to advertise his worth. For him, the idea of standing in the marketplace and soliciting popular support is to be supremely false to himself. He begs the senate, "I do beseech you, let me o'erleap that custom, for I cannot put on the gown, stand naked, and entreat them, for my wounds' sake, to give their suffrage. Please you that I may pass this doing." Menenius will have none of this, and he replies, "Pray you, go fit you to the custom and take to you, as your predecessors have, your honour with your

form.” But Coriolanus declares, “It is a part that I shall blush in acting and might well be taken from the people.”

“A part that I shall blush in acting.” His language invites a comparison with Hamlet. Hamlet is intermittently afraid that he is always only “acting” in the sense of emoting, declaiming, performing his grief—or perhaps, alternatively, deploying his antic disposition—but at the same time unable to act out his revenge in very truth, paralyzed, alienated from true action. Coriolanus, by contrast, is great at unthinking violent action—he’s the Terminator in a toga—but he hesitates when he is called upon to do something he sees as dissembling or feigning, the wrong kind of acting.

Menenius, a far more canny politician, presses him. “Fit you to the custom,” he says. A ruler must be adaptable, and although Menenius doesn’t quite explicitly say this, a ruler must also know that theater is an important part of politics. It’s not really so very surprising that an ex-actor made an astonishingly popular American president throughout the 1980s. Shakespeare’s audience in 1608 had no Ronald Reagan, but they had lived, most of them, through the realm of Queen Elizabeth, who knew all about the most effective way to stage monarchical power. But rulers, she once said, were as those set on high stages. She knew she had to perform.

But Coriolanus is filled with horror at wooing the commoners in this way, of staging himself to fit their desires. And in my next lecture we’ll see what happens when he is forced into the theater of politics, when he must perform beg for the consulship in the marketplace.

Lecture Twenty-Two

Coriolanus II—The Theater of Politics

Scope:

The play's first crisis comes when Coriolanus is unable to act the part of the humble suitor and win the votes of the plebeians by exposing the scars he earned in Rome's service. This lecture begins by examining the implications of the protagonist's horror at accommodating himself to his society's public rituals. It then proceeds to analyze the clash between Coriolanus's absolutism and the strategic (and theatrical) dissimulation for purposes of political expediency preached by Volumnia, his mother. Why does Coriolanus's attempt to follow Volumnia's orders and appease the plebeians result in his banishment from Rome? After discussing Shakespeare's interest in representing his hero in terms that make him either superhuman or inhuman, the lecture concludes with some remarks on Coriolanus's quest to "author" himself, in his exile, as someone who acknowledges no familial, social, or political ties.

Outline

- I. When Coriolanus cannot bring himself to solicit the support of the plebeians with any convincing appearance of humility, his action does not have much in common with the agonized choice-making of other tragic protagonists.
 - A. In refusing to humble himself, Coriolanus simply acts like himself, with minimal reflection.
 - B. But his refusal to fit himself to the custom puts him in the power of the tribunes, canny politicians who skillfully manipulate the plebeians.
- II. The scene in the marketplace triggers a clash between Coriolanus's personal system of values and the Roman status quo.
 - A. The commoners clearly affirm that if Coriolanus shows his vulnerability, they are bound to grant him their mandate.
 - B. Coriolanus believes that the act of showing the plebeians his wounds will subject him absolutely to those he despises.
 - C. Coriolanus appears to be an extreme conservative in his insistence on hierarchy, but he challenges tradition in refusing to confirm the social contract between patricians and plebeians.
 - D. When the tribunes press the people to withdraw their votes, Coriolanus offers a manifesto for revolution that the tribunes describe as treacherous "innovation."
- III. When Volumnia persuades her son to return to the marketplace and appease the mob, the gap between Coriolanus's desires and the compromises of power politics becomes even more evident.
 - A. Volumnia insists that Coriolanus translate his self-sufficient *virtus* into civic diplomacy.
 - B. She schools him for the part he must play, even as he insists upon the impossibility of acting it: he equates the performance of humility with emasculation and self-prostitution.
 - C. Volumnia's emotional blackmail eventually forces Coriolanus to do as she asks.
- IV. Coriolanus's inability to follow Volumnia's advice and mask his true feelings has disastrous results.
 - A. As soon as the tribunes reprise their accusation of treason, he reiterates his scorn for the popular mandate.
 - B. Banished from Rome, Coriolanus excoriates the commoners and hopes for Rome's utter destruction.
 - C. In declaring that *he* banishes his banishers, he reasserts his autonomy and alienates himself from

his city.

- V. Coriolanus's reinvention of himself as Rome's enemy appears to be the natural culmination of his refusal to acknowledge common cause with others or to admit his dependency on community.
- A. Long before his banishment, his own language and that of others has constructed the hero as either superhuman or inhuman—not quite one with the rest of society.
 - B. This version of Coriolanus is echoed in the reports of the former friends who have encountered him after he leads the Volscian forces to the very gates of Rome.
 - C. Coriolanus will finally seek a kind of self-authorship that denies all ties: familial, social, political.
 - D. But before the play ends, Coriolanus will have to confront his actual “author,” Volumnia.

Essential Reading:

Shakespeare, *Coriolanus*.

Supplementary Reading:

Cavell, *Disowning Knowledge in Seven Plays of Shakespeare*, chapter 4.

Questions to Consider:

1. Consider the role of the tribunes in this play. Is Coriolanus's fall primarily the result of his own actions or of their machinations?
2. Compare Coriolanus's aversion to the “theater of politics” to Hamlet's meditations on acting.

Lecture Twenty-Two

Coriolanus II—The Theater of Politics

When Coriolanus cannot bring himself to offer a full-blooded performance in the marketplace, cannot solicit the support of the plebeians with any convincing appearance of humility, modesty, and grace, his refusal doesn't exactly constitute a moment of choice, not in the sense of Macbeth choosing to kill Duncan, Othello choosing to believe Iago. There's no reflection here. Coriolanus, in refusing to act, refusing to engage in political theater, just acts like himself. I am going to explore both the political and personal consequences of Coriolanus's refusal to play his part in Rome's ritual for soliciting the consulship. The price of office, as one of the citizens tells him, is simply to ask it kindly. And the refusal to do so is a very, very expensive gesture, for it puts Coriolanus in the power of the tribunes who so skillfully manipulate the people into withdrawing their mandate. Shakespeare doesn't only emphasize Coriolanus's problematic actions here, he also offers a very full picture of political machination, most brilliantly, perhaps, when he has the canny tribunes tell the citizens to tell the patricians that it was only because the tribunes themselves advised them to give their voices to Coriolanus that they gave them at all.

But let's backtrack a little. As Act 2, scene 3 opens, we are in the marketplace before Coriolanus's first ritual attempt to solicit the people's good will. One citizen says, "If he do require our voices, we ought not to deny him." A second contradicts him, "We may, sir, if we will." A third citizen then offers these very telling remarks:

"We have the power in ourselves to do it, but it is a power that we have no power to do. For if he show us his wounds and tell us his deeds, we are to put our tongues into those wounds and speak for them. So, if he tell us his noble deeds, we must also tell him our noble acceptance of them. Ingratitude is monstrous, and for the multitude to be ungrateful, were to make a monster of the multitude, of the which we being members should bring ourselves to be monstrous members."

You should notice that although Coriolanus loathes the idea of having to be ratified by the people's voices, according to the third citizen, the very act of showing his vulnerability, even as he shows the scars he gained in his city's defense, will deprive them of power to deny him their mandate. His wounds will inspire the tongues of the people. The citizens must recognize what they stand for and show their gratitude for his services to the state. His wounds will summon up their tongues voting on his behalf, and to do anything otherwise would be monstrously ungrateful of them.

But Coriolanus doesn't see it this way. He construes the act of showing the plebeians his wounds and asking for their support as subjecting himself absolutely to people he despises, for the ritual in the marketplace will oblige him to open his mouth and show his need.

It's interesting to watch Shakespeare make Coriolanus disclose his horror of doing this. Coriolanus is briefly left alone in the marketplace after a group of citizens have exited. And in that brief moment of privacy his fury erupts:

"Better it is to die, better to starve, than crave the hire which first we do deserve. Why in this womanish [wolfish] toge should I stand here, to beg of Hob and Dick that do appear their needless vouches? Custom calls me to't. What custom wills, in all things should we do't, the dust on antique time would lie unswept, and mountainous error be too highly heapt for truth to o'er-peer. Rather than fool it so, let the high office and the honour go to one that would do thus."

Better it is to die, better to starve, than to have to beg for favors from those who should have no right to bestow them on me. It's as if he says, I cannot bear to be dependent, I cannot bear to have my ambitions nurtured at these people's say-so. And thus, of course, his refusal publicly to show those wounds to them, he can only solicit their favors in the most grudging way.

"You know the cause, sir, of my standing here," says Coriolanus. And a citizen responds, "We do, sir; tell us what hath brought you to't." He snarls, "My own desert." "Your own desert!" (your own deservings)

responds one of the citizens. And Coriolanus continues, "Ay, but not mine own desire." "How not your own desire?" asks another citizen. And Coriolanus mutters, "No, sir, 'twas never my desire yet to trouble the poor with begging." Then one of the citizens pointedly addresses the politics of the situation: "You must think, if we give you any thing, we hope to gain by you." "Well, then, I pray, your price o' the consulship?" And that's when one of the citizens says, "The price is to ask it kindly." "Kindly! Sir, I pray, let me ha't. I have wounds to show you, which shall be yours in private. Your good voice, sir; what say you?" How do you direct this? I've been saying it as if he was almost sarcastic, barely polite, refusing to greet any kind of authentic feeling. And the second citizen says, perhaps rather reluctantly, "You shall ha' it, worthy sir." "A match, sir. There's in all two worthy voices begged. I have your alms. Adieu!" And he has no more words or time for his interlocutors.

It would be tempting to think of Coriolanus as an extreme conservative in his impatience with anything that smacks of populism, in his emphasis on hierarchy, on the absolute gap between the patricians and plebeians that he perceives. But in his idiosyncratic way, he's as much a radical as a conservative aristocrat. A conservative usually upholds tradition and custom. Coriolanus challenges it. Let's look again at his brief soliloquy in the Roman marketplace. Speaking of the whole business of soliciting the favor of the plebeians, he says, "Custom calls me to't. What custom wills, in all things should we do't, the dust on antique time would lie unswept, and mountainous error be too highly heapt for truth to o'er-peer." He refuses to normalize and naturalize the social contract the patricians have arrived at. He challenges the custom which he sees as a threat to patrician identity. If we only follow tradition and custom, if we never query them, he suggests, we'll pile error upon error, so high, indeed, that truth will not be able to make itself known over mountainous, uninterrogated tradition. He's in his own way the radical voice who wants to make changes.

And indeed, when the commoners revoke their approval of him as consul, he turns to his people, the patricians, the aristocrats, and offers what is in effect the manifesto for revolution:

"This double worship, where one part does disdain with cause, the other insult without all reason; where gentry, title, wisdom cannot conclude but by the yea and no of general ignorance,—it must omit real necessities, and give way the while to unstable slightness. Purpose so barr'd, it follows nothing is done to purpose. Therefore, beseech you...at once pluck out the multitudinous tongue; let them not lick the sweet which is their poison."

We've got an impossible situation here, he says. Where one side, the patricians, disdains the other side, the plebs—and has every cause to do so—and yet that other side, the plebs, gets to insult us in a way that cannot be reasonably justified. If high birth and wisdom and noble prowess must always defer to the popular vote, the veto power of general ignorance, then nothing can be done in the ruling of the state that makes sense. And he concludes, "pluck out the multitudinous tongue." He wants them to abolish the laws that insist that certain actions can only be taken with the voices of the people. He wants to destroy the popular mandate and with it all dependence on the tongues, the voices, of the commoners whom he despises.

And when he proposes to the patricians that the commoners should be deprived any voice, any power, in deciding matters of state, he also speaks in terms of withholding food from those mouths, an image which returns us to the rebellion that was fermenting at the very start of the play. Let them not lick the sweet things that are really their poison, he says. Although he might as well be saying, let them not be nourished in a way that feels like poison to *me*.

He sees his proposals as promising the salvation of Rome, because, as I've already noted, he doesn't really count the plebeians among the real Romans. But from the point of view of plebeians this is treachery, pure and simple; Coriolanus is breaking the social contract. The tribunes order him to be arrested as what they call a traitorous innovator, and the patricians are barely able to get him out of the marketplace and escape safely home with him, where Coriolanus is horrified to find that his behavior is not ratified by his mother. Volumnia has brought him up to be a noble warrior, a patrician Roman. He is

acting in defense of the rights of the patricians. How is it that she's so unenthusiastic about the stand he has taken? "I muse my mother does not approve me further, who was wont to call them woollen vassals, things created to...be still and wonder, when one but of my ordinance stood up to speak of peace or war." And he addresses her directly: "I talk of you. Why did you wish me milder? Would you have me false to my nature? Rather, say I play the man I am." "Would you have me false to my nature?" Coriolanus is frankly baffled. And this is how his mother responds:

"O sir, sir, sir, I would have had you put your power well on, before you had worn it out. You might have been enough the man you are, with striving less to be so. Lesser had been the thwartings of your dispositions, if you had not show'd them how you were disposed, ere they lack'd power to cross you."

She makes power a kind of garment. She wishes he'd done what was necessary to be invested in that power, cloaked in the prerogatives of the consul, before he'd worn out his welcome with the people. You shouldn't have revealed your true feelings, "show'd them how you were disposed," until the plebs had no more power to thwart your aims and you had the consulship in hand.

She speaks the language of political expediency. She proposes a kind of situational ethics. And for Volumnia, this is not contradictory to the role of patrician. Indeed, she seems to rewrite the rules by which her son has lived in order to be pleasing to her. As the scene unfolds, she insists that he translate his self-sufficiency and absolutism into civic diplomacy. She explicitly tells Coriolanus that it's not dishonorable to speak in a way that has nothing to do with one's inner self; that it is not dishonorable to ignore or at least mask the promptings of the heart, to offer a show of deference to and dependence upon the voices of the plebians.

We see her schooling him for the part he has to perform if he is to recoup his losses. She argues carefully that in war he would be prepared to "take in a town with gentle words," use deceit and guile to win a victory without bloodshed. And if he can dissimulate in this way while on a military campaign without a second thought, he should be equally able to dissemble a little in peacetime politics. And then she gives him a further tutorial, briefing him on every gesture he needs to enact humility, to beg the people's pardon, to excuse his brusque behavior, to insist that he is at their service:

"Go to them, with this bonnet in thy hand and thus far having stretch'd it—here be with them, thy knee bussing the stones (your knee kissing the stones, half kneeling to them), for in such business action is eloquence—...say to them, thou art their soldier, and being bred in broils hast not the soft way which, thou dost confess, were fit for thee to use as they to claim in asking their good loves, but thou wilt frame thyself, forsooth, hereafter theirs, so far as thou hast power and person."

Coriolanus's response is not encouraging. "You have put me to a part which never I shall discharge to the life," he says. He cannot be the actor-politician she wants. He cannot dissemble and feign in order to give his deeds the necessary spin. So, Volumnia simply ups the emotional pressure. She entangles the personal with the political: "As thou hast said, my praises made thee first a soldier. So, to have my praise for this, perform a part thou hast not done before."

But Coriolanus is still resisting. In articulating his resistance to what he believes she's asking him to do, he goes on to equate the performance of humility with behaving as a whore, a eunuch, a woman, a knave, a schoolboy, a beggar, everything he conceives of as being alien to the nature of Coriolanus.

And when he continues to show his reluctance to return to the marketplace and act out a humility that repulses him, Volumnia then proceeds to make the pride and the fanatical independence he values a problem, no longer a virtue. Do as you wish, she says: "Thy valiantness was mine, thou suck'dst it from me, but owe thy pride thyself." You sucked bravery from me, at my breast (a not so subtle reminder of motherly power), but your pride is your own. You owe it to no one but yourself.

And this, of course, is when Coriolanus collapses. He cannot resist her particular brand of emotional blackmail any longer. “Mother, I am going to the market-place. Chide me no more.” But, of course, Coriolanus is quite unable to reinvent himself in the way that Volumnia demands. He cannot embrace his mother’s notion of the kind of maneuvering and dissembling that is required in the civic sphere. He cannot enter into her understanding of how to stage oneself in the theater of politics.

He declares he will indeed “mountebank” the people’s loves. This is very telling. Mountebank—the word is usually a noun. Shakespeare kidnaps the word and makes it into another of his astonishing verbs. A mountebank was literally, in Renaissance Europe, a person who gets up on a bench in a marketplace to hawk his wares, usually wares that have something of charlatanry about them. He’s a huckster, an entertainer, a deceiver. Coriolanus declares himself willing to play the mountebank, to offer false goods for sale in order to win the people’s love, which of course, it turns out he can’t do. He cannot even start to try to do this, in part because the tribunes know what buttons to press and they press them immediately. He’s barely got back to the marketplace when they say to him, “We charge you, that you have contrived to take from Rome all season’d office and to wind yourself into a power tyrannical, for which you are a traitor to the people.”

As soon as the accusation of treachery is made, all is lost. Coriolanus explodes with wrath, denounces the lot of them, and says of the people, “I would not buy their mercy at the price of one fair word.” When the sentence of perpetual banishment from his own city is pronounced upon him, Coriolanus returns wholly to the language of the beginning of the play. “You common cry of curs, whose breath I hate as reek o’ the rotten fens; whose loves I prize as the dead carcasses of unburied men that do corrupt my air, I banish you!” And he curses them:

“Have the power still to banish your defenders, till at length your ignorance which finds not till it feels, making not reservation of yourselves, still your own foes, deliver you as most abated captives to some nation that won you without blows! Despising, for you, the city, thus I turn my back. There is a world elsewhere.”

“I banish you,” he says. “There is a world elsewhere,” he says. Just look at the utter autonomy he lays claim to in that “I banish you.” He reverses the question of agency. He’s not the banished, but the banisher as he alienates himself from them. His utter estrangement is underlined by his parting curses: he wishes the Romans abjectly enslaved to some nation that barely has to strike a blow to overcome them.

There’s perhaps a telling kind of emotional logic shaping his attempt, after his banishment, to reinvent himself as a man possessing no ties with Rome *at all*. It seems to speak directly to his sense that Volumnia has betrayed him—betrayed him by insisting that he reinvent himself according to *her* prescription in order to become consul. One of the most important aspects of his new identity as Rome’s enemy, as he articulates it in subsequent scenes of the tragedy, is that he is the author of himself, the maker of himself, the creator of himself; that he has no mother. He’s cutting the umbilical cord at last, both his connection with his family and his connection with his city.

It’s worth looking harder at Coriolanus’s refusal to acknowledge his dependence on community or kin—his desire to set himself beyond the need to negotiate with the rest of world. Even before Coriolanus has his showdown with Rome, his own language and that of other speakers in this play tends to construct the hero as either superhuman or inhuman, not quite one with the rest of society. “Make you a sword of me,” he tells his troops. He becomes the inhuman weapon, not the human wielder of the weapon. And here’s Cominius, proposing Coriolanus for the consulship, describing his deeds during the battle against the Volscians. Cominius says:

“From face to foot he was a thing of blood, whose every motion was timed with dying cries. Alone he enter’d the mortal gate of the city, which he, painted with shunless destiny, aidless came off and with a sudden reinforcement struck Corioles like a planet.”

He's a thing of blood, not a man. Acting alone as a one-person invasion force, he's described as a heavenly body striking the city. He's immune to human vulnerability on the one hand. He's above human weakness on the other.

When, later on, Coriolanus derides both the commoners and the very idea of soliciting their favor, the tribune Sicinius Velutus says, "You speak o' the people, as if you were a god to punish, not a man of their infirmity." You speak of the people as if you were a god who had the right to punish them, a deity who can smite from a distance with Olympian detachment, not a man who shares the same faults and weaknesses as other men.

And the double notion of Coriolanus as both a thing, something inhuman, and a god, something superhuman, becomes fused in the reports that trickle back to Rome after his banishment, when he leads the Volscian force against his own city. Cominius, having gone on an unsuccessful mission to turn his former friend away from the destruction of Rome, tells Menenius, "He is their god. He leads them like a thing made by some other deity than nature."

Later, we hear Menenius on the same topic after the failure of his own personal mission to beg Coriolanus to spare Rome. Menenius says, "When he walks, he moves like an engine, and the ground shrinks before his treading... He sits in his state, as a thing made for Alexander"—that is, like a statue made in the shape of Alexander the Great—"He wants nothing of a god"—he lacks nothing of a god—"but eternity and a heaven to throne in." Menenius presents him as an engine, as a thing, as a statue, as a god.

And finally, here's Coriolanus himself, when his own family comes to plead with him to spare Rome. He is urging himself to resist all pleas for mercy: "I'll never be such a gosling to obey instinct, but stand as if a man were author of himself and knew no other kin."

Self-authored, self-created, immune to pity, he will, he says, acknowledge no ties with other humans—no familial ties, no social ties, no political ties.

But in the end, he cannot sustain this position. Coriolanus is not nonhuman. Coriolanus is not a god and Coriolanus is not the author of himself. His terrifying mother Volumnia is his author. She's helped to shape his value system and to mold his actions. And next time I will look at the astonishing confrontation between mother and son that undoes Coriolanus at the last.

Lecture Twenty-Three *Coriolanus* III—Mothers and Killers

Scope:

In the second crisis of *Coriolanus*, the hero, having allied himself with Rome's enemies and led their armies to Rome's gates, is persuaded to spare his city by the impassioned and highly manipulative speeches of his mother (an act of mercy that causes his new allies to plot his murder). This lecture looks more closely at the relationship between Coriolanus and Volumnia, examining the destructive contradictions within the system of values she has nurtured in him. A careful examination of their final confrontation addresses the nuances of the triangular relationship that binds together Coriolanus, his mother, and mother Rome. The lecture concludes by suggesting that Coriolanus's assassination in yet another marketplace recapitulates the tragedy's central opposition between its protagonist's desire for heroic individualism and his inescapable entanglement in his obligations to—and dependency upon—the larger community.

Outline

- I. The relationship between Coriolanus and Volumnia is even more striking than that between Hamlet and Gertrude, and Shakespeare offers a good deal of information about the way she has shaped his character.
 - A. In the tragedy's one scene of domestic life, we are made privy to Volumnia's own system of values in her conversation with her daughter-in-law, Virgilia.
 - B. According to Shakespearian scholar Janet Adelman, proper manhood, for Volumnia, involves valorous action that refuses self-indulgence or the indulgence of bodily appetite.
 - C. She celebrates masculine aggression and gleefully enumerates the scars that her son has amassed in battle.
 - D. She has instilled in Coriolanus a fear of dependence and neediness, while nevertheless keeping him still dependent on her approval.
- II. Coriolanus's absolute scorn of the plebeians becomes more understandable in the light of his relationship with Volumnia.
 - A. He associates the qualities of dependence, hunger, and need he has been taught to repress with the undisciplined behavior of the commoners.
 - B. He portrays the commoners in terms of their threatening mouths: for him, they constitute a many-headed monster with multiple tongues.
 - C. What he perceives as their infantilism is, for him, the very opposite of what it means to be a true Roman male.
- III. When the exiled Coriolanus arrives at the house of his enemy, Tullus Aufidius, he describes his complete alienation from his city.
 - A. He considers himself to have been fed to the hungry mouths of the plebeians by the treacherous patricians—nothing but his name remains of his Roman identity.
 - B. He has come “in mere spite” against Rome to ally himself with Aufidius.
- IV. After Coriolanus has brought an army to the gates of Rome and refused his friends' pleas that he spare his city, the arrival of his wife, mother, and son provokes a new crisis of identity.
 - A. He seeks to deny the ties of nature but must confront the collapse of his fantasy of self-authorship.

- B. He tellingly compares himself to a bad actor who has now forgotten his part.
 - C. He is appalled when his mother (reversing the usual hierarchy) kneels to him: in declaring her action “unnatural,” he implicitly reaffirms the relationship between them.
- V. Volumnia, an expert in political theater, offers a sustained assault on Coriolanus’s intention to destroy Rome.
- A. She describes the impossible dilemma of his family, who can neither wish him defeated by Rome nor wish him victorious over his city.
 - B. She declares that he will march to the destruction of his city over her dead body and makes the assault on his country interchangeable with trampling on his mother’s womb.
 - C. She insists that it is possible to make an honorable peace between the Volscians and Romans.
 - D. She describes the dishonorable place he will win in the historical record if he destroys his city.
 - E. She invokes his duty to her as his mother, as well as to mother Rome.
 - F. She finally accuses him of being the son of a Volscian mother, in effect disowning him.
- VI. Coriolanus’s surrender to Volumnia’s persuasions evokes responses that underline the impossibility of his position.
- A. He himself recognizes that Volumnia has won a victory for Rome that will be lethal to him.
 - B. Aufidius suggests that the mercy to Rome that Volumnia has described as the path of honor is a dishonorable act from the point of view of Coriolanus’s new allies.
- VII. Coriolanus’s position is exacerbated by the strains in his relationship with Aufidius.
- A. When Coriolanus had presented himself to Aufidius, he had sought a military alliance for mutual convenience, but Aufidius had described their new bond in much more personal terms.
 - B. By the time their forces are threatening Rome, Aufidius is smarting under Coriolanus’s pride while recognizing that his nature has not changed.
 - C. When Coriolanus spares Rome, Aufidius perceives him as a faithless partner who has broken a contract and has betrayed and diminished Aufidius himself.
- VIII. The play’s last scene recapitulates many of the work’s central themes.
- A. Once again, Coriolanus is accused of treachery and reacts violently.
 - B. Aufidius mocks him for showing mercy to Rome and describes his response to Volumnia as that of a dependent baby and “boy of tears.”
 - C. Coriolanus reclaims his identity as defeater of the Volscians, reasserts his autonomy and heroic selfhood (“alone I did it!”), and provokes his own death.
 - D. His angry response to the epithet “Boy!” paradoxically reminds us that he has always been Volumnia’s boy.
 - E. Volumnia, meanwhile, enjoys a triumphal entry into Rome along with her grandson, ready to shape another boy into adulthood.

Essential Reading:

Shakespeare, *Coriolanus*.

Supplementary Reading:

Adelman, *Suffocating Mothers: Fantasies of Maternal Origin in Shakespeare’s Plays*, pp. 147–164.

Questions to Consider:

1. Look back at the scenes in Act 1 in which Aufidius speaks of his feelings toward Coriolanus. Can his speeches in those scenes be reconciled with the way he behaves when Coriolanus arrives at his house in Act 4?
2. Discuss the role of Virgilia in *Coriolanus*. Why does Coriolanus's relationship with his mother seem to be so much more important than his relationship with his wife?

Lecture Twenty-Three

Coriolanus III—Mothers and Killers

Let me begin where I left off last time. By Act 5 of *Coriolanus*, the hero, seeking his revenge against the Rome that banished him, has allied himself with Aufidius, his former enemy, and is at his city's gates with a Volscian army, refusing to entertain any pleas for mercy, refusing to recognize any natural ties to his former community. As a last desperate resort, his mother, wife, and child go out to plead with him. And as they kneel at his feet, Coriolanus tries to maintain his stony indifference. I will not obey human instinct, he says, "But stand as if a man were author of himself and knew no other kin."

But what does it mean for Coriolanus to claim to be self-made in the very face of the woman who authored him, who both gave birth to him and shaped his character? I want to look at Coriolanus's relationship with Volumnia, the mother who brought him up alone after his father's death. We haven't had an important mother/son relationship in a tragedy since *Hamlet*. And in fact the tragedies have been full of missing mothers. Where is Laertes and Ophelia's mother, or Goneril, Regan, and Cordelia's mother, or Edgar's mother, or Edmund's mother, or Desdemona's mother?

Coriolanus has a little son, and we may perhaps see the ethos in which the boy's father was raised when we are offered, in Act 1, scene 3, a conversation between Coriolanus's mother, his wife Virgilia, and their friend Valeria, who has come to pay a social call. Valeria asks, "How does your little son?" and is informed by Volumnia, who often speaks for Virgilia, that the child would "rather see the swords and hear a drum, than look upon his school-master." To which Valeria replies:

"O' my word, the father's son. I'll swear, 'tis a very pretty boy. O' my troth, I looked upon him o' Wednesday half an hour together. He has such a confirmed countenance. I saw him run after a gilded butterfly and when he caught it, he let it go again; and after it again; and over and over he comes, and again; caught it again; or whether his fall enraged him, or how 'twas, he did so set his teeth and tear it. O I warrant, how he mammocked it!"

I don't think you need to know the sense of the archaic verb "to mammock" to get the sense of what's going on here.

Volumnia tellingly remarks, "One on's father's moods." It is a striking little moment. Valeria is charmed by the little boy's furious violence. The boy's grandmother finds this slightly-out-of-control aggression to reflect his father's nature precisely, and neither of them find such behavior out of place in the son of a noble Roman family.

Let's look further at the same scene. Volumnia opens it by chiding Virgilia for lamenting her husband's absence in the war against Corioles. When her son was very young, she recalls:

"To a cruel war I sent him; from whence he returned, his brows bound with oak"—the oak leaf crown of a victor—"I tell thee, daughter, I sprang not more in joy at first hearing he was a man-child than now in first seeing he had proved himself a man."

Her son's reputation for valor is more important to her than any private or domestic pleasure Volumnia might enjoy, and she continues, "Hear me profess...had I a dozen sons, each in my love alike, and none less dear than thine and my good Marcius, I had rather had eleven die nobly for their country than one voluptuously surfeit out of action." The telling opposition here is between the noble death in war and the act of abandoning oneself to pleasure and to surfeiting, to overindulging, one's appetites. Manhood, for Volumnia, is about being independent of all the softer appetites. I sometimes think that Volumnia should have married Octavius.

Volumnia delights in imagining a bloody Coriolanus trampling down his Volscian enemies. She goes on to say that blood becomes a man more than gilded metal becomes a trophy. And she also remarks, "The breasts of Hecuba, when she did suckle Hector, look'd not lovelier than Hector's forehead when it spit

forth blood at Grecian sword.” Hecuba, in Greek mythology, is the wife of King Priam of Troy. Their son Hector is the city’s noblest defender in the siege of Troy. Volumnia displaces a domestic, nurturing image—that of a woman suckling a baby—with a preferred image of a male warrior whose wound is spitting forth blood. Shakespearean critic Janet Adelman has argued that this translation of a scene of male dependency and hunger—the baby suckling the mother’s breast—into one of male autonomy and aggression offers an important clue to the belief system that shapes the actions of both Volumnia and her son. And of course Volumnia has succeeded brilliantly in making this vision of manhood a reality—remember the blood-covered Coriolanus who says to his followers, “Make you a sword of me.”

Volumnia’s characteristic attitude to blood and battle is further evident when she celebrates her son’s victory against the Volscians with Menenius and gleefully counts up the scars he has amassed. Although here, to be sure, her pleasure has a very specifically political subtext. She is looking ahead to the public display of all those scars in the marketplace to win the consulship.

So, this is the kind of mindset that has shaped Coriolanus. Let’s reconsider the displacement of the mouth of the dependent male baby feeding at the mother’s breast by the wounds which bedeck the warrior. Coriolanus seems to think real men aren’t hungry. They’re not hungry for food, like the plebeians. They’re not hungry for public congratulations; he shouts down all attempts to praise his deeds. They don’t *need*. The irony, of course, is that Coriolanus *is* still dependent on Volumnia’s approval. That’s why she alone can persuade him to try to humble himself before the plebs in Act 3. That’s why she and only she can save Rome from his revenge in Act 5.

Mind you, if Coriolanus has become a man by seeking to repress every aspect of the needy, hungry child he once was, his almost pathological scorn for the plebeians becomes a little more understandable. The first image of this play is of many hungry mouths. The citizens of Rome are starving. They claim the public storehouses controlled by the patricians are full of grain. They want it to be released to them. And from the start, Coriolanus describes the mob in terms of their hungry mouths. For him, they’re a many-headed monster with multiple tongues. From his point of view they are threatening, needy, infantile, the very opposite of what it means to be a true Roman male. By their very existence they offer a negative example of what it is to be noble: “Who deserves greatness deserves your hate.” It’s almost a defining condition: that being great, for him, is to be hated by the plebs.

But as I’ve remarked previously, to achieve the position of consul, a man must admit need. He’s got to solicit popular support. And in exposing yourself to the crowd, you must offer yourself up to all their hungry mouths.

When the exiled Coriolanus turns up on the doorstep of his enemy, Aufidius, in Act 4, he describes what Rome has done to him and insists he has severed all ties with the city and the community which he feels to have betrayed him. Yes, he is Coriolanus, but:

“Only that name remains. The cruelty and envy of the people, permitted by our dastard nobles, who have all forsook me, hath devour’d the rest, and suffer’d me by the voice of slaves to be whoop’d out of Rome. Now, this extremity hath brought me to thy hearth, not out of hope—mistake me not—to save my life, for if I had fear’d death, of all the men i’ the world I would have ’voided thee, but in mere spite, to be full quit of those my banishers, stand I before thee here.”

Nothing but his name remains of his Roman identity. The mouths of the plebs have devoured the rest of his Romanness, and the patricians have been complicit in feeding him to the plebs. And now he declares he stands before Aufidius ready to exact his revenge “in mere spite” to be rid of those who were his banishers. “In mere spite.” That’s an awfully telling word choice to describe his motivation. There’s something at once childish and very scary here. As if the kid, who screams, “I’ll kill you” at the other children who won’t let him join their games, actually had the power to enact his threat. For Coriolanus, we gather, the only identity he now wants to claim is that of Rome’s destroyer, and this is confirmed

when he won't listen to the pleas of Cominius, his former battle companion, or to those of Menenius, who is the nearest thing he has to a close male friend. He acknowledges no ties with them.

But then, of course, Rome stops sending diplomats and warriors to plead its case, and Coriolanus's family shows up at Aufidius's camp. This is his reaction: "My wife comes foremost; then the honour'd mould wherein this trunk was framed, and in her hand the grandchild to her blood. But, out, affection! All bond and privilege of nature, break! Let it be virtuous to be obstinate. What is that curt'sy worth?" It's another of those internal stage directions. His wife has obviously curtsied to him:

"What is that curt'sy worth, or those doves' eyes, which can make gods forsworn? I melt and am not of stronger earth than others. My mother bows, as if Olympus to a molehill should in supplication nod, and my young boy hath an aspect of intercession, which great nature cries 'Deny not.' Let the Volsces plough Rome and harrow Italy. I'll never be such a gosling to obey instinct, but stand, as if a man were author of himself and knew no other kin."

Ties of nature cannot be denied so easily. He's not made of a different material than other men. He's melting. His young boy's pleading face is such that "great nature"—that is, natural instinct, kinship, love—insists he must not deny the child, and he's increasingly aware of the impossibility of his fantasy of being self-authored, the fantasy which denies any kind of dependency on a mother.

His wife greets him and Coriolanus mutters, "Like a dull actor now I have forgot my part, and I am out." As we know, Coriolanus is rotten at acting. And this speech concedes he has been playing a part in playing out his fantasy of being utterly independent of any ties with any other human beings. And now he is out of his part, he has forgotten his lines, he is in danger of completely losing sight of the new script he had tried to write for himself.

Coriolanus kneels to his mother, shows loving duty to her—and then is horrified when Volumnia kneels to him. Shakespeare gives us a spin on that resonant moment in *King Lear*, when Lear emerges from madness and Cordelia kneels to ask his blessing and then *he* kneels to her. We should note the weightiness of these moments in cultures that insists upon the subordination of children, even adult children, to parents. Coriolanus finds Volumnia's action of kneeling to him supremely unnatural and disturbing. Volumnia, of course, knows all about political theater, all about telling gestures. Just think of the way she tried to coach Coriolanus before he returned to the Roman marketplace. It is in her interest that her son think that her kneeling to him is unnatural, because if he believes that, he is implicitly reaffirming that there *is* a relationship between them in which he should naturally show deference to her.

Volumnia's assault on Coriolanus begins with her describing the impossible dilemma his relations are now caught in. They cannot wish him defeated by Rome and led in disgrace as a traitor. But neither can they wish him to sack their city. And then Volumnia gradually turns the screw. If I cannot persuade you to show mercy, she says, "Thou shalt no sooner march to assault thy country than to tread—trust to't, thou shalt not—on thy mother's womb that brought thee to this world."

She is threatening to commit suicide, and she makes the act of assaulting his country interchangeable with that of treading on his mother's womb. He will have to march to victory over her dead body; it will lie between him and the capture of Rome. But Rome, itself, is now positioned as the mother he is not permitted to deny. To destroy Rome is to destroy his mother.

Volumnia's next move is to foreground the question of honor, to insist that she is not asking him to betray the Volscians in order to save the Romans. That would show her to be intent on tainting his honor, she says. But no: "Our suit is that you reconcile them. While the Volsces may say 'This mercy we have show'd,' the Romans, 'This we receive,' and each in either side give the all-hail to thee."

And then she compares this happy outcome to the result of what he'll do if he destroys his city. He would then gain a name for himself "whose repetition will be dogg'd with curses" and his history would be

summarized by the world thus: “The man was noble, but with his last attempt he wiped it out, destroy’d his country, and his name remains to the ensuing age abhorr’d.”

She’s reminding him, of course, that his reputation is not under his own control: it is the historical record that will shape it. Finally, she makes a much more personal move: “There’s no man in the world more bound to’s mother, yet here he lets me prate.” If he does not listen to her, acknowledge that her request is in no way dishonorable, he is withholding the obedience due to a mother. She has now translated the political back into the personal. But of course she has already insisted that to destroy Rome is to trample on her womb. Rome and Volumnia have been fused as the mothers who insist on their due, and the personal is always the political here.

Finally she deploys her last weapon. Speaking to Virgilia and the little boy she says, “Let’s go! This fellow had a Volscian to his mother; his wife is in Corioli and his child like him by chance.” “This fellow had a Volscian to his mother”: she’s saying his kin are now elsewhere. She’s coming very close to disowning him, to saying: you are not my son. His response is not verbal at first but gestural. In one of the most eloquent stage directions in Shakespeare we’re told: “He holds her by the hand, silent.” He clasps her hand; he silently reconfirms the bond between them. He is not author of himself. He is not made by some other deity than nature. He has admitted his common humanity, even as he suggests the results may be fatal for him: “O mother, mother! What have you done?” You’ve won a great victory for Rome, he goes on to say, “But, for your son,—believe it, O believe it, most dangerously you have with him prevail’d... But, let it come.” He accepts the finality of it all, the no going back. What’s done is done.

And then we see Coriolanus doing something he’s never done before, not once in this play: he turns to a person other than Volumnia for ratification of his actions. He turns to Aufidius and says, “Would you have heard a mother less or granted less, Aufidius?”

But although Aufidius seems to confirm the rightness of his action—“I was moved withal,” he says; I, too, was moved by your mother’s pleas—we also hear Aufidius speak aside, saying, “I am glad thou hast set thy mercy and thy honour at difference in thee.” I can exploit this to my own advantage is the subtext here.

Aufidius insists on opposition between honor and mercy. There’s another instance of just how up for grabs terms like honor can be. Volumnia has argued it would be dishonorable for Coriolanus to be unmerciful, since he is, after all, a Roman. But for Aufidius it is dishonorable to spare Rome, since Coriolanus is now an ally of the Volscians. Coriolanus, of course, has ended up in one of those impossible situations that shape tragic drama, situations in which there are no right choices to be made.

Aufidius has his own grievances against Coriolanus. When his exiled enemy shows up on his doorstep and invites Aufidius either to kill him or to accept him as an ally against Rome, Aufidius says, “Know thou first, I loved the maid I married. Never man sigh’d truer breath. But that I see thee here, thou noble thing, more dances my rapt heart than when I first my wedded mistress saw bestride my threshold.” Coriolanus thinks he’s negotiating a military alliance for mutual convenience. Aufidius seems to be celebrating a wedding—or rather the creation of an emotional bond that is stronger than that between a wife and a husband. But this is an alliance which for Aufidius has a very short honeymoon. Even before Volumnia’s arrival to plead for Rome, he has said to one of his officers, “He bears himself more proudlier, even to my person, than I thought he would when first I did embrace him. Yet, his nature in that’s no changeling.” His nature has not changed. Aufidius perceives the impossibility of Coriolanus changing even before his ally recognizes that he hasn’t been able to reinvent himself.

When Coriolanus spares Rome, he is from Aufidius’s perspective a faithless partner who has broken a contract and has both betrayed and diminished Aufidius himself. As the play’s last scene begins, we see Aufidius actively plotting Coriolanus’s destruction. And the final confrontation between Aufidius and Coriolanus in the marketplace of Corioles replays in some respects the scene at Act 3, scene 3 in the Roman marketplace, in which Coriolanus is banished from Rome. In both scenes, other people are

secretly manipulating the action: the tribunes in Act 3, scene 3, Aufidius and his fellow conspirators in the later scene. And in both, there's no going back after someone calls Coriolanus "traitor."

As Coriolanus hands over the new treaty to the city elders, Aufidius makes his intervention, "Read it not, noble lords, but tell the traitor, in the high'st degree, he hath abused your powers." "Traitor? How now?" says Coriolanus. "Ay, traitor, Marcius!" "Marcius?" Why is he calling him by that name? "Ay, Marcius," says Aufidius:

"Caius Marcius, dost thou think I'll grace thee with that robbery, thy stol'n name Coriolanus in Corioli? You lords and heads o' the state, perfidiously he has betray'd your business and given up, for certain drops of salt, your city Rome—I say 'your city'—to his wife and mother. Breaking his oath and resolution like a twist of rotten silk, never admitting counsel o' the war, but at his nurse's tears he whined and roar'd away your victory."

Aufidius first calls him traitor, then denies him his identity as Coriolanus, next infantilizes him, turns humane mercy into unmanliness. He then reduces Volumnia's powerful plea to "certain drops of salt"—a few tears. He redefines his mother, tellingly, as his nurse, and then reduces him within his language to a whimpering, dependent baby. When Coriolanus starts to expostulate, invoking the god of war, "Hear'st thou, Mars?" Aufidius responds scathingly, "Name not the god, thou boy of tears!"

And Coriolanus, predictably, explodes. He calls Aufidius a "cur," just as he called the people "you common cry of curs" before his banishment from Rome, and in his own diatribe, he reduces Aufidius to the defeated enemy "who wears my stripes"—the mark of my whip—even as he reclaims his identity as defeater of the Volscians, reminds everybody present of his victory earlier, and denies that epithet, that hated epithet, "boy." "Cut me to pieces, Volscies; men and lads, stain all your edges on me! Boy! False hound! If you have writ your annals true, 'tis there that, like an eagle in a dove-cote, I flutter'd your Volscians in Corioli. Alone I did it. Boy!"

"Alone I did it. Boy!" He demands his death at their hands. He insists on seizing the responsibility for it from them. It's the same kind of reversal as when he told Rome "*I banish you.*"

And then not only Aufidius, not only Aufidius's conspirators, but all the people in the marketplace are buying for blood; the hated voices have come to feed upon Coriolanus again, and Coriolanus is slain.

Let's ponder again Coriolanus's last, provoking words: "Alone I did it!" He boasts of his previous victory and then in scorn and distaste repeats, in order to deny, the hated epithet, "boy." Within his very last words we see Coriolanus's desire for autonomy, independence, heroic selfhood—"Alone, I did it"—*and* his fear of having to admit to dependency, neediness, and weakness. He *was* the heroic loner who won that victory. But even the most heroic individual is also some mother's son, and whatever Coriolanus thinks he has done alone in his life has been shaped every step of the way by the fact he *is* Volumnia's boy, including the actions that brought him to this other marketplace, where despised voices are trying to reduce him to the dependent "boy of tears"—"Alone I," on the one hand, "boy," on the other. The tension between them is never reconciled. He dies with the impossible opposition still on his lips.

It's important, however, to note that although this concludes the play, it's not the only ending it offers us. Coriolanus attempts to return to the Volscies in triumph with the treaty that is still advantageous to them and is killed, but Volumnia has a truly triumphant entry into Rome in the scene that precedes his death. "Behold our patroness, the life of Rome!" cries a senator. "Patroness": they mean our protector, our guardian, and also perhaps the mother, who has given new life to Rome, or perhaps both a mother and a father, since the root of the word patron is *pater*, father.

And she returns with the other Romans who accompanied her to plead with Coriolanus, including her grandson, the child whose savaging of the butterfly she'd approved four acts back in the play. Volumnia is back in Rome with another boy to shape into manhood, to start the process all over again.

Lecture Twenty-Four Conclusion—Beyond Tragedy?

Scope:

This lecture begins by addressing the elusiveness of “Shakespearean tragedy” as a descriptive category, briefly summarizing the idiosyncrasies of some of the author’s experiments. It then discusses Shakespeare’s most striking preoccupations as a tragic dramatist, reexamining not only the dilemmas of his tragic protagonists but also the nature of the “tragic universes” that shape their choices. “Transgression” in the world of these plays puts people beyond the pale of normal human experience. What they have suffered or learned can become literally unspeakable, and tragic time always posits a point of no return, the irrevocability of one’s actions. A teasing reminder of such irrevocability, the aborted reunion between father and beloved daughter in *King Lear*, is revisited in the “post-tragic” plays Shakespeare writes at the very end of his career. The lecture concludes with an account of what happens when our playwright moves beyond tragedy.

Outline

- I. It is difficult to apply any kind of limiting definition to Shakespeare’s tragedies: they encompass a striking diversity of experience, and Shakespeare regularly redefines the nature and the boundaries of “the tragic.”
 - A. Although tragic drama is much concerned with impossible or destructive choices and with the process of making such choices, the business of choosing is rendered very differently in the various imaginative spaces of these plays.
 - B. If one considers the acquisition of tragic knowledge in these plays, one can see dramatic divergences between the nature and scope of the insights won by Shakespeare’s various protagonists.
- II. It is perhaps more useful to consider the general characteristics of the imagined worlds in which the chief characters suffer and act.
 - A. In all six of the mature tragedies, a complex array of both external and internal pressures bears down upon the actions of the protagonist.
 - B. It is a defining condition of these tragic universes that actions are irrevocable; an inexorable chain of cause and effect traps the protagonist after a certain point in his or her career.
- III. Thinking about the irrevocable nature of certain actions in tragedy, one might note that the Latin root of *transgress* literally means “to step beyond or across.”
 - A. The actions of Shakespeare’s tragic heroes move them from the territory of ordinary experience into a space of social and psychological alienation where all norms seem to be placed in question.
 - B. In the end, what they experience can never be adequately “unfolded”: even as they try to articulate their suffering or anger or special vision, they bear witness to its unspeakability.
- IV. Yet some of Shakespeare’s tragedies suggest a movement beyond the space of alienation and of non-reversible, linear time.
 - A. Cleopatra’s insistence upon her marriage to Antony in death recalls the endings we more usually associate with Shakespearean comedy—and in dressing as if to meet Antony for the first time at Cydnus, Cleopatra seems to hint that their story can begin all over again.
 - B. Another glimpse of this challenge to apparently unredeemable time occurs in *King Lear*, when Lear finds temporary peace in his reunion with Cordelia, although this hint of restoration is

obliterated by what follows.

- V. This dream of “redeeming the time” is revisited in certain plays Shakespeare wrote at the end of his career, between 1608 and 1611 (*Pericles*, *Cymbeline*, *The Winter’s Tale*, *The Tempest*).
- A. The plots of these plays, to some extent, echo those of the mature tragedies and contain very dark elements; they end, however, in reunion, reconciliation, betrothals, and marriages.
 - B. If characters make tragic errors—or are separated by potentially tragic circumstances—these errors may eventually be reversed: circumstances are ameliorated by human love, by the healing aspects of nature, and/or by direct supernatural intervention.
 - C. The sense that benevolent cosmic forces are at work in these dramas distinguishes them from the tragedies in which characters question whether any divine justice or shaping providence informs their world.
 - D. The eventual restoration of harmony requires a much longer time frame in these plays than in Shakespearean comedy: regeneration occurs by way of a new generation, and father/daughter relations have a particular emotional resonance in their plots.
- VI. These later plays seem to “write beyond the ending” of tragedy.
- A. The action of *The Tempest* originates in an act of usurpation and attempted murder. An ousted duke with magical powers has the chance to enact his revenge, but after tormenting his enemies, the apparently vengeful Prospero decides that forgiveness is the nobler course.
 - B. In the first half of *The Winter’s Tale*, a pathologically jealous husband brings about the death of his wife and disowns and abandons his infant daughter. The second half of the play “writes beyond” the *Othello* plot and the *Lear* plot: a lost wife and a lost daughter are restored and a sinning husband has the opportunity to repent.
 - C. Shakespeare transcends his own tragic art, taking us into a brave new world of wonder and grace.

Essential Reading:

Shakespeare, *The Winter’s Tale*.

Supplementary Reading:

Danson, *Shakespeare’s Dramatic Genres*.

Shakespeare, *The Tempest* (highly recommended!).

Questions to Consider:

1. Take a look at *The Winter’s Tale*. Like *King Lear*, it is a play in which the personified deity Nature is invoked by more than one character—how do the characters in *this* play imagine Nature’s nature and powers? Is Nature necessarily defined differently in the cosmos of the tragedies?
2. What have *you* found most interesting or question-provoking about Shakespeare’s tragic protagonists and the worlds they move in?

Lecture Twenty-Four Conclusion—Beyond Tragedy?

I'm going to have to start this last lecture with a confession. I can't in fact offer you a single tidy definition of what, exactly, constitutes Shakespearean tragedy. In part because the plays themselves resist a limiting definition; they encompass an enormous diversity of experience. From play to play, Shakespeare redefines the nature and the boundaries of "the tragic."

It is, for example, a critical commonplace that in tragedy the protagonist will be faced with some kind of dilemma, will have to make a choice that has far-reaching and fatal consequences. But if one looks at the individual plays, the business of choosing is represented very differently in their different imaginative spaces.

Some of the protagonists are very aware that they must make a choice. Recall Othello's words to Iago: "I think my wife be honest and I think she is not; I think that thou art just, but think thou art not." Hamlet is always presenting himself with choices. Is he going to endure the horrors of existence or commit suicide? Is he going to believe the ghost is indeed his father's spirit, or dismiss it as a servant of the devil? If he chooses to revenge his father, is he carrying out an act of conscience or doing murder?

Macbeth seems at first to be as introspective as Hamlet. He discusses all the implications of murdering Duncan; but it might be argued that, rather than consciously making a choice between following his conscience or ignoring it, he sidesteps the issue by responding instead to the alternative choice Lady Macbeth offers him between "being a real man," according to her distinctly problematic definition, or a coward. After the killing of Duncan, Macbeth insists he has no choice but to continue on the same path. "I am in blood stepp'd in so far that, should I wade no more, returning were as tedious as go o'er."

Lear, by contrast, doesn't even seem to realize that his actions at the beginning of the play constitute a terribly loaded choice. He must learn what it means to try to hold onto his authority while surrendering his power. He must learn what it means to try to retreat to the "kind nursery" of his youngest daughter rather than face his own mortality. He must learn what it means to take Goneril and Regan's protestations of love at face value and to disown Cordelia.

When Antony abandons Octavia and returns to Cleopatra, Shakespeare refuses to dramatize any soul-searching on his part about what it means to choose this course of action. He doesn't even devote a scene to Antony's reunion with Cleopatra; this takes place off stage. He seems to be much more interested in exploring the aftermath of choice. Antony's lingering sense of himself as a Roman, his investment in Roman evaluations of his behavior, and his simultaneous desire to escape the prescriptions Rome would place upon his actions.

Coriolanus can't even think of his actions in the marketplace as a choice. "Would you have me false to my own nature?" he asks his mother. He may eventually and consciously choose to readmit his kinship with Volumnia and Rome, but as he confronts the consequences of that choice, his words are very telling, "O mother, mother! What have *you* done?" he says.

I've used these examples to suggest how the specifics of any given play tend to qualify and complicate attempts to generalize about the nature of Shakespearean tragedy. If, for example, I'd chosen to look at the notion of tragic knowledge—the kind of special vision, illumination, recognition which, according to many critics, the tragic protagonist invariably arrives at in the course of choosing, suffering, and learning—I could argue for comparable divergences in the nature and scope of the insights won by the various heroes.

Indeed one might ask whether *any* of our protagonists reaches a complete understanding of themselves, or of the universe in which they have acted and suffered, or whether it is only the audience outside the action who can be granted this complete vision. Shakespeare himself appears to consciously foreground this

problem at times—for example, when he has Iago insist that “What you know, you know.” The villain’s words oblige us to ponder what Othello *does* know by the end of his tragedy.

I myself would suggest that it is less useful to attempt an all-purpose account of what constitutes a Shakespearean tragic hero than to think more specifically about the general characteristics of the imagined worlds in which his protagonists suffer and act. What characterizes a *universe* which we end up calling a tragic universe?

For a start, the worlds of all of these plays present a complex array of both external and internal pressures bearing down upon the actions of the protagonist, inflecting what he or she does, how he or she acts.

Macbeth offers us a complicated relationship between the hero’s own half-hidden desires, the teasing and equivocal prophecies of the witches which encourage those desires to surface, and the ambitions of a wife he loves who has a significant power to mold his behavior.

In *Othello*, Iago weaves his own web to trap the hero and becomes an external source of poison which taints his mind; but Othello’s choices and actions are also shaped by his own anxieties and insecurities. There’s his consciousness of his peculiar position, half inside, half outside the Venetian world, a world which may be as prone to regard him as a monstrous alien as to look at him as a heroic warrior. This consciousness of how he is constructed by others perhaps fosters his willingness to believe that Desdemona’s very readiness to love him may suggest her desires are somehow perverse, transgressive. And there’s also his own susceptibility to the misogyny of his society, a society which seems to see women as naturally prone to transgress, to betray, to run wild. “She has deceived her father and may thee,” says Brabantio. Iago’s dark plots don’t work in a vacuum.

In *King Lear*, the tragic action seems to be triggered by the drastically bad decisions of a stubborn, passionate old man—but these also play into the consciously malignant plots of Regan, Goneril, Cornwall, and Edmund, and the actions of all the characters unfold within the universe in which, at least if we believe Gloucester, human beings may be merely the playthings of a particularly capricious set of deities.

Hamlet’s actions are circumscribed and problematized by the commands of the ghost and by the plots and actions of Claudius, as well as by the workings of his own psyche. The time is out of joint, and his personal misery at his situation suggests that [tragedy may derive from] the impossible or conflicting demands placed upon somebody who was out of place from the very start. His tragedy has a lot to do with the fact that a conscience-ridden, thoughtful man is asked to perform a task that demands violent, confident, non-introspective action.

Antony’s actions are motivated not only by his own desires and appetites, but also by his complicated investment in a particular sense of his own history and his own identity, the intricate pressures of public life at a moment of political crisis and the competing demands made on his loyalties by both Octavius and Cleopatra, and, perhaps, by his vexed relationship with the whole value system of Rome.

Coriolanus’s tragedy is shaped by his own inflexible vision of what constitutes honorable behavior, by his inability to fathom the logic that underpins Rome’s social contracts, by his particular vulnerability to the woman who has molded his career, and also, of course, by the political machinations of the tribunes, who have their own agendas.

And it’s one of the defining conditions of these tragic universes that actions are not only enormously over-determined by the various forces working on the protagonist from both within and without, but they’re also irrevocable. An inexorable chain of cause and effect traps the hero after a certain point in his career.

In *Hamlet*, the death of Polonius is the watershed moment from which there’s no going back, although Hamlet may not realize this until later.

Macbeth says after the death of Duncan, “All is but toys. Renown and grace is dead.” “Macbeth shall sleep no more.” And his wife will later say, “Who would have thought the old man had so much blood in him?” The blood that just kept flowing and flowing for the rest of the play.

They all reach a moment from which there’s no going back. “All the perfumes of Arabia” will not clean this little hand. We might ponder at this moment the literal meaning of the word *transgression*. Through a Latin root, it means, literally, to step beyond or across, to move out of the territory of ordinary experience, to enter a space of alienation, a place where, for example, impossible reversals take place. A national hero finds himself banished; a father is betrayed by his children; a loving husband comes to think that his wife is the blackest of devils. A place where the natural world is invaded by a possibly malignant supernatural world—or where, perhaps worse, all faith in benign supernatural powers that shape or guide human destinies, or at least have some interest in them, all faith in this collapses completely, and one is left staring into a void, a place where language itself fails; where things are experienced that can never be properly “unfolded” to a bemused audience of outsiders; or where suffering is so extreme that one is left beyond words. “Howl, howl, howl,” says Lear, as he enters with dead Cordelia’s body in his arms. Or even if one has the words to articulate one’s condition, they only bear witness to its non-meaning. “Life,” says Macbeth, “is a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing.”

And yet, at the same time, certain of Shakespeare’s tragedies suggest a movement beyond the space of alienation. When Antony dies, Cleopatra declares the crown of life is gone. She says that there is nothing left remarkable beneath the visiting moon. But as she takes her own life she says, “Husband, I come.” She reaches out towards a reunion in death that hints at something we more normally associate with the endings of Shakespearean comedies—that is, a marriage. Indeed, she is humorously distressed when Iras falls dead before she does, because she fears her attendant will steal the first kiss of greeting from Antony in the afterlife. Cleopatra doesn’t seem to be trapped by the linear, unredeemable chronology of tragedy in which “what’s done is done.” So far as she’s concerned, their story can begin all over again. “I am again for Cydnus, to meet Mark Antony.”

We glimpse something akin to this challenge to apparently unredeemable time in *Lear*. I’ve mentioned the irrevocability of choices or actions in tragedy. The tragic protagonist may perhaps achieve some kind of understanding of what he or she has done, but cannot turn the clock back to redeem it. One of things that makes *King Lear* perhaps the most wrenching of the plays is that we’re teased with the possibility that problematic choices may *not* after all be irrevocable; that we might, after all, transcend tragedy. Think of the reunion scene in Act 4 of the play. Lear gets to make amends to the daughter he wronged at the start. He receives the affirmation of Cordelia’s boundless love and forgiveness. He learns humility. “I am a very foolish fond old man...and, to deal plainly, I fear I am not in my perfect mind.”

In his new honesty and newfound peace, he might seem on the verge of redeeming his shattering of the father/daughter bond, but the forces unleashed in Lear’s world by the errors of both Lear and Gloucester won’t let things end there. Cordelia’s forces lose the battle, Lear and Cordelia are captured, and the vision of a world where father and daughter are happily reunited and Lear can repair his errors and indeed set his rest upon her kind nursery is now only the fantasy of an old madman as he’s led off to prison. And when Cordelia is murdered, Lear is left questioning the justice of a universe where dogs and rats have life but not his virtuous and forgiving daughter. The brief glimpse of a restored order, informed by forgiveness and love, is obliterated as we return to a world whose gods seem either to be absent or, if present, tormenting humanity for their sport.

However, that scene in which Lear and Cordelia are reunited, that fragile glimpse of time redeemed in a scene organized around a reunion of family members and celebrating a daughter’s healing love, turns out to have a resonance, to have reverberations, which lasts far beyond the wrenching conclusion of *King Lear*.

Between the years 1608 and 1611, Shakespeare returns to the scenario I’ve just described, the scenario which he had written and then shattered in the last acts of *King Lear*. He embeds variations on this theme

in a series of plays which critics have often found difficult to classify under nice tidy labels. The plays are *Pericles*, *Cymbeline*, *The Winter's Tale*, and *The Tempest*. Sometimes they're called Shakespeare's tragicomedies. Sometimes they're called his romances. Sometimes they're simply called the late plays. Their plots contain many events which one might well expect to find in the tragedies. In both *Cymbeline* and *The Winter's Tale*, we see a husband's uncalled for and potentially murderous suspicion of his wife's fidelity. In *Cymbeline* and *The Winter's Tale*, a father disowns his daughter. In *The Tempest*, there's a prince whose brother usurps his throne and arranges for him to be put out of the way. In *Pericles*, a father lapses into a kind of madness after the loss of his daughter.

But these plays don't end like tragedies—they end in reunion, reconciliation, betrothals, and marriages. If characters make tragic errors or are separated by potentially tragic circumstances, then these errors may eventually be redeemed, these circumstances ameliorated by human charity and love, by the healing aspects of nature, even by direct supernatural intervention.

Let me pause on that last idea. The sense that benevolent cosmic forces are actually players in these dramas, working to heal rifts, to enable atonement—and “at-one-ment,” reunion—offers a particularly striking contrast to the Shakespearean tragic universes where people tend to end up questioning whether the gods exist at all, or whether there's any divine justice or shaping providence behind the scenes of the “stage of fools” where people play out their lives. In the tragedies it is unclear whether nature is a benign force or a devouring deity, red in tooth and claw. And when supernatural beings enter into their action—like the ghost in *Hamlet*, the witches in *Macbeth*—those forces are surrounded by an aura of ambiguity. They are always, potentially, representatives of the forces of darkness. But in these late plays, by contrast, supernatural forces seem to act on behalf of human beings, and nature is a potentially healing force.

Now, of course, the late plays aren't the only dramas Shakespeare wrote in which confusions and conflicts are resolved and special kinds of union come into being. The romantic comedies he wrote in the 1590s repeatedly bring order out of confusion, unite lovers, heal rifts in the community. But in these much later plays, the problems to be resolved are more serious than those which we see in most of the comedies, and the time frame in which actions may be redeemed and reconciliation achieved is much longer.

In *The Winter's Tale*, a daughter who is born early in the play must grow up to sexual maturity before a happy ending can be achieved. There's a 14- or 15-year time gap between Act 3 and Act 4 of that work. In *The Tempest*, although the actual action of the play only occupies one afternoon, the crises which must be resolved in that afternoon have their roots many years in the past, when the hero's daughter, who's now 15, was merely a toddler.

In tragedy, time works in a linear manner, and involves a perpetual sense of irrevocable loss. What is done cannot be undone. The dead cannot be brought back to life. Horribly wrong choices cannot be fully redeemed. But the timeline of these late plays seems to be cyclical: a new generation can undo the faults of their parents. Regeneration occurs by way of that new generation. These are the healing cycles of nature, in which spring always follows winter, bringing with it the promise of new life. They're not just turns of the wheel of capricious and indifferent fortune.

One has a feeling, reading these later plays, that Shakespeare is writing beyond the ending of tragedy. In *The Tempest*, for example, the action of Act 1 prepares us for something like a tragedy of revenge. The protagonist, Duke Prospero, has had his realm taken from him by his own brother—shades of those plotting kinsmen in *Hamlet* and *Macbeth*. The brother, wicked Antonio, has plotted against Prospero with the help of the ruler of a neighboring state. Prospero and his infant daughter were sent into exile, alone in a ship that was barely seaworthy, with the expectation that they would perish. But they made landfall and have lived on a near-uninhabited island for 15 years, and Prospero has become skilled in the occult and magical learning that allows him now to detect the presence of his enemies sailing near his island, and he creates a tempest which brings their ship to his shores.

We don't know at the start of the play what Prospero will do with Antonio and Antonio's allies, now they're at his mercy. It's not even clear that Prospero knows what he will do. He torments them with magical spectacles that recall to them their own guilty acts and drive them to the verge of madness. But in the end, Prospero learns forgiveness. He learns it from the promptings of one of the elemental spirits who serves him on the island. And he declares that the rarer action—the nobler action—is in virtue rather than vengeance. We're not having a revenge tragedy, after all. And his daughter, Miranda, becomes an instrument of reconciliation in the new generation through her love for the son of the neighbor monarch who betrayed him. Shakespeare transcends the boundaries of anything resembling a revenge tragedy here.

The dynamic of “writing beyond the ending” of tragedy, a boundary crossing that is its own kind of felicitous transgression, is seen even more clearly in *The Winter's Tale*. The first three acts of this play unfold like a very compressed tragedy. Leontes, the king of Sicilia, becomes pathologically suspicious of his wife. He's an Othello who is also his own Iago. He believes Hermione to have betrayed him with his best friend Polixenes. Leontes's soliloquies reveal his diseased imagination as he recreates the reality about him in accordance with his own jealous suspicions. He declares his newborn daughter to be a bastard, to be the other man's child, and orders her sent out to be exposed to the cruelties of nature. His little son wastes away with grief at the accusations against his mother and dies. And Hermione, his wife, appears to have collapsed and perished at the very moment she is, in fact, exonerated by the oracular testimony of the god Apollo. Leontes has depopulated his world and is left frozen in grief and repentance.

But in Acts 4 and 5 of the play a new dynamic takes over. We move to the country where the infant Perdita was left to die—Leontes's daughter. She is in fact rescued and brought up by local shepherds. She's not lost to cruel nature but nurtured within a healing natural world and will eventually return to her father's kingdom with her betrothed, the son of the very man Leontes thought had betrayed him. Not knowing the beautiful young woman's identity, Leontes greets the couple as if he is seeing in them his own lost wife and son, and declares that they are to be “welcome hither as is the spring to the earth.” He invokes the regenerative powers of the seasonal cycle. *The Winter's Tale* is not to remain in the frozen territory of winter.

At the very end of the play, after Perdita's true identity is revealed, there's an astonishing scene where Leontes, his new family, and his reconciled friend Polixenes visit the house of a noblewoman Paulina, who has been the staunchest defender of the slandered queen. Ostensibly they're there to admire a statue she has commissioned of the lost Hermione. It's so lifelike that Leontes thinks it moves, and Paulina advises him that she can indeed bring it to life. “It is required you do awake your faith,” she says tellingly, to the king whose faith had so strikingly failed him when he had no faith in his wife. And the statue steps down from its pedestal and when Leontes touches it he gasps, “O she's warm!” It's a moment that rewrites poignantly a moment at the start of the play when Leontes became possessed by jealousy. At that point, watching Hermione engage in innocent banter with Polixenes, he'd said, “Too hot, too hot!” But now he reaches out towards warm, loving, female flesh. “O she's warm!” His words and action redeem the moment in Act 1 when his imagination clung to his diseased vision of Hermione's “hotness.”

Hermione it turns out has survived in hiding, and is restored to Leontes when her daughter is restored to her and when her husband becomes capable of this healing leap of faith. The scene also powerfully rewrites the moment in *Othello* when the protagonist, his eyes fully open to his errors, contemplates the irrevocability of his murderous wrath. There's no resurrecting Desdemona. Othello, touching her body, can only report her to be “Cold, cold, my girl! Even like thy chastity.” And there's also no resurrecting Cordelia in *King Lear*, although in that play's unbearable last moments Lear thinks her lips move with breath even as he himself dies. But in *The Winter's Tale*, a daughter disowned and banished is restored to her father. The horror that marks the responses of the onstage onlookers at the end of *King Lear* is replaced by the wonder of those who see the family reunions of *The Winter's Tale*. In *King Lear*, people are punished by an uncaring universe far beyond what their errors deserve, or lose their lives in the absence of *any* transgression. In the world of this later play, a kind of cosmic grace offers restoration that goes beyond any simple poetic justice, and it's heartbreaking, but in quite a different sense.

Shakespeare's tragic vision is multifarious and astonishing and terrible and superb. But it's not his final word as an artist. It's revised and perhaps even transcended by his own art as he writes beyond tragedy. So keep reading.

Timeline

Major Events in English Political History, the Theater, and Shakespeare's Life

- 1558Elizabeth I comes to the throne.
- 1561–1562*Gorboduc* (Thomas Sackville and Thomas Norton): first English play in blank verse.
- 1564Birth of William Shakespeare.
Birth of Christopher Marlowe.
- 1569Elizabeth quashes a major rebellion in the north of England led by supporters of her Catholic rival (and a claimant to the English throne), Mary Queen of Scots.
- 1576James Burbage builds the first permanent playhouse (called The Theatre) on the south bank of the Thames. Eventually, seven playhouses are erected, but usually only two or three are in operation at any given time. Companies made up of young boys play at two indoor theaters.
- 1577Francis Drake circumnavigates the globe.
- 1581The Master of the Queen's Revels is empowered to approve (and censor) all plays intended for public performance.
- 1582Shakespeare marries Ann Hathaway.
- 1583Birth of Shakespeare's daughter Susanna.
- 1584–1585Sir Walter Raleigh annexes Virginia for the English crown; failure of the Roanoke colony.
1585.Birth of Shakespeare's twin children, Hamnet and Judith.
- 1587*Tamburlaine* (Christopher Marlowe).
The Spanish Tragedy (Thomas Kyd).
Execution of Mary Queen of Scots, mother of James VI of Scotland (who will later become James I of England).
- 1588Defeat of the Spanish Armada (a large invasion fleet sent against England).
- Late 1580s.....Shakespeare is now in London working as both an actor and a playwright.
- 1589–1593Shakespeare's earliest plays, including *Henry VI*, parts 1, 2, and 3; *Richard III*; *Comedy of Errors*; *Love's Labor's Lost*; *Titus Andronicus*.
- 1592*Doctor Faustus* (Christopher Marlowe).
First mention of Shakespeare by another author (insulting reference to him as an "upstart crow" in a pamphlet by Robert Greene).
- 1593Marlowe killed in a tavern brawl.
- 1593–1594Playhouses closed for many months because of a plague epidemic.
Shakespeare writes *Venus and Adonis* and *The Rape of Lucrece*.
- 1594–1600Shakespeare writes some of his best known comedies and histories, including *A Midsummer Night's Dream*; *Merchant of Venice*; *As You Like It*; *Much Ado About Nothing*; *Richard II*; *Henry IV*, parts 1 and 2; and *Henry V*.

- 1594Shakespeare listed as a joint stockholder of the acting company called the Lord Chamberlain’s Men; he will remain with this company for the rest of his career.
- 1596Death of Hamnet Shakespeare.
Romeo and Juliet.
Shakespeare successfully applies to the College of Heralds for a coat of arms for his family.
- 1597Shakespeare buys New Place, the second largest property in Stratford (over the next decade, he purchases a significant amount of additional land in Stratford).
- 1598Shakespeare listed as one of the “principal comedians” in Ben Jonson’s *Every Man in His Humour.*
Complimentary mention and listing of many of Shakespeare’s plays in Francis Meres’s *Palladis Tamia.*
- 1598–1599The Globe Theatre is built for the Lord Chamberlain’s Men. Used by the company until the closing of the theaters in 1642.
- 1599*Julius Caesar.*
- 1600–1608The Children of Saint Paul’s (one of the “boys’ companies”) active on the indoor stage of Blackfriars Theatre.
- 1600–1601*Hamlet.*
- 1601Failed rebellion of the Earl of Essex, previously a favorite courtier of Elizabeth I.
- 1603Death of Elizabeth I; James I succeeds to the throne.
The Lord Chamberlain’s Men become the King’s Men.
- 1603–1604Lengthy closure of the theaters because of plague epidemic.
- 1604*Othello.*
- 1605*King Lear.*
- 1605Discovery of the Gunpowder Plot, a Catholic conspiracy to blow up the Houses of Parliament while King James was presiding.
- 1606*Macbeth.*
Parliament passes an act to regulate and censor the language of stage plays.
- 1606–1607*Antony and Cleopatra.*
- 1607Captain John Smith settles Jamestown.
- 1607–1608*Pericles.*
- 1608*Coriolanus.*
Shakespeare listed as one of the joint owners of Blackfriars Theatre (where his company will now play during the winter months).
- 1609Publication of Shakespeare’s *Sonnets.*
- 1609–1610*The Winter’s Tale* and *Cymbeline.*
- 1610–1611Shakespeare retires to Stratford.
- 1611*The Tempest.*
Publication of the King James Version of the Bible.

- 1612–1613*The Two Noble Kinsmen* (with John Fletcher).
- 1613Destruction of the Globe by fire.
- 1614Building of the second Globe.
Shakespeare involved in land disputes in Stratford.
- 1616Death of Shakespeare.
- 1623Publication of the First Folio of Shakespeare's plays (edited by his actor colleagues John Heminges and Henry Condell and entitled *Mr. William Shakespeare's Comedies, Histories and Tragedies*). It contains 36 plays, of which 18 had not been previously published.
- 1625Death of James I; accession of his son Charles I.
- 1642During the English Civil War, Parliament closes the theaters and bans public playacting. There is no public theater in England until the restoration of Charles II in 1660. None of the old playhouses survives the period of the Interregnum.

Glossary

agency: Most simply, the power to act freely and, by extension, to take responsibility for one's actions. In the imaginative universe of tragedy, characters often struggle to assert their agency in the face of forces (social, political, or metaphysical) that might inhibit their desires; alternatively, they may speak in ways that mystify or deny their agency, their responsibility for their deeds.

amphitheaters or public theaters (such as the Globe Theatre used by Shakespeare's company): Large buildings erected outside the city limits of London from the 1570s on for the performance of plays. They were polygonal in shape and had a stage that thrust out into an area where the "groundling" spectators might stand; one could pay a higher price to sit in galleries surrounding the yard. The original Globe had room for about 3,000 people. By contrast, *hall theaters* or *private theaters* (such as Blackfriars) were smaller, enclosed playing spaces in which performances did not take place only in natural light and where none of the audience stood. Seats were considerably more expensive in these theaters, and the companies who played in them originally consisted entirely of boy actors.

anagnorisis: Aristotle's term for a moment of charged recognition in a tragic plot.

aside: A remark made by a character speaking to himself or herself while in the company of others and, by convention, not heard by anybody else on stage.

blank verse: The verse form in which many Elizabethan and Jacobean dramatists composed much of their plays. It consists of unrhymed lines and is usually structured as iambic pentameter: that is, its rhythmical base consists of five groups of two syllables, in each of which an unstressed syllable is followed by a stressed syllable (dee-DUM). A skilled poet will, however, offer many variations on this basic pattern.

body politic: The state imagined as an organic system comparable to the human body—the image is common in the political philosophy of Shakespeare's day.

catharsis: Aristotle's term for a tragedy's emotional effect on its audience—in particular, its power to purge the strong emotions (especially pity and fear) that it has created in the spectator.

chorus: In classical Greek drama, the chorus was a group of actors not directly involved in the action who, at intervals, offered a commentary on what was unfolding on the stage. In Shakespeare's day, the "chorus" is a single actor who sometimes speaks the prologue of a play.

conceit: In early modern usage, a concept or idea or thought or image.

courtesan: A high-priced and rather high-class prostitute (Venice was famous for its courtesans).

dramatic irony: The term *irony* refers to words (or perhaps a situation) in which two levels of meaning are held in tension; when dramatic irony is at work, the audience, because its members have knowledge of a situation or of a character's actions or intentions that goes beyond that of other characters on the stage, perceives a special resonance in what is done or said that is unavailable to the characters over whom they hold the discrepancy of awareness.

Elizabethan: Pertaining to the period when Elizabeth I was ruler of England (1558–1603).

enjambement (sometimes spelled *enjambment*): We see enjambement in a poetic text when a line of verse does not stop syntactically at its typographical end but continues over the line break to complete itself in the next lines; a very common phenomenon in blank verse.

equivocation: To equivocate is to speak in a manner that is deceptive or ambiguous or involves the conscious deployment of double meanings (cf. the witches in *Macbeth*).

foil: A character positioned to provide contrast with another character. For example, Laertes-as-revenger is a foil to Hamlet-as-revenger.

folio: A large and expensive book format in which the sheets of printing paper that make up the work are folded just once. The first collected edition of Shakespeare's plays (published in 1623) used this format and is usually referred to as the First Folio.

Fortune: The personification of the principle of chance as it affects human events. "Lady Fortune" was often depicted as turning a wheel on which characters might rise (in prosperity, fame, or happiness) but would necessarily fall again.

gender: A term that points to identities that are socially constructed as "masculine" or "feminine" (as opposed to a merely biological definition of one's sex). Lady Macbeth, for example, "genders" compassion and pity as (problematically) feminine characteristics when asking the spirits of darkness to rid her of these emotions.

genre: Literary genres are different kinds or categories of literary works (for example, comedy, tragedy, epic); fairly specific artistic conventions (or audience expectations) are associated with given genres.

hamartia: Aristotle's term for the "error in action" that dooms a tragic protagonist; "tragic flaw" is an inadequate translation of this term.

honor: This word has a particular inflection in Shakespearean English when it is attached to a woman. It refers to her virginity (if she is unmarried) or her absolute sexual fidelity (if she is married).

interiority: The inner psychological state of a character—in Shakespearean drama, it is most obviously disclosed by way of the soliloquy (or, more briefly, by way of an aside).

Jacobean: Pertaining to the reign of James I of England (who was also James VI of Scotland); James ruled from 1603–1625.

Moor: Term used in the late 16th and early 17th centuries to describe any North African, whether Arab or sub-Saharan.

providential design: *Providence* is a term associated with Christian theology; it encompasses the notion of divine guidance or care. If one believes in a providential design, one believes that people act within a universe in which life is patterned and shaped in a meaningful way by a loving deity and in which their choices and actions have their own significance in the "big picture."

purgatory: In Roman Catholic doctrine, a place for the punishment and purification of the souls of those who had died in a state of grace: an intermediary stage before admission to heaven.

Puritans: Radical members of the Protestant faith. English Puritans wanted to reform the Anglican faith (the official and moderate version of Protestantism upheld by the monarchy after 1558) and move it even further away from the doctrine and ritual practices of Catholicism.

quarto: An inexpensive book format used to publish single plays; the name refers to the fact that a quarto was sewn together from multiple large sheets of printing paper folded twice to produce "gatherings" of four double-sided pages. Quite a few of Shakespeare's plays exist in individual quarto editions.

revenge tragedy: A type of tragedy first made popular by Elizabethan dramatists, in which the protagonist takes it upon himself to enact revenge for crimes his own society is unwilling to recognize or unable to punish. Such plays tend to involve the corruption of the revenger by his murderous pursuits and the bloody deaths of many characters.

Senecan tragedy: Tragedies written during the Elizabethan period in imitation of plays written by the Roman poet Seneca. Seneca's plays were written in five acts, were characterized by both emotional and

physical violence (although the latter took place offstage in his works), and were prone to rhetorical extravagance. There is a significant overlap between Senecan tragedy and revenge tragedy.

soliloquy: A speech delivered by a character while alone on stage; characters often examine their feelings or reflect upon or interrogate their actions in soliloquy.

theater of the absurd: Drama that depicts the absurdity of the human condition; it usually questions conventional theological or philosophical ways of explaining or ordering the universe. In absurdist drama, isolated and usually powerless characters struggle to make sense of a bewildering cosmos. Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* (1954, English version) is a famous example of this kind of drama.

tragedy of fate: A tragedy in which the actions of the protagonists are represented as being predetermined to a considerable degree by larger metaphysical forces.

tragedy of state: A tragedy with a good deal of overt political content, in which the actions of the characters will determine the fate of a state or realm. The proper uses (and the abuses) of power are often debated in the action.

tragic knowledge: The special insight or vision sometimes granted to the tragic protagonist: perception clawed from supreme suffering. It is possible, to be sure, that the "knowledge" achieved by this character might be interrogated by audience members who hold a larger awareness of the complete action of a play.

tragic protagonist: The central character in a tragedy. Not necessarily the "tragic hero" (protagonists aren't necessarily male, and tragic protagonists may, in fact, be officially villains—e.g., Macbeth).

transgression: In tragedy, this might be equated with Aristotle's "error in action," but the term has the specific sense of an action that separates one from ordinary experience and puts one "beyond the pale." The definition of "transgressive" behavior is not necessarily an absolute one: it is often socially determined, for example, when Brabantio deploras Desdemona's "unnatural" act of marrying Othello.

virtus: Latin word that is roughly equivalent to "virtue" but also has gendered connotations of specifically "manly" behavior: courage, the faithful performance of public responsibilities to the state, and so on (cf. Cominius's public commendation of Coriolanus).

Shakespeare: A Biographical Note

William Shakespeare was born in the provincial town of Stratford-upon-Avon in 1564, the eldest son of John Shakespeare and Mary Arden. John Shakespeare's father had been a small farmer, a tenant of Mary's prosperous landowning family; he himself was, for many years, a thriving glove-maker and tanner who held several important official positions in local administration, including that of alderman. When William was about 12, his father's business went into decline and John Shakespeare was no longer active in civic affairs: he accrued heavy debts and defaulted on a mortgage he had taken out on a tract of land that was part of his wife's inheritance. He appears, however, to have recovered his respectability in later years, perhaps aided by his financially successful son. In 1596, an application made by William for the Shakespeares to be granted their own coat of arms was approved by the College of Heralds; this would have officially marked the family as "gentry."

William Shakespeare did not attend university, but as the son of a respectable tradesman, he would have been educated for up to 10 years at the quite prestigious local grammar school. *Grammar* here means Latin grammar: William would have read the works of Cicero, Seneca, Virgil, and Ovid and would have had some training in rhetoric and oratory. He might also have had his first exposure to theater during these years: records show that traveling companies of players quite regularly performed in Stratford.

It is not clear what trade or profession Shakespeare followed between leaving school and moving to London. We do know that in November 1582, at the age of 18, he married Anne Hathaway, who was 8 years his senior. Anne was already pregnant; Shakespeare's daughter Susanna was born 6 months after the marriage. In 1585, Anne gave birth to the twins Judith and Hamnet (Hamnet would die young in 1596). No records have been found of Shakespeare's doings from this point until his arrival in London, although it has been suggested that he found employment as a country schoolmaster. In his *Groats-Worth of Wit* (1592), Robert Greene, surveying the literary scene in London, mocks "an upstart Crow" who, with "his Tygers hart wrapt in a Players hyde, supposes he is as well able to bombast out a blanke verse" and "is in his owne conceit the onely Shake-scene in a countrey." Greene here parodies a line taken from Shakespeare's very early play *Henry VI*, part 3; it is clear from his remarks that Master "Shake-scene" was already quite well known, both as an actor and as a dramatist.

Our most detailed knowledge of Shakespeare's London career comes after 1594, when he became a "sharer," or joint stockholder, in the company of players called the Lord Chamberlain's Men (all acting companies had to have the patronage of a person of rank or risk being prosecuted as "rogues and vagabonds"). We do know that his long narrative poems *Venus and Adonis* and *The Rape of Lucrece* were written just prior to this, when the London theaters were closed for more than a year because of a plague epidemic. After 1594, Shakespeare wrote exclusively for the Lord Chamberlain's Men until his retirement, usually finishing two plays per year. He continued to act from time to time, and we know he participated in performances of works by his learned contemporary Ben Jonson.

Until the turn of the century, Shakespeare mainly (although not exclusively) wrote history plays and romantic comedies; his works at this time include *A Midsummer Night's Dream*; *Romeo and Juliet*; *Much Ado About Nothing*; *The Merchant of Venice*; *As You Like It*; *Richard II*; *Henry IV*, parts 1 and 2; and *Henry V*. In *Palladis Tamia: Wit's Treasury* (1598), a contemporary commentator, Francis Meres, praises Shakespeare's dramatic art and approvingly lists 12 of his plays. The playwright seems to have remained in London for much of this time, although he presumably visited Stratford during the winter when the public theaters were closed. He invested much of his earnings in Stratford properties, beginning in 1597 with his purchase of New Place, considered the second most impressive house in his hometown. In 1607, when Susanna Shakespeare married a local physician, her father was able to give her a considerable marriage settlement that included more than 100 acres of land.

In 1599, the Lord Chamberlain's Men moved to the newly built Globe Theatre, the company's main home for the remainder of Shakespeare's career. All the major tragedies discussed in this course were first performed in the Globe, although in 1608, Shakespeare's company also acquired shares in the private hall theater of Blackfriars. After James I came to the English throne in 1603, the Lord Chamberlain's Men were given royal patronage and renamed the King's Men; from then on, the company quite often performed at court, as well as at the Globe or Blackfriars.

In the final stage of his career, Shakespeare produced complex hybrids of comedy and tragedy—plays whose striking use of spectacle may have exploited the superior technical facilities of the Blackfriars Theatre. In these later years, Shakespeare renewed his Stratford ties and, around 1610–1611, seems to have moved back there on a more permanent basis. (In 1614, he was embroiled in a legal case, involving the enclosure of land formerly held in common, that created significant local unrest.) Early in 1616, he drafted and then redrafted his will, showing particular care to protect the financial interests of his daughter Judith, who had recently married a man of dubious character. He made special bequests to just three of his colleagues in the King's Men and notoriously mentioned his wife only once, leaving her “my second best bed.” (Anne may well have automatically received one-third of his estate as the “widow's portion,” but the lack of even the most conventional terms of endearment in her husband's single reference to her is striking.) Shakespeare died on April 23, 1616, and was buried in Stratford's Holy Trinity Church: a verse on his tomb roundly curses anyone who disturbs his bones. Seven years after his death, John Heminges and Henry Condell, two of the three fellow players mentioned in his will, published the first (more or less) complete edition of his plays.

Bibliography

Primary Texts:

You should read Shakespeare in a good modern edition with notes and annotations. There are many complete editions of the plays, and the following are recommended.

The Norton Shakespeare: Based on the Oxford Edition, edited by Stephen Greenblatt, Walter Cohen, Jean Howard, and Katharine E. Maus. New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1997. (This edition is used by the lecturer and includes a very good general introduction.)

The Complete Works of Shakespeare, edited by David Bevington, 4th ed. New York: Longman, 1997.

The Riverside Shakespeare, edited by G. Blakemore Evans, et al., 2nd ed. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1997.

There are many good scholarly editions of individual plays. Three particular series of such editions are well thought of by many experts in the field: the *Arden Shakespeare: Third Series* (published by Thomas Nelson), the *Oxford Shakespeare*, and *The New Cambridge Shakespeare*. All volumes in these series offer full introductions and exhaustive notes. The single volumes are published in both hardback and paperback. Especially recommended are the following single editions from these series (listed with the names of their editors):

Hamlet. Edwards, Philip (Cambridge, 2003). Hibbard, G. R. (Oxford, 1987).

Othello. Neill, Michael (Oxford, 2006). Sanders, Norman (Cambridge, 2003).

King Lear. Foakes, R. A. (Arden, 1997). Halio, Jay L. (Cambridge 1992, or updated edition of 2005).

Macbeth, Braunnmuller, A. R. (Cambridge, 1997). Brooke, Nicholas (Oxford, 1990).

Antony and Cleopatra, Neill, Michael (Oxford, 1994).

Coriolanus, Bliss, Leo (Cambridge, 2000). Parker, R. B. (Oxford, 1994).

Note on variations among texts of Shakespeare's plays:

Some of Shakespeare's plays were not printed until his colleagues, Condell and Heminges, collected his works after his death in the volume we call the First Folio and which they entitled *Mr. William Shakespeare's Comedies, Histories and Tragedies* (1623). Others were printed in one or more individual editions (the *quartos*) before the First Folio appeared. We have no surviving manuscripts of any Shakespeare play and no information as to whether (in an era before copyright) Shakespeare himself was ever involved in the publication of any one of these earlier editions. There are some striking variations among the different texts. Hamlet, for example, wishes that his "too too solid flesh would melt" in the First Folio of his tragedy but wishes that his "too too sallied flesh would melt" in the first and second quarto editions of the play. A modern editor must often choose between different readings of the same line or even offer an interpretive correction when the printed text seems odd (so that some editors emend "sallied" to "sullied" and substitute this reading for the Folio's "solid"). *There is no single absolutely stable and "authorized version" of a Shakespeare play*. Indeed, one or two early editions, most notably the first quarto of *Hamlet*, are so wildly different from others that it has been suggested they were pirated versions based on the "memorial reconstruction" of an actor who performed in the work. If you find that a line or passage in your own text differs from that quoted by the lecturer, you may want to consult the textual notes of your edition to find out what is going on, in terms of editorial practice, at this point!

Other Primary Texts:

Christopher Marlowe's *Tamburlaine* and *Doctor Faustus*, along with Thomas Kyd's *Spanish Tragedy*, mentioned in Lecture Two, may be found in: *English Renaissance Drama*, edited by David Bevington, et al. New York: Norton, 2002.

Supplementary Reading:

Adelman, Janet. *Suffocating Mothers: Fantasies of Maternal Origin in Shakespeare's Plays*. New York: Routledge, 1992. Feminist psychoanalytic readings of mothers (absent and present) in Shakespeare's plays, with particular emphasis on the tragedies.

Bate, Jonathan. *The Genius of Shakespeare*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1998. A fine and capacious exploration of Shakespeare's life and writings—and of the qualities that have sustained his fame.

Bradley, A. C. *Shakespearean Tragedy: Lectures on Hamlet, Othello, King Lear, Macbeth*. 3rd ed. New York: St. Martin's, 1992. Originally published in 1904. A very influential work on Shakespearean tragedy: somewhat "Victorian" in nature but still interesting.

Briggs, Julia. *This Stage-Play World: Texts and Contexts, 1580–1625*. 2nd ed. New York: Oxford University Press, 1997. A lively and useful discussion of historical, social, and cultural contexts for reading Renaissance English literature.

Bullough, Geoffrey, ed. *Narrative and Dramatic Sources of Shakespeare*. 8v. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, and New York: Columbia University Press, 1957–1975. Reproduces the sources of Shakespeare's plays and discusses the ways in which Shakespeare reshaped them. A good place to find the Thomas North translations of Plutarch that Shakespeare used in writing *Antony and Cleopatra* and *Coriolanus*.

Cantor, Paul. *Shakespeare's Rome: Republic and Empire*. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1976. A useful study of Shakespeare's remaking of Roman political history.

Cavell, Stanley. *Disowning Knowledge in Seven Plays of Shakespeare*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987. A distinguished contemporary philosopher addresses Shakespeare. Includes fine essays on *Lear* and *Coriolanus*.

Danson, Lawrence. *Shakespeare's Dramatic Genres*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000. A concise discussion of the main features of Shakespearean comedy, history, and tragedy.

Deats, Sara Munson, ed. *Antony and Cleopatra: New Critical Essays*. New York: Routledge, 2005. A collection of recent essays on the play.

De Grazia, Margaret, and Stanley Wells, eds. *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000. A reference anthology that has some particularly interesting chapters on contemporary and global responses to Shakespeare's work.

Dollimore, Jonathan. *Radical Tragedy*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984. This provocative "new historicist" reexamination of Renaissance tragedy, which includes an excellent chapter on *King Lear*, pays particular attention to the political resonances of early-modern theater.

Drakakis, John, ed. *Shakespearean Tragedy*. New York, Longman, 1992. An anthology of essays on the plays (with an emphasis on recent theoretical approaches) that also includes a preliminary chapter offering an overview of major discussions of tragedy across the last 200 years.

Greenblatt, Stephen. *Hamlet in Purgatory*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002. A rich and suggestive discussion of the treatment of death, mourning, and the role of the Ghost in *Hamlet* within the context of the religious debates of the English Reformation.

Gurr, Andrew. *The Shakespearean Stage, 1574–1642*. 3rd ed. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992. Solid resource for information about the playhouses and players in Shakespeare's era.

Kahn, Coppelia. *Roman Shakespeare: Warriors, Wounds and Women*. New York: Routledge, 1997. Feminist/historicist study of Shakespeare's Roman plays.

Kerrigan, John. *Revenge Tragedy: Aeschylus to Armageddon*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996. A wide-ranging, recent study of this subgenre in all its manifestations.

Kirsch, Arthur. *The Passions of Shakespeare's Tragic Heroes*. Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1990. A sensitive humanist reading of the plays.

Kott, Jan. *Shakespeare Our Contemporary*. New York: Norton, 1974. An iconoclastic account of Shakespeare originally dating from the 1960s and still provocative; some fine essays on the tragedies.

Lockyer, Roger. *James VI and I*. London and New York: Longman, 1998. A concise history of the reign of Elizabeth I's successor.

Mangan, Michael. *A Preface to Shakespeare's Tragedies*. London and New York: Longman, 1991. Helpful introductory chapters on Shakespeare's theater and on literary trends in the early 17th century; later chapters offer intelligent overviews of the plays.

McDonald, Russ. *The Bedford Companion to Shakespeare: An Introduction with Documents*. 2nd ed. Boston and New York: Bedford, 2001. A helpful reference book with excellent chapters on a variety of historical, social, theatrical, and literary contexts for reading the plays. Includes some trenchant pages on the authorship question.

———, ed. *Shakespeare: An Anthology of Criticism and Theory, 1945–2000*. Oxford: Blackwell, 2004. A wide-ranging anthology of well-chosen examples of various schools of Shakespeare criticism.

Neely, Carol Thomas. *Broken Nuptials in Shakespeare's Plays*. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1993. Contains her groundbreaking essay "Women and Men in *Othello*."

Neill, Michael. *Issues of Death: Mortality and Identity in English Renaissance Tragedy*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997. Substantial and learned discussions of the tragedies.

Poole, Adrian. *Tragedy: A Very Short Introduction*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2005. Concise, accessible, and historically wide-ranging survey of tragedy as a literary genre.

Schoenbaum, Samuel. *William Shakespeare: A Compact Documentary Life*. Rev. ed. New York: Oxford University Press, 1987. Perhaps the single best resource for biographical information about Shakespeare.

Sinfield, Alan, ed. *Macbeth*. New York: St. Martin's, 1992. Collection of recent critical essays on *Macbeth*, with a particular emphasis on new historicist interpretations.

Snyder, Susan. *The Comic Matrix of Shakespeare's Tragedies*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979. Examines the ways in which plot structures and conventions from Shakespeare's comedies are reshaped in the tragedies; suggestive discussion of *Othello*.

Young, David, ed. *Shakespeare's Middle Tragedies: A Collection of Critical Essays*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1993. A short anthology of some of the most influential recent articles on *Hamlet*, *Othello*, and *Lear*. Highly recommended.

Internet Resources:

Internet Shakespeare Editions, <http://ise.uvic.ca/Foyer/index.html>. Superb (and visually beautiful) reference site. Many links to well-presented material about Shakespearean contexts; excellent online reference for the plays themselves (elegantly scanned in multiple editions). You can search the texts or browse scene by scene. Includes an excellent Shakespeare-in-Performance database and many links to further reading.

Shakespeare Resource Center, <http://www.bardweb.net>. Extremely accessible and easy-to-navigate site that offers links to essays and illustrations on a good range of topics (for example, "The Globe Theatre" or "Elizabethan England"), followed by an annotated set of links to aid further research.

Films and Videos:

Following is a selected list of TV films and movies, available on video or DVD, that the lecturer has found of interest.

Hamlet

- 1948 film version directed by and starring Laurence Olivier. Black and white. Hamlet as a supremely introspective and wounded Renaissance man. Very marked cuts (Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, for example, disappear completely).
- 1980 made-for-TV film, part of the BBC/Time-Life series of all the Shakespeare plays. Directed by Rodney Bennett. Mainly remarkable for a superb performance by Derek Jacobi as the prince.
- 1990 film version directed by Franco Zeffirelli; Mel Gibson as Hamlet. Glenn Close is first-rate as Gertrude, and the closet scene is very sexually charged.
- 1996 version directed by and starring Kenneth Branagh. The whole text is filmed (or at least *a* whole text is filmed!). Updated to what looks like 19th-century Germany. Derek Jacobi is a fine Claudius, and Branagh, an interestingly aggressive prince.
- 2000 version directed by Malcolm Almereyda and starring Ethan Hawke. Contemporary setting; Hamlet is an independent filmmaker.

Othello

- 1952 version directed by Orson Welles (who plays the lead). The film was made in bits and pieces and varies wildly in quality, but some parts of it are visually astonishing.
- 1995 version directed by Oliver Parker with Laurence Fishburne as Othello and Kenneth Branagh as a nastily cheerful Iago. Some interesting moments, but the play is too drastically cut.

King Lear

- 1971 film directed by Peter Brook based on his celebrated stage production of some years before. Famously idiosyncratic—and a particularly brutal version of the play. Paul Scofield is a very fine Lear.
- 1983 or 1984 made-for-TV version of the play directed by Michael Elliot and starring an old and frail (although still, at times, astonishing) Laurence Olivier, whose own physical fragility gives the play extra poignancy. A superb cast; a gentler version of the play than the Brook film.
- 1998 film directed by the acclaimed Richard Eyre with Ian Holm as a tough, difficult Lear: recommended.

Macbeth

- 1948 film by Orson Welles shot quickly and on the cheap. Extremely horrible costumes. Welles is occasionally powerful as Macbeth.
- 1971 film version by Roman Polanski, made (in)famous by Lady Macbeth sleepwalking naked. Some visually astonishing moments (the opening sequence in which a battle is evoked on the misty margins of the sea is splendid), but the acting tends to be bland.
- 1978 filmed-for-TV version of a studio theater production by the Royal Shakespeare Company, directed by Philip Casson, based on original direction by Trevor Nunn. Possibly the best film of any Shakespearean tragedy; Ian McKellen and Judi Dench are superb as Macbeth and his lady, and the claustrophobic filming style is beautifully fitted to the play.

Antony and Cleopatra

- Film directed by Jon Scofield, based on a famous 1974 Royal Shakespeare Company production. Richard Johnson and Janet Suzman offer fine performances as Antony and Cleopatra; a young Patrick Stewart is an interesting Enobarbus.