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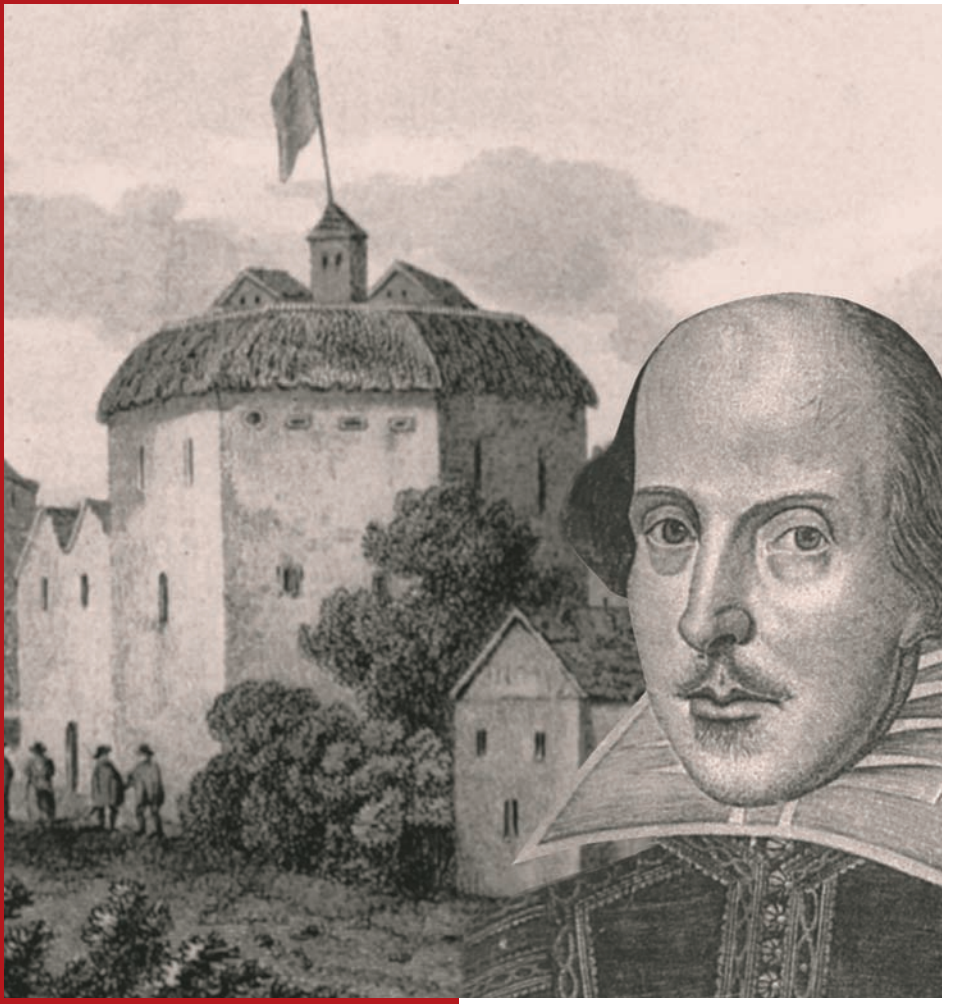
SHAKESPEARE:
THE SEVEN MAJOR TRAGEDIES

COURSE GUIDE



Professor Harold Bloom
YALE UNIVERSITY

Shakespeare: The Seven Major Tragedies

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Editor - James Gallagher
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Cover image: Engraving of William Shakespeare and the Globe Theater © Clipart.com

#UT067 ISBN: 978-1-4193-5861-6

Course Syllabus

Shakespeare:
The Seven Major Tragedies

About Your Professor

Harold Bloom

Harold Bloom is Sterling Professor of the Humanities and English at Yale University. He was born in New York City, earned his B.A. at Cornell, received his Ph.D. from Yale in 1955, and has been a member of the Yale faculty since then.

He is the author of many books, including *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human, Hamlet: Poem Unlimited, The Western Canon: The Books and School of the Ages, Agon: Towards a Theory of Revisionism, The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry, Wallace Stevens: The Poems of Our Climate, How to Read and Why, Stories and Poems for Extremely Intelligent Children of All Ages, Genius: A Mosaic of One Hundred Exemplary Creative Minds,* and *A Map of Misreading.* He is also co-editor with Lionel Trilling of *Romantic Poetry and Prose* and *Victorian Poetry and Prose.*

Suggested Reading for This Course

You will get the most out of this course by reading Professor Bloom's book *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human* (Penguin Putnam, 1998).

Introduction

Shakespeare invented characters in a new kind of way. He not only gave them personality and depth, he gave them life. Not a life that went simply from point to point, but one that developed rather than unfolded. In so doing, Shakespeare created characters with whom everyone can identify, whether the characters were kings and queens or fools and merchants.

Shakespeare's seven great tragedies contain unmistakable elements that set them apart from any other plays ever written: In *Romeo and Juliet*, Shakespeare embodied in the character of Juliet the world's most impressive representation ever of a woman in love. With *Julius Caesar*, the great playwright produced a drama of astonishing and perpetual relevance. In *Hamlet*, Shakespeare created a character with the most brilliant mind in all of literature. And the character of Iago in *Othello* has been the very archetype of the villain ever since.

King Lear presents audiences with unparalleled emotional and intellectual demands. *Macbeth* is a play of ruthless economy in which Shakespeare forces his audience into intimate sympathy with a man not far from being a mass murderer. Finally, in *Antony and Cleopatra*, Shakespeare created something entirely new: a vast political and historical conspectus involving the whole world.

This series of lectures presents a unique and exciting study of Shakespeare's seven greatest tragedies from one of the world's foremost literary critics and authorities on Shakespearean drama.

Lecture 1:
Romeo and Juliet

The Suggested Reading for this lecture is Harold Bloom's *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human,* Part III, "The Apprentice Tragedies: *Romeo and Juliet.*"

William Shakespeare tended, in general, to be terribly uninterested in plot—he would steal a plot wherever he could find one, and that is what he is doing in *Romeo and Juliet*, indeed, in all of the major tragedies. But in *Romeo and Juliet,* he's inventing character in a new kind of way, and in the character and personality of Juliet in particular, he is giving what to this day is the most persuasive and impressive representation that we have of a young woman in love, or indeed, of any woman in love with a man.

Juliet's Bounty

Juliet's greatness is first fully revealed in act 2, scene 2, of the play. Romeo is very young, and Juliet is very young also—she is not quite fourteen years old, but emotionally speaking, humanly speaking, she has developed in consciousness, and in total range of human capacity, far beyond Romeo (though he's a very promising young man indeed, and perhaps no more than two years older than she is).

Romeo and Juliet have fallen in love with each other. They are declaring their love. She is on the balcony (the famous balcony scene), and he is down below. Their love is a prohibited love, because each of their respective noble houses in Verona is ferociously and murderously opposed to the other.

Juliet speaks a most extraordinary line:

My bounty is as boundless as the sea,
My love as deep; the more I give to thee,
The more I have, for both are infinite.

Juliet has declared her astounding greatness, and yet also, in a very deep sense, she has told us what her tragedy is to be about. It is not a tragic flaw that is going to mark this great tragic heroine. Her tragedy is, in fact, her very greatness as a human being. Her tragedy is the totality of her love, the fact that she loves without reservation. Throughout the play, Romeo, though they have so little time together, is learning from her and is trying to raise himself up to the level of her love.

Nietzsche once wrote (and he was thinking of *Hamlet*): "That for which we can find words is something already dead in our hearts. There is always a kind of falsity in the act of speaking." That certainly would be true of Hamlet, who never quite says what he means. But it is totally untrue of Juliet. What she is finding words for is something absolutely alive in her heart.

Mercutio

Mercutio, the best friend of Romeo, is an incredibly witty but foul-mouthed fellow—he can scarcely open his mouth except to utter some sexual innuendo or obscenity.

Mercutio's death is an extraordinary indication of Shakespeare's skill in the play. Romeo has come between Mercutio and one of the kinsmen of Juliet's, desperately trying to prevent a fight between them, and in the course of it, Mercutio receives his death wound, delivered under Romeo's arm by Tybalt. One tradition of theatrical history says that Shakespeare kills off Mercutio so early because otherwise Mercutio would kill the play by capturing all the male interest from Romeo. Mercutio says:

> *No, 'tis not so deep as a well, nor so wide as a church door; but 'tis enough, 'twill serve: ask for me tomorrow, and you shall find me a grave man. I am peppered, I warrant, for this world.—A plague o' both your houses!*

And with that, you have the disappearance from the play of this very great figure, whose function is to show what Romeo is getting away from: a kind of lightness in erotic matters of which he has been cured permanently by falling deeply, and with utter conviction, in love with Juliet, who represents a higher order of existence than he has ever known. And indeed, she represents the same for the audience.

An Unprecedented Character

The heart of this drama is indeed the heart of Juliet herself. In all of the Western tradition of literature that leads up to Shakespeare, there is no comparable portrait of a young woman (she is extraordinarily mature for her age), or of any young person so deeply and authentically in love. In Shakespeare's way of showing the constant generosity of Juliet's nature as his technique for unveiling the ultimate secrets of the human heart, he teaches us, I think, a wisdom that no one has surpassed throughout Western literary tradition.

The great modern philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein once coined the aphorism: "Love is not a feeling. Love is put to the test, pain not. One does not say: 'That was not a true pain, or it would not have passed away so quickly.'" While he did not mean it to have a direct application to Juliet, it is one of the best characterizations of the authenticity and the permanence of her love for Romeo. Her love is not a feeling. Her love, unlike pain, is put to the test. None of us would say after a really intense pain was over that it was not a true pain because it passed away so quickly. But that defines the difference between love, in the highest sense of Juliet's, and a mere pain, a mere negative affect of any sort.

What precedent did Shake-speare have for Juliet? The answer is that he had no precedent. There is no figure in Western literature, or in anything he could ever have read, that would have taught him how to create this amazing representation of a warm, generous, overflowing, albeit selfless, personality, giving herself away absolutely and com-pletely in her love for a young man. In one sense, *Romeo and Juliet,* because it was the first, is necessarily the least of Shakespeare's seven major tragedies. Shakespeare is learning his art as he goes. Yet with Juliet, he has taken a kind of quantum leap and

given us something not only unprecedented, but not surpassed ever since. And that takes one deep into the tragic world as Shakespeare conceives it. All of us know that we can often say of a particular person, he or she has an extremely pleasant personality, but I do not trust his or her character. All of us also know that we can often say of other persons, she or he has a remarkable moral character, but I am not at all pleased by his or her personality. Before Shakespeare, character and what we would now call personality were not very different entities. Shakespeare shows this in Juliet before he does it anywhere else. In doing so, he teaches himself as well as the rest of us something incredible, which we could not have learned without him.

The Play's Major Elements

Shakespeare's art is certainly an art of language, of an enormous control over the resources of language; indeed, Shakespeare can be said to have reinvented the English language. He has the largest vocabulary of any author who has ever written. Of that vocabulary, he invented fully 1,800 words himself, and 1,200 of those words are still common usage in England and the United States, or wherever English is spoken in the world today. Shakespeare's enormous control of language, his ability to reinvent language, is an enormous element in his art. But there are two other elements that I think are even more important, and even more powerful.

One element most certainly is the creation of personality added to the representation of character. "Personality" in the modern sense, though he does not use the word, is a Shakespearean invention. But finally there is the entire question of cognitive power, of the capacity for thinking. Shakespeare *thought* more originally and more inventively than any writer before him or since. He's unique among the world's authors in that regard. In giving us Juliet, he found a way of integrating a superb personality with a deep and immensely moving character—he has found language of absolute eloquence and memorability for her to speak. Most of all, he thought his way into her mind, so that, in a deep sense, we can say he *is* Juliet. The great Romantic critic William Hazlitt once said of Hamlet, "It is we who are Hamlet." I would say that, in some sense—though we cannot live up to her character—there is something in every one of us, female and male, that is Juliet.

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING

Questions

1. What is meant by “Juliet’s bounty”?
2. Was there any precedent in literature for the character of Juliet?

Suggested Reading

Bloom, Harold. *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human*. New York: Penguin Putnam, Inc., 1998.

Other Books of Interest

Shakespeare, William. *Romeo and Juliet: Arden Shakespeare*. 2nd edition. Series ed., Brian Gibbons. London: Arden, 1980.

Lecture 2:
Julius Caesar

The Suggested Reading for this lecture is Harold Bloom's *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human,* Part III, "The Apprentice Tragedies: *Julius Caesar.*"

Shakespeare's remarkable political tragedy *Julius Caesar* is a beautiful example of a well-made play. It is a strikingly clear drama with four major characters: Julius Caesar; Marcus Brutus (in some sense, it is the tragedy of Marcus Brutus, though Caesar is the greater personage in terms of rank and, at least formally, of character); Caius Cassius, who first brings Brutus into the plot to kill Caesar; and Mark Antony, who survives to help to destroy the conspirators and who will eventually be the hero of Shakespeare's last great tragedy, *Antony and Cleopatra.*

The Richness and Elliptical Nature of Shakespeare

The eighteenth century's Dr. Samuel Johnson, a great Western literary critic, confessed to a certain reservation about *Julius Caesar*; he said it was a "cold" play. And indeed, there is something stoic and slightly chilly about it. We are not given any completely sympathetic character. Shakespeare wanted all of us to fall in love with Juliet, but no one could fall in love with Caesar himself, with Brutus (as Shakespeare portrays him), with Mark Antony (at least not Mark Antony at this stage of his career), or with Cassius. But this was highly deliberate on Shakespeare's part, because he wanted to put the emphasis elsewhere. In fact, this is one of the most enigmatic—and subtly worked out—of his plays.

Plutarch (following the ancient Roman historian Suetonius) maintained that all of Rome, including Caesar and Brutus, fully believed that Brutus was the natural son of Caesar. Shakespeare does not give you explicit reference to that in the play, and yet it raises the fascinating question of the elliptical element in Shakespeare's art, particularly interesting because Shakespeare is the richest of all writers. It is worth exploring the contrast in his writing between the richness of Shakespeare's plays (the sense you get that he's put everything in) and the elliptical quality (the sense that he's reserved something, or left something deliberately out, to provoke thought and speculation).

Marcus Brutus

What is the full relationship between Caesar and Brutus? That indeed raises the question of Brutus's motives in joining—then leading—the conspiracy and in striking the particular blow against Caesar, with a dagger. In some traditions, according to Plutarch, the blow was actually struck in the genitals, making it a kind of Oedipal attack.

In act 2, scene 1, Brutus is alone and meditating on the question of what is

to be done about Caesar, who seems to have embarked upon a systematic campaign to become emperor of Rome.

Crown him?—that;
And then, I grant, we put a sting
in him . . .

That is to say, the conspirators would make him a potentially poisonous snake. And then, because Brutus is an immensely honest person, though also immensely self-involved and with little sense of the reality of selves other than his own, he states the truth:

And, to speak truth of Caesar,
I have not known when his affections sway'd
More than his reason.

That is to say, Caesar has never abused power; he has never let his emotions carry him away; he has always exercised reason, restraint, and judgment with his power. But then three shocking words from Brutus:

Fashion it thus . . .

In other words, let me construct it in the following fashion; let me pass a conscious fiction upon myself.

. . . That what he is, augmented,
Would run to these and these extremities:
And therefore think him as a serpent's egg
Which, hatch'd, would, as his kind, grow mischievous,
And kill him in the shell.

It is an extraordinary speech that begins with total honesty in and toward the self and then becomes a conscious fiction that one tells oneself to treat as the absolute truth, and it indicates the fatal flaw in Brutus's nature: his capacity to deceive himself because he so firmly believes in the absoluteness of his own virtue and does not for a moment consider that he could have hidden motives other than the salvation of Rome.

What those hidden motives may be might well have some relationship to his complex existence in regard to Caesar, if Caesar is indeed Brutus's natural father. In a striking soliloquy, Brutus speaks the following words:

Since Cassius first did whet me against Caesar,
I have not slept.
Between the acting of a dreadful thing
And the first motion, all the interim is
Like a phantasma, or a hideous dream:
The Genius and the mortal instruments
Are then in council; and the state of man,
Like to a little kingdom, suffers then
The nature of an insurrection.

This is the exact prophecy of a particular speech of Macbeth's. When Macbeth murders King Duncan, his kinsman, he is murdering a good king and a good man who has a fatherly relationship with him and his wife, Lady Macbeth. That there should be a kind of Oedipal motive—of the son slaying the father—in *Macbeth* in relation to Duncan is not surprising. But it is

surprising that this prophecy of Macbeth's should emerge at just this point in *Julius Caesar*. There is a deep ambivalence that is being manifested, and as Freud teaches us, it is the special mark of what he calls the Oedipus complex.

Julius Caesar

In the play, Caesar is represented not in his full greatness, but in his clear decline. He is beginning to be a little inconsistent and has become a strange mixture of bravado and real courage, of wisdom and self-deception. In act 2, scene 2, Caesar is being begged by his wife, Calpurnia, as well as by his servants and retainers, not to go forth to the Senate that day. Caesar cries out:

The gods do this in shame of cowardice:
Caesar should be a beast without a heart,
If he should stay at home today for fear.
No, Caesar shall not . . .

Notice that he is speaking of himself in the third person, a kind of weakness on his part, but that in itself raises another question: How is it that Caesar, who is already an absolute dictator in Rome, is so easy to kill? Why are there no Praetorian guards about him? One could say that it is sheer bravado, but there is a deeper and darker implication. There is some sense that, on some primordial level, he desires martyrdom, because he understands with his deep intellect that if he is cut down by the conspirators, he will be avenged. And indeed, his great-nephew and heir Octavian will become—at the close of *Antony and Cleopatra*—the emperor Augustus and will fully found the Roman Empire. Each new emperor shall be called Caesar. Caesarism, and the spirit of Caesar, will be prevalent in the world ever after. So another of the elliptical elements in this play is whether or not Caesar sees himself as a willing sacrifice to his own greatness.

The Assassination and the Aftermath

The actual scene of Caesar's assassination is a striking scene indeed, something that went beyond anything that Shakespeare had composed up to that time in terms of sheer dramatic intensity. In act 3, scene 1, the conspirators are gathered around Caesar; Mark Antony has been sent off; there are no guards. The conspirators each stab Caesar, until the final blow is given. Caesar cries out, in effect:

And thou, my son [and you, too, indeed, Brutus] *then fall, Caesar!*

The great murder is accomplished. And you get a moment of extraordinary theater as Brutus leads the conspirators in dipping their hands in the blood of Caesar, an act they know is gory, but which they do as if to say: We fully accept our guilt, and we do this for the sake of liberty.

Every time there is a disagreement between Brutus and Cassius, Cassius is invariably right. Cassius initially said, before the actual murder of Caesar, that they should also murder Mark Antony, because he is too devoted to Caesar and would revenge himself upon them. Brutus disagreed and did not believe Mark Antony would be a threat after Caesar's death. And then there was a further disagreement: Brutus goes to the Forum to speak to the citizens of Rome to justify the murder of Caesar, and Mark Antony asks to read a requiem for Caesar. Cassius advises against it because Mark Antony's

eloquence might be too dangerous, but Brutus again shrugs him off, and this pattern will continue throughout the rest of the play. Whenever Cassius advises doing battle with Octavius and Mark Antony and their armies, Brutus invariably disagrees, which leads to the defeat, overthrow, and suicide of Cassius, and finally to that of Brutus himself.

Brutus is a superb stoic, a figure of enormous dignity and enterprise, a man almost wholly admirable, except for an amazing blindness toward himself and his own motivations—including that hidden motivation of the deep ambivalence to the kind of love he bears for one who seems to be his actual father, Julius Caesar.

Cassius is more honest; he makes clear throughout the play that he resents the natural superiority of Caesar. Mark Antony is a loving and loyal follower of Caesar's, as is the young Octavius, his heir and great-nephew. But Mark Antony does not seem to come to himself until his great funeral oration, in which, almost prophesying Iago and the special arts of Iago in the great tragedy *Othello,* Mark Antony starts a spirit of mischief abroad and incites the gathered mob to rise against the conspirators.

A Drama of Astonishing Relevance

Shakespeare practices a kind of alienation effect in *Julius Caesar*. It is not possible to sympathize with Brutus, because Brutus does not allow himself to fully understand his own motives. We cannot fully sympathize with Caesar either, both because there is this strange suicidal element in him and also because he worships and venerates himself in the third person, clearly producing a kind of dehumanizing effect. We certainly cannot sympathize much with Cassius, though we can admire the leanness of his intellect and the way in which his great design plays upon Brutus. And even Mark Antony—who does seem a kind of free spirit and someone with a tremendous capacity for emotional life—is seen preparing a purge that goes far beyond any purge of the Romans suggested by Brutus and Cassius. These characters are cold-blooded in the extreme, so we are alienated from them.

Shakespeare, quite clearly, is trying for a complex effect, and one of the most remarkable aspects of this drama is that throughout the early twentieth century, it was played as a left-wing drama; it was played as a fascist drama; it caused riots from both extremes. Shakespeare himself, politically, was disengaged, and he was always religiously disengaged. We do not know where Shakespeare stood in relation to the four major characters in *Julius Caesar* or to the crucial action of the play, which is the assassination of Caesar. He certainly did not believe that it was an action to achieve liberty, and yet he did not wholly stand for the spirit of Caesarism either. He stood apart, and he seems to want us to stand apart also. But he created a drama of astonishing and perpetual political relevance, as deeply involved in our awareness of what is going on in the present as it was four centuries ago, when first it was composed.

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING

Questions

1. What is meant by the “elliptical nature” of Shakespeare’s plays?
2. What is the major flaw in Brutus’s character?

Suggested Reading

Bloom, Harold. *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human*. New York: Penguin Putnam, Inc., 1998.

Other Books of Interest

Shakespeare, William. *Julius Caesar: Arden Shakespeare*. 3rd edition. Ed. David Daniel. London: Arden, 1998.

Lecture 3:
Hamlet: Part I

The Suggested Reading for this lecture is Harold Bloom's *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human,* Part VII, "The Great Tragedies: *Hamlet,*" and Harold Bloom's *Hamlet: Poem Unlimited.*

Hamlet is unique in all of literature—all of Western literature, and by now, since English has become the lingua franca of the entire world, replacing French, in some sense, it is *the* unique work, the most famous literary work, in the entire world today.

A Unique Tragedy

The play was probably begun in 1599, when Shakespeare was about thirty-five years old. It was finished and first acted in 1600, when he was thirty-six; it was revised in 1601, the year in which he turned thirty-seven. He died fifteen years later, in 1616, on just about his fifty-second birthday.

There is a subtle personal family background to Shakespeare's tragedy of *Hamlet.* Shakespeare had only one son, Hamnet, and in those days—when Elizabethan spelling was by no means regular (Shakespeare himself, in different documents, spelled his own last name six or seven ways)—there would have been little difference between Hamnet and Hamlet. The boy died at the age of eleven, three years before the play was written. In the year of the play's revision, Shakespeare's father died.

By universal agreement, Hamlet is, quite simply, the most brilliant mind in the entire history of literature. He is, in the Renaissance, four centuries ago, a new kind of man, as much a new kind of man as King David is in the Hebrew Bible in the second book of Samuel, or perhaps as Jesus of Nazareth is in the Gospel of Mark. Hamlet is an absolute individual, a total original. He does not resemble any figures who come before or after him in Shakespeare's work, but his influence, and the influence of the play, has been so enormous that it is quite customary throughout Western literature to find characters who are to one degree or another imitations of Hamlet, and by now in Eastern literature as well.

A traditional way of talking about this character is to say that he is a man who could not make up his mind to do what the ghost of his father had ordered him to do: avenge his father's murder at the hands of his uncle, Claudius, who not only usurped the throne, but married Hamlet's mother, Queen Gertrude. Indeed, it is a dark element that while Gertrude surely does not know that Claudius murdered her first husband, neither we nor Hamlet know how far back her sexual relationship with Claudius goes. And this creates a special problem for Hamlet's consciousness, because he does not like Claudius, and there is an outside possibility (which Hamlet is not willing to express) that he could be the son of Claudius.

No one has succeeded in creating a character whose consciousness is as extraordinarily capacious as Hamlet's, a character who seems to be aware of everything, a character whose self-awareness, in fact, is so intense that it becomes a kind of theatricality. He is at every point aware that in some sense he is acting in a play. Hamlet somehow seems to us a kind of real person who has been popped into the midst of a play in which no one else is quite real, as though he is a human being surrounded by puppets, some of them extraordinary figures indeed (like his beloved Ophelia), but who nevertheless do not have what you might want to call the reality quotient that Hamlet himself has.

This is Shakespeare's longest play by far. It is 4,000 lines long and is almost never put on completely on the modern stage. Of those 4,000 lines, three-eighths—1,500 lines—are spoken by Hamlet himself. His range of interests is exceptional, the quality of his intelligence piercing; though the play is already far too long for ordinary stage presentation, something in us always wishes Hamlet to say even more than he already does.

Reactions to *Hamlet*

The range of reactions to this play has always been astonishing. The English Romantic critic Samuel Taylor Coleridge said that this was the tragedy of a man who thought too much. The great German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche replied: No, that is wrong—Hamlet's problem is not that he thinks too much, but that he thinks much too well, and he thinks his way through to the truth, and all you can do in relation to the truth is die of it. While I prefer Nietzsche to Coleridge on this, I would myself go a little further. I think that Hamlet is not so much what Nietzsche calls a Dionysiac man—that is to say, a kind of archaic, ecstatic sort of a person, but rather a new kind of man, one who in a sense incarnates the truth in himself. As the King David of Second Samuel seems to incarnate the truth in himself, as the Jesus of the Gospel of Mark is taken as incarnating the truth in himself, so Hamlet seems to be the truth, and comes to recognize that he is the truth, and if you are the truth, then only annihilation, self-annihilation, is appropriate for you—a terrible and nihilistic conclusion, but I think there is a strong nihilistic element in this great drama.

Sigmund Freud thought that both the character Hamlet and the drama of *Hamlet* was an exemplification of what he called the Oedipus complex—he took it that Hamlet's relationship to the dead King Hamlet was marked by extreme ambivalence, that is to say, simultaneous love and hatred. But I think that is wrong, and that the Freudian reading of this play is, in the end, a profoundly mistaken one.

Time in *Hamlet*

Hamlet, at the beginning of the play, has come back from the University of Wittenberg, a Protestant university in Germany, to the royal court of Elsinore in Denmark because his father has suddenly and mysteriously died. His mother has been remarried to his father's brother Claudius, who has become king in the elder Hamlet's place. Hamlet—like his school chums Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, or another school friend, Horatio—is a student. The Hamlet of the opening of this play cannot be more than nineteen years of age. But

we are told very clearly in the graveyard scene that it is twenty-three years since Yorick, Hamlet's boyhood companion and the king's jester, died, and that Hamlet was seven years old at the time. That means that Hamlet is thirty years old by the fifth act of the play—but in no way can the time lapse of the plot be more than six weeks. So we are given a hero who somehow ages eleven years in just six weeks.

The great rival dramatist Ben Jonson was always outraged by what he took to be Shakespeare's extreme liberties and carelessness in terms of plot. But I think this is Shakespearean deliberation. He wants a Hamlet who is still essentially a student (though a very wise student) at the opening of the work, but then he wants a Hamlet who is indeed moving on to full maturity at the close of the work, and he does not care if he involves himself in a contradiction; indeed, Shakespeare might well have said, even more than Walt Whitman said: "Do I contradict myself? Very well, then I contradict myself. I am large, I contain multitudes."

The Nature of the Play

The play is, in many ways, baffling—T.S. Eliot, a major poet and critic of the twentieth century, did not like the play. He once said that it is certainly an aesthetic failure, which always causes me to say that if *Hamlet* were an aesthetic failure, then there is no such thing as any literary work ever that has been an aesthetic success. But one knows what it is that bothered Eliot—he felt that there is some emotion in excess of what is going on in the play that is constantly being manifested in Hamlet. That has to do with hidden elements in Hamlet, some of which I hope to uncover.

Hamlet and Shakespeare share a tremendous distrust of motives. Hamlet does not trust the motivation of anyone else in the play, and he distrusts his own motives. They also share an intense theatricality. Shakespeare himself acted the part of the ghost of Hamlet's father. And because of a long theatrical tradition in which, more often than not, the actor who plays the ghost also plays the first actor (the first player or player king), there is every reason to believe that Shakespeare doubled in that part also.

Four centuries and more after it was first written and put on at the Globe Theatre, Shakespeare's theater in London, *Hamlet* remains the most experimental stage drama ever written. It tests the absolute limits both of theatricality and of consciousness. No one—not Pirandello, not Samuel Beckett, not Bertolt Brecht, not the Theater of the Absurd people, including Ionesco and Artaud—no one in the twentieth century, or now in the twenty-first, is able to get beyond *Hamlet.* It is the most alarming kind of a play, whether we read it or watch a good performance of it, because everything about it is unexpected; nothing in it is predictable.

The Character of Hamlet

I turn therefore to a crucial question. How did Hamlet first become Hamlet? How did he become the extraordinary individual whom we meet, who is so deeply ambivalent, who questions everything, who manifests an incredible degree of irony, and who, of all of Shakespeare's characters, seems to be the most adept at overhearing himself, being able to listen to himself as if he

were some person other than himself, and, on the basis of what he hears, go through a process of extraordinary change? He is, I think, a changeling from the start—a kind of actor-dramatist from the beginning, and I suppose that's why Shakespeare appears at his side as the first player and as the paternal ghost, to make clear to the audience that the character of Hamlet is not a self-representation on his own part.

The great Romantic critic William Hazlitt said, "It is we who are Hamlet," which I think is not altogether the case, because none of us is as intelligent, after all, as Hamlet is—but also, none of us is, I think, quite as cold as Hamlet is.

It is not the audience who is Hamlet, but the audience who is Horatio. Horatio is the figure who mediates Hamlet for us, who makes Hamlet accessible for us. Horatio represents the audience. Without Horatio, we would have no way directly into the character and personality of Hamlet, simply because he seems to exist in a sphere very much apart from us.

In *Hamlet*, Shakespeare mixes melancholia with a wild, ironic humor, and the play manifests also his tendency to produce the most amazing range of diction (word choice) in all of literature. The vocabulary of *Hamlet* is enormous; indeed, a great many words in it are words that Shakespeare had, in fact, invented.

Melancholia is, of course, what Hamlet is famous for. But the melancholia is not grief at the death of his father, let alone the enormous shock at the remarriage of his mother so quickly—to Claudius of all people—but that Hamlet had always been (except for Yorick) an unloved child. The ghost never speaks of the love he bears for his son. When he shows up again later in the play, it is out of concern for Gertrude, not out of concern for Hamlet. Indeed, there is not much evidence that Gertrude, who is a kind of sexual magnet, has ever paid much attention to her son either. So from the beginning we are dealing with someone who has, in an extraordinary way, invented himself—which takes me to the moment I have been leading up to: the entrance of the players after Hamlet confronts Rosencrantz and Guildenstern for the first time in the play.

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern have been called from Wittenberg to spy upon Hamlet for Claudius and for Polonius, Claudius's chamberlain. Hamlet is well aware that there is something wrong with their presence, and he shows a great deal of wariness. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, for their part, are aware that they face grave difficulties from the start. They admit that they were sent for, and then, with extraordinary ambivalence about the entire human situation, Hamlet cries out:

> *Man delights not me, no, nor women neither, nor women neither, though by your smiling you seem to say so.*

And Rosencrantz protests:

My lord, there was no such stuff in my thoughts.

And Hamlet says:

Why did you laugh then, when I said "man delights not me"?

And Rosencrantz replies:

To think, my lord, if you delight not in man, what poor entertainment, as it were, the players shall receive from you . . .

That is to say, the actors (always called players in those days) are coming, and that will take us into the next section of this play.

Death

Hamlet carries with him an intense consciousness of death. His consciousness is so enormous that it comprehends the whole question of human mortality. In the speech that he gives to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, there is an overwhelming sense that our condition as human beings is extraordinarily divided against itself. We are, in some ways, like mortal gods, and yet we know that we are going to die. As the great English critic George Wilson Knight once wrote: "Hamlet is death's ambassador to us. He conveys to us the embassy of death."

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING

Questions

1. Why is the character of Hamlet such a unique creation?
2. Why did T.S. Eliot think that *Hamlet* was an aesthetic failure?

Suggested Reading

Bloom, Harold. *Hamlet: Poem Unlimited*. New York: Penguin, 2003.

———. *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human*. New York: Penguin, 1998.

Other Books of Interest

Shakespeare, William. *Hamlet: Arden Shakespeare*. 2nd edition. Ed. Harold Jenkins. London: Arden, 1982.

Lecture 4:
Hamlet: Part II

The Suggested Reading for this lecture is Harold Bloom's *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human,* Part VII, "The Great Tragedies: *Hamlet,*" and Harold Bloom's *Hamlet: Poem Unlimited.*

Hamlet was first acted at the Globe Theatre during the year 1600. But in 1601, Shakespeare expanded its ironic commentary on the War of the Theatres, which he was having with his friendly rival Ben Jonson. Yet even the Poets' War is only a little bit of that extraordinary maelstrom you get in the sequence that goes from act 2, scene 2, line 315, through act 3, scene 2, line 288.

In the entrance of the Players, not only do we see the Poets' War of 1600 to 1601 (in which Shakespeare joins his friends John Marston and Thomas Dekker in their battle against Ben Jonson and the child actors whom he was directing at the Blackfriars Theatre), but we are given nonexistent plays.

Once the Players arrive, they are clearly Shakespeare's own actors from the Globe. Hamlet asks why they are in Elsinore, and not, in effect, in London. According to Rosencrantz, it is because there are these little young hawks, "these aery of children, little eyases," who are taking all of the business away. Hamlet says that he finds that difficult to believe, but Guildenstern says that there has been much throwing about of brains in this kind of warfare.

Hamlet says that the Players are welcome and that he wishes them to repeat a play. Addressing the Player King, who is almost certainly the actor William Shakespeare himself, Hamlet says, "I heard thee speak me a speech once, but it was never acted; or, if it was, not above once; for the play, I remember, pleased not the million; 'twas caviare to the general." Shakespeare may well be jokingly referring to his own play *Troilus and Cressida,* which had had perhaps one performance, and it was not at the Globe. The nonexistent play, which has no title, is a satire of Shakespeare's contemporaries Christopher Marlowe, Thomas Kyd, and Thomas Nashe.

Plays Within Plays

Hamlet starts to quote a speech from this play to the actor William Shakespeare. (Hamlet is played by the actor Richard Burbage, the chief actor of Shakespeare's company, who has the distinction of having inaugurated the role of Hamlet as well as all the other great roles in mature Shakespeare.) Hamlet relates how Pyrrhus, the son of Achilles, avenged the death of Achilles, who had been slain by Paris, the son of Priam, who had stolen Helen away and precipitated the Trojan War.

What follows is a magnificently ridiculous passage, spoken by Hamlet and ending with "the hellish Pyrrhus / Old grandsire Priam seeks." Then the

Player King, or William Shakespeare himself as actor, recites a ghastly scene in deliberately bad verse. He relates how Priam is chopped up by the son of Achilles and how Queen Hecuba comes to lament the death of Priam. Hamlet says that they will hear a play again the next day; they will play *The Murder of Gonzago* (another nonexistent play), but Hamlet says that he will revise it. He says to the Player King that he will give him new lines to speak. He will retitle *The Murder of Gonzago* as *The Mouse-Trap,* because he means it to be the trap in which he catches his enemy Claudius.

Unpacking Your Heart with Words

When Hamlet is left alone, we are suddenly back in the play of *Hamlet*, and Hamlet speaks a major soliloquy in which he cries out:

That I, the son of a dear father murder'd,
Prompted to my revenge by heaven and hell,
Must, like a whore, unpack my heart with words.

Hamlet speaks of what is involved in unpacking your heart with words, like a whore who says "I love you" when she does not love you. Nietzsche, very much under the influence of *Hamlet*, made of this the extraordinary principle that I think is a wonderful interpretation of what Hamlet, and indeed Shakespeare, finally is up to. Nietzsche said, "That for which we can find words is something already dead in our hearts. There is always a kind of contempt in the act of speaking."

What we are being told, quite extraordinarily, is that we are in a bad situation whenever we try to directly express our present sensation—that when we try to say to someone "I love you," in some sense we are lying, because if you can find words for it, then it is already dead in your heart. And there is always in Nietzsche a kind of contempt for the act of speaking. Certainly that is manifest throughout *Hamlet.*

To Be, or Not to Be

In act 3, scene 1, we come to the most famous speech—the most famous question—in all of literature: the great soliloquy, "To be, or not to be."

"Question," by the way, is a very good word. In all of Shakespeare, there is no play that uses the word "question" in all its forms—questionable, questioning, question—as often as Hamlet does throughout *Hamlet*. The word occurs in different forms seventeen different times. And indeed, Hamlet does question everything. And when he says,
"To be, or not to be," he does not mean whether or not he is to avenge his father, and he certainly does not mean that he is contemplating suicide (though the way in which he speaks makes it sound as though he is thinking about the possibility of self-slaughter). He is dealing with something very different.

Hamlet takes you to the dread of something after death, the fact that we just do not know one way or the other whether there is annihilation or there is consciousness. Hamlet describes death as "[t]he undiscover'd country from whose bourn / No traveler returns." This, he says, "puzzles the will / And makes us rather bear those ills we have / Than fly to others that we know not of?" And then he says something else that is frequently misunderstood: "Thus

conscience does make cowards of us all." Though he uses the word "conscience," in Shakespeare "conscience" means "consciousness" as you and I now employ it. So it is consciousness itself that makes cowards of us all, and he says that any resolution we care to make is necessarily "sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought . . . And enterprises of great pitch and moment, / With this regard their currents turn awry, / And lose the name of action."

The Murder of Gonzago

In act 3, scene 2, Hamlet enters with three of the Players. Hamlet, with the voice of Shakespeare, speaks about the purpose of playing, which he says is to hold a mirror up to nature. And then the play moves to the most exceptional moment in it, which breaks the continuity and calls into question the whole issue of stage representation.

Hamlet sits with Ophelia, Polonius, Claudius, Gertrude, and the rest of the court, and *The Murder of Gonzago* is played in front of them. It is very badly written indeed—remember, this is not supposed to be written by Hamlet; it is a parody of a Marlowian, Kydian kind of play.

Its very worst moment comes when the Player Queen, who very clearly represents Gertrude, says, "A second time I kill my husband dead, / When second husband kisses me in bed." And then comes the passage that, undoubtedly, Hamlet himself wrote, and had interpolated in the play. The Player King says to the Queen:

I do believe you think what now you speak;
But what we do determine oft we break.
Purpose is but the slave to memory,
Of violent birth, but poor validity;
Which now, the fruit unripe, sticks on the tree;
But fall, unshaken, when they mellow be.

That is to say, every time we purpose doing something, or meaning something, it is of poor validity, because it will be forgotten quickly. We might will one thing, but fate brings about another. Our devices and plans are always upset. Our thoughts may be ours, but the purposes to which they lead are completely alienated from us.

And then we are shown precisely what the ghost had told Hamlet: that the king's brother Claudius had come and poured poison in his ear while he was sleeping. Hamlet observes this and cries out, "He poisons him i' the garden for's estate. His name's Gonzago: the story is extant, and writ in choice Italian" (as of course it is not); "you shall see anon how the murderer gets the love of Gonzago's wife." It is too much for Claudius. He leaps to his feet and cries out, desperately: "Give me some light: away!" Everyone, except Hamlet and Horatio, runs offstage.

Hamlet is left alone with Horatio. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern enter as Hamlet exults and cries out for some music. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern say that the king is furious. Hamlet, speaking to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, announces the Players, who have entered again, playing small woodwind instruments. Hamlet offers instruments to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern and tells them to play for him. Guildenstern protests that he doesn't have the skill. Hamlet cries out:

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 am easier to be played on than a pipe?

With that, Hamlet, I think, has directly challenged not only Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, and Claudius and Polonius through them, but he has also challenged the audience. Shakespeare is warning us that to pluck out the heart of Hamlet's mystery is almost impossible, and yet we have no choice—it is what the play is asking us to do.

The Murder of Polonius

In act 3, scene 3, Hamlet comes upon his uncle, who is down on his knees asking forgiveness for the murder of his brother. Hamlet stands above him, unseen by Claudius, with a drawn sword—but he does not strike. The reason he gives is that he will not cut down a man while he is praying, but I think that masks something else, something far more profound. Hamlet's thoughts are bloody, though he is not yet ready to act. A moment later, Hamlet strikes through the curtain and kills Polonius, then simply shrugs it off. He says: "Thou wretched, rash, intruding fool, farewell! / I took thee for thy better" (I thought I was thrusting through the curtain and killing your master, Claudius). When he is done, Hamlet denounces his mother, Gertrude, so fiercely that the ghost reenters to keep him from doing any violence to her. Though I think Hamlet is not on the verge of killing her, she is certainly frightened at his fury and apparent madness. Interestingly enough, he can see the ghost, but she cannot, which raises another of the deep ambiguities of this play.

When the ghost first appears, in the first act of the play, he is seen by Horatio, Marcellus, Bernardo, the soldiers, and also Hamlet. But when he makes his second and last appearance, the ghost is visible only to Hamlet, and not at all to Gertrude. It has raised for many the immemorial question of Hamlet's madness, which I would like to dismiss. Hamlet himself disposes of the question: "I am but mad north-north-west: when the wind is southerly, I know a hawk from a handsaw." And indeed he is never mad. He puts on, as he says, an "antic disposition," but that is to fool Claudius and Polonius, and to be able to carry out his designs, even though he is by no means certain what those designs are.

And so we are taken to the opening of act 4, scene 2, when Hamlet is forced to reveal where he has taken the body of Polonius, of which he has said, unceremoniously and with no contrition, "I will lug the guts into the neighbor room." He is told that he is to be escorted to England by Rosencrantz and Guildenstern with sealed instructions that they are to present to the king of England. Those sealed instructions, as we rapidly discover, are that Hamlet is to be executed immediately by the king of England. Claudius says that the population loves Hamlet so greatly in Denmark that they dare not do it themselves, but that he is too dangerous to be allowed to live.

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING

Questions

1. What does Hamlet mean when he speaks of unpacking one's heart with words?
2. In the famous "To Be, or Not to Be" soliloquy, what is it that Hamlet says makes cowards of us all?

Suggested Reading

Bloom, Harold. *Hamlet: Poem Unlimited*. New York: Penguin, 2003.

———. *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human*. New York: Penguin, 1998.

Other Books of Interest

Shakespeare, William. *Hamlet: Arden Shakespeare*. 2nd edition. Ed. Harold Jenkins. London: Arden, 1982.

Lecture 5:
Hamlet: Part III

The Suggested Reading for this lecture is Harold Bloom's *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human,* Part VII, "The Great Tragedies: *Hamlet,*" and Harold Bloom's *Hamlet: Poem Unlimited.*

In act 4, Hamlet sees the army of Fortinbras, the prince of Norway, march across the stage. Hamlet broods on the insanity of the fact that thousands of men are going to die for a very small bit of ground. Hamlet then goes off on the ship to England. But pirates come along, and Hamlet, thinking quickly, takes advantage of the occasion to make his escape.

A Different Hamlet

There is an extraordinary difference in Hamlet in act 5. Before act 4 is over, Ophelia goes mad and drowns herself. The fifth act therefore opens in the graveyard, and the gravedigger is speaking to another clown while they dig a grave for Ophelia. Quite suddenly, Hamlet and Horatio enter. Hamlet, having taken advantage of the pirate attack to go below ship and unseal the letter ordering his execution, has used his art of penmanship to change the instructions so that it is Rosencrantz and Guildenstern who are to be executed upon reaching England. Hamlet then boards the pirate ship; he is taken for ransom back to Denmark and is reunited with Horatio.

Hamlet enters the graveyard and watches the gravedigger throw up skull after skull. Hamlet looks at one skull and says:

> *This might be the pate of a politician, which this ass now o'er-offices; one that would circumvent God, might it not? . . .*
>
> *Did these bones cost no more the breeding, but to play at loggats with 'em? Mine ache to think on't.*

It is one of his most profound and frightening reflections upon mortality, and it raises the question of what kind of man has come back from the sea. There is a new quietude in Hamlet in act 5. He no longer frets about his dead father. He no longer seems to want to make any resolution whatsoever to do anything about Claudius. He seems to adopt a kind of wise passivity, a deep kind of quietism, which really is a sort of disinterestedness or resignation.

As he is meditating in this kind of a mode, the gravedigger throws up a skull and asks Hamlet whose skull he thinks it is. Hamlet says: "Nay, I know not." And then follows what might be the most famous moment in all of Western literature. The gravedigger says:

> *A pestilence on him for a mad rogue! a' poured a flagon of Rhenish on my head once. This same skull, sir, was Yorick's skull, the king's jester.*

Hamlet is incredulous. He holds the skull, stares at it, and brings it close to his face. This is, after all, the fellow who died when Hamlet was seven years old, twenty-three years before. This is the person who, in a court that neglected the little prince, was always his playfellow, always available to him. How many times are we to believe that King Hamlet ever carried the little Hamlet on his back? Likely, none whatsoever.

Alas, poor Yorick! I knew him, Horatio: a fellow
of infinite jest, of most excellent fancy: he hath
borne me on his back a thousand times.

One also wonders how often in his life Hamlet has kissed either Gertrude or Ophelia—not many times at all, one might suspect. Yet of Yorick:

Here hung those lips that I have kissed I know
not how oft.

Hamlet, speaking of Alexander the Great, the most famous individual in history short of Jesus of Nazareth, says:

Dost thou think Alexander
looked o' this fashion i'
the earth? . . .

To what base uses we may return, Horatio! Why may
not imagination trace the noble dust of Alexander,
till he find it stopping a bung-hole?

Mortality is everything, and human life in opposition to it seems slight indeed. In comes the funeral of Ophelia. Hamlet observes it, and then Laertes leaps into the grave so as to hold his sister once more in his arms. Hamlet appears and says:

What is he whose grief
Bears such an emphasis? Whose phrase of sorrow
Conjures the wandering stars, and makes them stand
Like wonder-wounded hearers?

In the end, as Shakespeare knows, this is what he is doing to his audience: he is making us into hearers wounded by wonder. And then with great pride, telling the king that he is back and to look out for him, Hamlet cries out:

This is I, Hamlet the Dane.

Laertes grapples with him, screaming:

The devil take thy soul!

Hamlet, with perfect self-control, says:

Thou pray'st not well.
I prithee, take thy fingers from my throat;
For, though I am not splenitive and rash,
Yet have I in me something dangerous,
Which let thy wiseness fear: hold off thy hand.

This is a warning on Hamlet's part that he is, indeed, a very dangerous person.

No More Than to Say "One"

In act 5, scene 2, Hamlet says to Horatio:

There's a divinity that shapes our ends,
Rough-hew them how we will.

Horatio replies:

That is most certain.

Horatio is thinking, piously, about the Christian divinity. But Hamlet has not said what god this is. There is a divinity who is Nemesis, or Fate—not God the Father or Christ—because Hamlet has moved into a state of almost total nihilism. Hamlet says:

And a man's life's no more than to say "One."

It is, again, a reminder of mortality. In any one moment, we may, any of us, suddenly depart.

Readiness Is All

An emissary, Osric, is sent to invite Hamlet to a duel, which is supposedly going to be a mock duel between Hamlet and Laertes to be fought in front of the king. There is no notion on Hamlet's part that Laertes' sword will be poisoned or that there will also be a poisoned glass of wine.

Hamlet, speaking to Horatio, says:

. . . thou wouldst not think how ill all's here
about my heart: but it is no matter.

Horatio says that he will forestall the duel, to which Hamlet replies:

Not a whit, we defy augury: 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: since no man of aught he
leaves knows aught, what is't to leave betimes?
Let be.

Hamlet is, of course, citing the Gospel of Matthew on the fall of a sparrow. But when he says, "If it be now, 'tis not to come," in every case "it" means the moment of death.

In the King James Bible, when Simon Peter falls asleep on his watch, Jesus says of him, "The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak." The same passage appears in William Tyndale's Geneva Bible, which Shakespeare has very much in mind here: "The spirit is ready, but the flesh is weak." So "readiness is all" simply means that the willingness is all. We do not know anyone. We do not understand anyone. We do not understand anything. Why should it matter whether we leave at one time or another? "Let be" will become a great refrain that beats on and off for the rest of Hamlet's brief existence.

The Duel

Everyone enters; the duel takes place. But as it takes place, there is a series of misadventures. Gertrude, drinking to Hamlet's fortune, drinks from

the poisoned cup of wine. Laertes wounds Hamlet, who suddenly understands that something is very wrong indeed. Hamlet then wounds Laertes with his own poisoned sword. The queen falls dead, and Laertes confesses everything. Hamlet wounds Claudius, and then, very powerfully, he says:

Follow my mother.

The king dies. Laertes dies also, and then we have the slow death of Hamlet, which goes on for more than sixty lines after Hamlet says, "I am dead, Horatio."

Dismissing any notion that he was madly in love with his mother—the Freudian notion—he simply shrugs her off and cries out:

Wretched queen, adieu!

He then speaks directly to the audience:

You that look pale and tremble at this chance,
That are but mutes or audience to this act,
Had I but time—

There is something that Hamlet could tell us, but it is Shakespeare's great art that he will not let Hamlet tell us everything we want Hamlet to tell. We want Hamlet to explain himself to us. We want him to explain to us what it is to have been Hamlet, to have that extraordinary, exalted state of consciousness.

Fortinbras, with his army, comes onto the stage. Hamlet cries out:

But I do prophesy the election [of the new king] *lights*
On Fortinbras . . .

Suddenly, Hamlet realizes that he cannot say another word. He cries out:

The rest is silence.

This is the last thing Hamlet says, which is most astounding. It means that, on the one hand, the remainder—anything more that is going to happen to him—is not going to be consciousness, but is going to be annihilation, is going to be total silence. Hamlet, who has spoken 1,500 lines out of the 4,000 in this vast play, is the least silent character, even in all of Shakespeare. But it means something else also. It means that the silence he enters will be a profound rest, which he very badly needs. It means that he is exhausted of consciousness and exhausted of events.

Horatio, rising to the occasion, cries out:

Good night, sweet prince . . .

And flights of angels sing thee to thy rest!

There is no reason to believe that flights of angels are going to sing Hamlet anywhere, and Shakespeare does not let the play end like that. He ends the play with surpassing irony.

Fortinbras, who, like the senior Hamlet, is nothing but a killing machine, comes onto the stage, sees all of the dead, and cries out that Hamlet deserves a military funeral:

Go, bid the soldiers shoot.

That is to say, fire a volley commemorating Hamlet as a military hero. This is perhaps the most powerful irony of this endlessly ironic play. Hamlet is not a soldier. Hamlet is an intellectual. He is a poet, a dramatist. He is a revenger who has refused to take overt revenge and has allowed events to overtake him, because in some deep sense, he's protesting the mission of revenge as being below his extraordinary and elevated consciousness. It is as though Hamlet has been saying, throughout the play—and I think Shakespeare is acknowledging it here, at the close—that Shakespeare has put Hamlet into the wrong play, that he deserved a vast, cosmological kind of a play like *King Lear* or *Macbeth*—one in which the powers of darkness and of light seem to struggle with one another, one in which the great issues of man's fate are properly taken up and argued in an almost celestial kind of fashion. But Shakespeare deliberately has not provided him with that—and Shakespeare, I think, is implicitly confessing it through this incredible close to the play.

The most amazing disclosure that Hamlet makes in his closing moments is that, while he has much still to tell us, presumably, about who he was and what he has come to understand about the human condition, his great anxiety is that he will leave a "wounded name" behind him. It is a justified anxiety. He is, after all, instrumental in eight deaths, including his own. But he also shows that in spite of his nihilism—in spite of his refusal to feel any confidence or any trust in language, in God, in his own sense of being, in his own intellect—there is still a remainder. There is something left behind; there is a deep concern for us in the audience. If he is not capable of loving a single human being as such, nevertheless his feelings as he dies are essentially benign and worthy of so extraordinarily capacious a person.

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING

Questions

1. How is Hamlet a changed man in act 5?
2. What is meant by “readiness is all”?

Suggested Reading

Bloom, Harold. *Hamlet: Poem Unlimited*. New York: Penguin, 2003.

———. *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human*. New York: Penguin, 1998.

Other Books of Interest

Shakespeare, William. *Hamlet: Arden Shakespeare*. 2nd edition. Ed. Harold Jenkins. London: Arden, 1982.

Lecture 6:
Othello: Part I

The Suggested Reading for this lecture is Harold Bloom's *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human,* Part VII, "The Great Tragedies: *Othello.*"

While the great tragedy *Othello* is very much the tragedy of Othello, the African commander of mercenaries for Venice, it is really Iago's play. Iago is its controlling intelligence. Iago plots the entire drama as it goes along. He is the only figure who gets anything started, and he would have gotten his way entirely had he not overlooked the goodness of his wife, Emilia.

Motivation

There is a question that has puzzled critics, audiences, and readers ever since *Othello* was first played at the Globe: What is the motive for Iago's vengeance against Othello? The best way to explain what otherwise would seem like motiveless malignancy (as Samuel Taylor Coleridge called it) is what John Milton has his Satan proclaim in *Paradise Lost*: that he suffers from a sense of injured merit. And indeed, just as Satan has been passed over in *Paradise Lost* for Christ and rebels against God on that basis, so Iago has been passed over for promotion in favor of Cassio, and something in him is as deeply rebellious and affronted by this as Satan, who in a sense can be called his disciple. Indeed, the influence of Iago upon Milton's Satan is extraordinary. And Iago has been the very archetype of the villain in world literature ever since.

Iago is the third in command of Othello's mercenary army. The second in command, the lieutenant, has evidently been wounded or killed, and before the play opens, Othello, to the terrible shock of Iago, has passed over his third in command in favor of one Michael Cassio, who is a kind of staff officer, not a battle-tested veteran like Iago. Othello is not at all aware of the extent to which he has alienated Iago. He perpetually goes on calling Iago "honest Iago," though we realize Iago is anything but that.

In act 1, scene 1, Iago is talking to Roderigo, whom he is perpetually soliciting for money. Roderigo is furious that Othello has married Desdemona, for whom Roderigo had expressed considerable interest and desire. Iago explains why he still follows the Moor:

Were I the Moor, I would not be Iago:
In following him, I follow but myself;
Heaven is my judge, not I for love and duty,
But seeming so, for my own peculiar end:
For when my outward action does demonstrate
The native act and figure of my heart
In complement extern, 'tis not long after
But I will wear my heart upon my sleeve
For doves to peck at: I am not what I am.

Ponder the extraordinary sentence: “I am not what I am.” Anyone in Shakespeare’s audience would have instantly recognized that it is set against St. Paul’s statement: “By the grace of God, I am what I am.” Iago says, “I am not what I am,” and his negation is striking. He is one of the great nihilists in literature, surpassing Hamlet in that regard.

Iago has been passed over by Othello—though Shakespeare never makes it overt—because he is always at war. He does not distinguish between the camp of war and the camp of peace. Because Iago has no diplomacy and is dangerous therefore in peacetime, Othello (with great wisdom) decided that he is someone who can be relied on in the battlefield, but not someone to be placed as second in command, for if Othello were to be wounded in battle or killed, there would be a highly irresponsible and dangerous person in charge.

Iago has worshipped the god of war in his captain-general Othello, just as Satan has worshipped God in *Paradise Lost.* When Iago is passed over, he feels completely undone. He is rendered impotent. He feels, indeed, that his whole life has come to nothing. He feels he has no dignity and no self-regard, that there’s scarcely any reason for going on, and so he turns upon his war-god, Othello, and looks for a way to return that god to a kind of original chaos. Iago’s soliloquies are very unlike those of Hamlet. They’re not the soliloquies of a master of consciousness. There is a tremendous internalization of the self, a tremendous new kind of inwardness, that does make Hamlet a new kind of human being. Iago is a Machiavellian figure. He is a villain. But he is a highly original villain. It is one of his curious attributes that he really has no emotions, no affective life of any kind, so that he first invents or makes up emotions, such as jealousy, and then he *pretends* to feel them.

Sexual Jealousy

The marriage between Desdemona and Othello is a remarkable one. She is probably no older than Juliet—fourteen or fifteen years of age. She has no prior experience of men, and if Roderigo is an example of what Venice affords to her by way of young men, quite clearly she ought to do better. She is someone who possesses a great deal of Juliet’s nature, and indeed, Shakespeare, I think, is renewing his sense of Juliet in Desdemona. Here is an extraordinary person, wonderfully capable of a selfless love. Othello, a visitor in her father’s house, a figure with a fabulous past, who rose from being an outcast prince of Africa to a boy soldier and has fought his way into the esteem of all of Europe as a great mercenary captain, has won her heart without meaning to by telling her of his exploits, and she’s frantically carried away by this. As Othello says, she does the wooing. Rather reluctantly, Othello allows himself to be wooed, and the two of them have, indeed, made a marriage. But Othello is a man in late middle age; it has been nine months since he has been in military action of any sort; he is really not himself, and he fears marriage. Indeed, there is no reason to believe that he knows very much about women at all.

Shakespeare is endlessly subtle. His art is elliptical. He scarcely allows even a single night—even a single hour—in which the marriage between Desdemona and Othello could ever have been consummated. And that is one of the reasons it is so easy for Iago to seduce Othello into the madness of sexual jealousy.

Sexual jealousy is an extraordinary impulse, perhaps even more so in males than in females. Shakespeare shows himself to be the major theorist of sexual jealousy that the world was ever to see before the advent of Sigmund Freud and Marcel Proust, and it's questionable whether they ever match his full insights. There is a distinct element in any sexual jealousy on the part of a male in the feeling of being abandoned; there is also an authentic sense of one's own mortality. If Othello, from the beginning, is as reluctant to marry as he has shown himself to be—if he has a kind of implicit fear of being cuckolded—then there is something about the nature of his love for Desdemona that is precarious almost from the start.

Sowing the Seeds

In the third act, Iago has gotten his wife, Emilia, to steal the handkerchief that was a special relic of Othello's mother. He says:

I will in Cassio's lodging lose this napkin,
And let him find it. Trifles light as air
Are to the jealous confirmations strong
As proofs of holy writ . . .

Iago is feeling his way; he is trying to discover what it is that is coming. And Othello, who after all is an extremely powerful and dangerous figure, a man who keeps his tremendous power of violence well in check by his habit of command, and by the use of reason, is now thoroughly deranged, and screams out, very powerfully and frighteningly:

I had been happy, if the general camp,
Pioneers and all, had tasted her sweet body,
So I had nothing known.

His desperation is extraordinary. No one in literature before Shakespeare conveyed such absolute wrath and hideous torment and doubt. Othello gets more and more furious. Finally, Othello kneels, and Iago says:

Pray be content.

And there is a brilliantly staged scene on Iago's part. Othello screams:

O, blood, Iago, blood!

Iago brilliantly says:

Do not rise yet.

He is now being the stage manager and director, as well as the plotter and playwright, and he kneels, side by side—it's a marvelous dramatic coup on Shakespeare's part—with Othello on stage, and cries out:

Witness, you ever-burning lights above,
You elements that clip us round about,
Witness that here Iago doth give up,
The execution of his wit, hands, heart,
To wrong'd Othello's service!

They rise together; Othello says:

I greet thy love.

As they stand side by side, Othello cries out:

Now art thou my lieutenant.

And Iago magnificently replies, a devil, having gotten Othello in his power:

I am your own for ever.

The great scheme of Iago has gradually formulated itself and will culminate in the fourth and fifth acts of the play.

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING

Questions

1. How did Shakespeare's Iago influence John Milton's Satan?
2. Why is Othello so susceptible to sexual jealousy?

Suggested Reading

Bloom, Harold. *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human*. New York: Penguin, 1998.

Other Books of Interest

Shakespeare, William. *Othello: Arden Shakespeare*. 2nd edition. Ed. E.A.J. Honigmann. London: Arden, 1996.

Lecture 7:
Othello: Part II

The Suggested Reading for this lecture is Harold Bloom's *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human,* Part VII, "The Great Tragedies: *Othello.*"

Most theatergoersand readers of Shakespeare find the ghastly murder of Desdemona to be extraordinarily painful material. It is even more dreadful than the horrifying moment at the close of *King Lear* when the great king enters with his hanged daughter Cordelia in his arms, his heart forever broken, and the audience's hearts, to a considerable extent, are broken also.

The Victim: A Kind of Saint

In reworking *Othello,* Shakespeare left the part of Iago absolutely alone. It was as though he had gotten it perfect the first time around. He made some modifications to the character and personality of Othello and Desdemona, but his principal revisions had to do with showing us more of the nature of Emilia, who is going to be the agency, at the cost of her own life, of the undoing of her dreadful husband, Iago.

In the opening of the fourth act, Othello asks Iago, referring to Cassio:

What hath he said?

Iago answers:

Faith, that he did—I know not what he did.

Othello:

What? What?

Iago:

Lie—

Othello:

With her?

Iago:

With her, on her; what you will.

Othello goes completely wild. He falls down; he actually faints. And still it goes on, this terrible breaking down of Othello, until the extraordinary dialogue between Desdemona and Emilia, which for the first time shows that something is beginning to stir in Desdemona. Emilia and Desde-mona are very close to each other. Emilia is Desdemona's body servant, but also her closest friend.

Desdemona, in one of the most deeply pathetic moments in all of Shakespeare, says:

My mother had a maid call'd Barbara:
She was in love, and he she loved proved mad
And did forsake her: she had a song of "willow";
An old thing 'twas, but it express'd her fortune,
And she died singing it: that song tonight
Will not go from my mind; I have much to do,
But to go hang my head all at one side,
And sing it like poor Barbara. Prithee, dispatch.

Emilia, a feminist long before the fact, says passionately:

Let husbands know
Their wives have sense like them: they see and smell
And have their palates both for sweet and sour,
As husbands have. What is it that they do
When they change us for others? Is it sport?
I think it is: and doth affection breed it?
I think it doth: is't frailty that thus errs?
It is so too: and have not we affections,
Desires for sport, and frailty, as men have?
Then let them use us well: else let them know,
The ills we do, their ills instruct us so.

The fourth act ends, setting Desdemona up as victim. In the passionate speech of Emilia is the presage to what is to come—when, knowing that Desdemona is a kind of saint, and in every way more virtuous and finer in texture than herself, Emilia discovers that Desdemona has been slain for no reason at all and that Desdemona's reputation is being hideously maligned on every side. Though Emilia knows it will cost her her life, she and she alone is in possession of the information that will undo her husband Iago's extraordinarily subtle and deft plot.

It is fascinating that Shakespeare should have given Iago—who otherwise is remarkably armored against every possibility—this one frailty. Iago has taken Emilia for granted. Iago is, in fact, so incredibly shocked when she reveals the truth—particularly because Emilia knows, and he knows, that he will instantly give her the death wound, as he does—that it puts him into one of the most extraordinary conditions in all of Shakespeare, one in which he chooses total silence at the end.

The Fifth Act

Othello's fifth act may well be the most painful in all of Shakespeare. In scene 2, Othello enters the bedchamber where Desdemona sleeps. With immense dignity and power, and yet immense weakness and confusion, he cries out:

It is the cause, it is the cause, my soul,—
Let me not name it to you, you chaste stars!—
It is the cause. Yet I'll not shed her blood . . .

He has, in fact, never shed her blood. She is still a virgin, and he knows it,

and the audience is surely beginning to suspect it. He kisses his sleeping bride, and Desdemona cries out:

Who's there? Othello?

Othello:

If you bethink yourself of any crime
Unreconciled as yet to heaven and grace,
Solicit for it straight.

Desdemona:

Talk you of killing?

Othello:

Ay, I do.

Desdemona:

Then heaven
Have mercy on me!

Othello:

That handkerchief
which I so loved and
gave thee
Thou gavest to Cassio.

Desdemona denies giving Cassio the handkerchief.

Othello:

It is too late.

And he stifles her; he smothers her. She is not quite dead, though she is very close to it.

Emilia breaks into the room. With her dying breath, Desdemona cries out:

A guiltless death I die.

Emilia, to Othello:

O, the more angel she,
And you the blacker devil!

Othello, who is desperate and screaming, cries out:

She turn'd to folly, and she was a whore.

Emilia:

Thou art rash as fire, to say
That she was false: O, she was heavenly true!

And Othello, who is now totally out of control:

Cassio did top her; ask thy husband else.

Everyone dashes in. Emilia cries out to Iago:

Disprove this villain, if thou be'st a man:
He says thou told'st him that his wife was false:
I know thou didst not, thou'rt not such a villain.

And Iago, now desperate:

I told him what I thought, and told no more
Than what he found himself was apt and true. . . .
Be wise, and get you home.

And Emilia says:

I will not.

And he offers to stab Emilia, and she cries out:

O thou dull Moor! that handkerchief thou speak'st on
I found by fortune and did give my husband;
For often, with a solemn earnestness,
More than indeed belong'd to such a trifle,
He begg'd of me to steal it.

Othello screams out:

Precious villain!

Othello runs at Iago and tries to stab him, but Iago stabs Emilia and runs off:

Emilia is dying, and dying with an extraordinary sense that she has done the right thing, giving up her life to clear Desdemona's good name—a heroic death, and perhaps indeed, in terms of contemporary and justified feminism, the most judicious death in all of Shakespeare.

Othello cries out:

I have another weapon in this chamber;
It is a sword of Spain . . .
O ill-starr'd wench!
Pale as thy smock! when we shall meet at compt,
This look of thine will hurl my soul from heaven,
And fiends will snatch at it. Cold, cold, my girl!
Even like thy chastity.

Notice that remark. Othello is answering the question of whether or not he had ever consummated the marriage.

A Silent Death

The wounded Cassio is brought in, as is Iago, now a prisoner. Othello wounds Iago.

When Cassio says to him: "Dear general, I never gave you cause," poor Othello says: "I do believe it, and I ask your pardon"; and then suddenly understanding it all, he says:

Will you, I pray, demand that demi-devil
Why he hath thus ensnared my soul and body?

In what is the most striking remark in this play and one of the greatest moments in all of Shakespeare, Iago says:

Demand me nothing: what you know, you know:
From this time forth I never will speak word.

And though they say that they will torture him and that he will die under torture, he will die totally mute; he will never again speak a word, because of the

incredible shock and his sense of self-betrayal, his sense that he had made a magic web and yet had completely neglected the one figure who could undo him, Emilia.

Othello, rather desperately, says, “Well, thou dost best,” and they say to him that they are taking him back to the Venetian state. And Othello then utters a great death speech, which is generally badly misunderstood. T.S. Eliot actually said that, in this speech, Othello is merely trying to cheer himself up, but that is a hopelessly inadequate interpretation. Othello knows that Cassio is no replacement for him. He knows that under tight control, no doubt, his military skills, his prowess, his habit of command, are invaluable to Venice. And though Shakespeare, in his elliptical way, does not let Othello say this out loud, deep within him, Othello understands that they may just use him as a kind of killing machine, and a machine of command, to be loosed whenever they need him, and that is not the existence he wants.

I took by the throat the circumcised dog,
And smote him, thus.

With that outcry, Othello stabs himself to death. Notice that this is not a Roman suicide. This is an act of tragic intensity. Rather than survive in a diminished guise, and with the eternal torment of knowing that he has been led by Iago’s treacheries and persuasions to destroy his wholly innocent and blameless wife, he passes a judgment upon himself that he fears that Venice will not pass, because he still could be very useful to Venice; he condemns himself to execution, and he executes himself. And in doing so, he recovers a certain quality of tragic dignity. In this final speech, he is certainly not trying to cheer himself up; he is trying to face the terrible reality that he has helped to create.

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING

Questions

1. What characteristics of feminism are in Emilia's speech?
2. Why is Emilia's a tragic death?

Suggested Reading

Bloom, Harold. *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human*. New York: Penguin, 1998.

Other Books of Interest

Shakespeare, William. *Othello: Arden Shakespeare*. 2nd edition. Ed. E.A.J. Honigmann. London: Arden, 1996.

Lecture 8:
King Lear: Part I

The Suggested Reading for this lecture is Harold Bloom's *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human,* Part VII, "The Great Tragedies: *King Lear.*"

King Lear is the most demanding play that Shakespeare ever wrote. Its emotional demands upon its audience and readership are unparalleled, just as the intellectual demands of the tragedy of *Hamlet* are beyond measure.

Nothing Will Come of Nothing

Eighty-year-old King Lear is at once an eternal image of fatherhood and the embodiment of all the infirmities of being eighty years old and possessing total royal authority. Lear loves his third daughter, Cordelia, above all other human beings. And yet he is violently over-expressionistic in his excessive need for love, from her in particular. He suggests in many ways Yahweh, the Jehovah of Genesis, Exodus, and Numbers. Like that God, Lear is impulsive and given to sudden furies. He is wayward but sublimely impressive. Though at the opening of the play Lear formally abdicates, in fact, he cannot bear to surrender his kingship. In act 1, scene 1, there is an extraordinary exchange between Lear and Cordelia, which is the true beginning of the tragedy. Lear says to Cordelia, referring to the kingdom:

> *What can you say to draw a third,*
> *More opulent than your sisters? Speak.*

And Cordelia replies:

> *Nothing my lord.*

Lear speaks with great, mounting fury:

> *Nothing will come of nothing.*
> *Speak again.*

And Lear exhibits a very Jehovah-like loss of temper as he exiles her in fury.

His two other daughters, Regan and Goneril, divide the kingdom between them. They are, of course, the creatures later described as monsters of the deep. They are the most extraordinarily evil women in all of Shakespeare, just as Cordelia is one of the most quietly loving and impressive. As to why she had nothing to say, it is simply because she has a certain recalcitrance. He has been demanding excessive love from her all her life, and while she truly loves him as he loves her, she doesn't want to have to declare it upon demand.

Edmund and Lear

The second scene features one of the most fascinating figures in this great drama: Edmund, who is the bastard half brother of the legitimate half brother Edgar, who will eventually succeed his godfather, Lear, in the kingdom.

Edmund is an ice-cold strategist, much like Iago, but with this enormous difference: he is a strategist of evil rather than a great improviser and technician. He has less feeling than any other figure in Shakespeare, just as Lear has more emotion. Iago actually felt emotions only after first inventing them as tactics.

This play, like so many of Shakespeare's works, is elliptical in particular respects. Thus, though Lear and Edmund share the stage for the first long scene and the final last scene of the entire drama, they never address a single word to each other. It is almost as though Shakespeare is telling the audience that total emotion and absolute lack of emotion literally cannot speak to each other.

Why is it that for the first half of this play Shakespeare makes it so difficult for us to immediately like Lear? The audience has to keep reminding itself of what is absolutely crucial, which is that every evil figure in the play is against Lear. Lear is greatly loved by and loving to all of the figures in the play who are on the side of decent behavior.

The Fool

The Fool is a fascinating figure who loves Lear but is furious with him, since he forms a kind of community of love with Lear and Cordelia. It is interesting that the Fool and Cordelia are never on stage together in the play. The Fool vanishes very mysteriously from the play and the audience is never told of his fate. When Lear, in the fifth act, enters with the corpse of his daughter Cordelia, he cries out in anguish "and my poor fool is hanged!"—almost as though he is confusing in his madness the identities of the Fool and Cordelia, another highly deliberate act of symbolism on Shakespeare's part. It's very important to pay great attention to the Fool, because he is unlike all the other clowns, jesters, and fools in Shakespeare. Indeed, in Shakespeare, and in particular in *King Lear* and in *Macbeth,* the word "fool" takes on a special meaning. It had originally meant someone you were in a sense foolish about, someone you were fond of, a child, a beloved, but it begins to mean "victim" in this play, and in that sense it gives a very special meaning to many things that the Fool says.

The Fool is immensely bitter. Indeed, the Fool in some sense wants to drive Lear mad and actually is the largest single element in driving Lear mad by pointing out to him how absurdly he has behaved.

There is an extraordinary scene between Goneril, the Fool, and Lear that is followed by Lear's enormous cursing of Goneril, again very Jehovah-like, when Goneril says that she is going to cut off part of his hundred knights, which leads to the rather desperate dialogue that takes place between Lear and the Fool. From that moment on, throughout act 2 and into act 3, the mounting madness of the great king can be seen.

An Overwhelming Pathos

Act 2 switches to another plot, as this is a play with a double story line. One is that of Lear and his daughters, and the other is that of Edmund, Edgar, and their father, Gloucester, who is treated horribly by the Duke of Cornwall, who will put out his eyes.

It is fascinating that the two figures who undergo the greatest change throughout the play are Edgar and Lear. Edmund changes only at the very end, and too late. English essayist and poet Charles Lamb felt that the play was too great to be actable, and pointed in particular to the majestic quality of Lear, who actually cries out to the heavens that they too are old and should therefore take his part. Lear's point is a point that is immensely strong. There is a kind of overwhelming pathos, an overwhelming mode of feeling, that is felt in the character of King Lear.

The Storm

In a marvelous bit of stage direction, a storm is heard approaching at a distance. It is the storm to which the king will be so desperately exposed in act 2, when he is locked out by his daughters, when there is the vision, stronger and stronger as act 3 progresses, of the old man out on the heath. And then there is an intensity of expression that simply surpasses anything anywhere else in Shakespeare, and Lear is a kind of unplayable part because even the most distinguished actor could never fully deliver the enormous intensities of the tremendous outcries of Lear upon the heath as the storm rages.

Lear cries out to the heavens more and more ferociously. His plaints reach an extraordinary climax as this amazing scene out at the heath progresses.

It is important to notice at this point that no Queen Lear is present in this play. She died before the play begins. There's only one mention of her, when, confronting the horror of Goneril and Regan, Lear wonders indeed whether his queen played him false, though that is merely part of his madness.

Lear makes the most amazing transformation from sanity to madness, and he will vary between the two right down to the end of the play. He prays for all of the homeless and poverty stricken there are in his Britain, and this is ancient Britain many centuries before Christ, indeed, probably set in what Shakespeare took to be the time of King Solomon in Israel, because Lear deeply resembles the portrait drawn of the aged Solomon—not Solomon in all his glory in the books of Kings and of Chronicles and the Song of Songs, but the wise, desperate old Solomon of the Wisdom of Solomon in the Apocrypha or of the Ecclesiastes or Kuheleth in the Hebrew bible.

And Lear wakes up to everything he has failed to do as a king, which is to take care of the poor and the wretched. Gloucester comes to take him out of the cold and to give him shelter, and then follows the terrifying climax of the third act, which is the awful blinding of Gloucester by the Duke of Cornwall, Regan's husband.

The scene of the blinding is almost too terrible to describe. Gloucester is tied to a chair and his eyes are plucked out by Cornwall. A servant does his best to prevent this and in a quick duel gives Cornwall what will be his death wound. Regan stabs the servant from behind, and the poor, desperate

Gloucester is thrust out onto the heath. Blind Gloucester suddenly learns the terrible truth about Edmund and Edgar, that Edgar has been horribly slandered by Edmund and that it is now too late for the poor blind old man to do anything about it.

The Crucial Question

Why does Shakespeare make Lear so difficult for the audience to like in the first two acts of the play (and to some extent in the early parts of the third act)? The answer has to be that he is practicing what Bertolt Brecht called the alienation effect. He knows that once the audience begins to identify with Lear (and about halfway through the third act the audience is fully identifying itself with Lear), the horror of what the audience is enduring will be almost too great in terms of the extraordinary effect, the overwhelming emotion, that the audience will feel at the sufferings of the mad old king who has been deprived of everything (ultimately by his own foolishness and misjudgment, but also by the wickedness of his two elder daughters). From this point in the play, the humanization of Lear will be made external, as will what the good characters in the play have always understood as being the true nature of King Lear: that he is loving, compassionate, and always intending to do good, but so desperately full of the necessity of being excessively loved in return that it has misled him again and again. By to some extent alienating the audience from Lear in the first two acts, Shakespeare strengthens them, so that when the full horror of what is happening to the old king breaks and the audience fully identifies with him, they are then able to bear it more strongly.

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING

Questions

1. What is Lear's overwhelming weakness?
2. Why would Shakespeare employ the "alienation effect" in *King Lear*?

Suggested Reading

Bloom, Harold. *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human*. New York: Penguin, 1998.

Other Books of Interest

Shakespeare, William. *King Lear: Arden Shakespeare*. 3rd edition. Ed. R.A. Foakes. London: Arden, 2001.

Lecture 9:
King Lear: Part II

The Suggested Reading for this lecture is Harold Bloom's *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human,* Part VII, "The Great Tragedies: *King Lear.*"

The fourth act of *King Lear* contains what is perhaps the greatest sequence in all of Shake-speare, certainly in the play: the confrontation between the insane old King Lear and the blinded Gloucester, whose eyes have been ripped from their sockets.

O Piercing Sight!

Edgar enters at the opening of act 4. The terrible pathos is then enacted of the blinded Gloucester being led in by an old man.

Edgar takes his father, who says that he wishes to throw himself from a high cliff, and decides that the only way to cure this suicidal mania on the part of his father is to emulate the scene, claiming that Gloucester has leaped off a cliff, though he has not actually done so.

Gloucester supposedly falls off a cliff. Edgar then tells his father that his life has been preserved by the gods.

Then in a remarkable stage entrance, Lear comes on to the scene absolutely mad and crowned with wild flowers. Edgar, in one of those extraordinary intrusions, since this is, after all, a pagan play set nine centuries before Christ, but intended for a Christian audience, cries out:

O thou side-piercing sight!

Everyone in that audience at the Globe would have remembered that the Roman centurion wounds Jesus on the cross with his lance. And then Lear, suddenly wondering who Edgar is, wants a password from him to make sure he is not one of the enemy. Lear says:

Give the word.

Edgar cries out:

Sweet marjoram.

Marjoram was a drug, an herb, then and now, that was given for schizophrenia, and indeed some modern drugs that are used to treat schizophrenia are artificially produced versions of marjoram.

Lear muses that he was taught that he was the image of authority when truly he was not; that it was not proper treatment of him as a king and a mortal god to agree with him about everything; that he caught a dreadful cold out in the storm; and that he was told that he was everything in himself and has learned that he was actually nothing in himself.

And then, very cruelly and powerfully, but also sardonically, in that kind of self-satire that Lear is now given to, in his enormous bitterness, in that extraordinary fusion of mind and madness that he now represents, he cries out:

Let copulation thrive; for
Gloucester's bastard son
was kinder to his father than
my daughters
Got 'tween the lawful sheets.

This is another terrible irony, because Gloucester can hear this and know that it is not true, since he was betrayed by Edmund, the bastard, while Edgar must be beyond suffering as he listens to the falsehood.

Speaking to Edgar, who had given the password, "sweet marjoram," Lear treats Edgar as he would an apothecary, what would now be called a druggist, saying that he needs civet, its sweetness a kind of sugar, and he says:

Give me an ounce of civet, good apothecary, sweeten my imagination.
There's money for thee.

Lear holds out his hand with some coins, realizing that he needs to "sweeten" his imagination, that his imagination has turned wholly rancid. This is an extraordinary moment for him, and then something much more beautiful and bitter for him follows. Gloucester realizes that this is indeed the king, and calls out:

O, let me kiss that hand!

And Lear, in enormous chagrin, replies:

Let me wipe it first; it Smells of mortality.

That is to say, it is a human hand, and therefore unclean. Gloucester, in total despair, bringing in the apocalyptic end of the world theme that is going to be featured in this singular drama from now until the close, says:

O ruined piece of nature!

And then desperately and pathetically, he says to Lear:

Dost thou know me?

Lear, with what would seem to be amazing cruelty, except that he is mad, says:

I remember thine eyes well enough.

He is after all staring at sockets, bloody sockets from which the eyes have been ripped. And then, thinking of all the legends of Cupid as being blind and as squinting, therefore explaining why so many mismatches are made in the world, Lear says:

No, do thy worst, blind Cupid; I'll not love.

Suddenly, Lear is off completely in another of his phantasmagorias or visions. He sees a court- and church-appointed beadle, who is whipping a whore's back. Lear says:

Thou rascal beadle, hold thy bloody hand!
Why dost thou lash that whore? Strip thine own back;

Thou hotly lusts to use her in that kind
For which thou whipp'st her.

Then he moves on to society and condemns everything that goes on there.

The usurer hangs the cozener.
Through tattered clothes small vices do appear;
Robes and furred gowns hide all. Plate sin with gold,
And the strong lance of justice hurtless breaks.

That is to say, gold buys justice. And suddenly, as though his boots are too much for him, Lear starts screaming in his madness:

Now, now, now, now!
Pull off my boots. Harder, harder! So.

And Edgar, who is consumed by suffering, cries out in an aside:

O matter and impertinency mixed,
Reason in madness.

Which is a beautiful formula for what we are hearing in Lear.

Solomon

And then arrives the climax of this act, and in a sense the climax of the play, because this is the greatest and most extraordinary use in Shakespeare of a biblical allusion. Lear begins magnificently, with absolute sanity, by crying out to Gloucester:

If thou wilt weep my fortunes, take my eyes.
I know thee well enough; thy name is Gloucester.
Thou must be patient.

An allusion to the King James Bible establishes the deep identity between Solomon the Wise and Lear in his madness. Here is Solomon summing up his career: "I myself am also mortal and a man like all other and am come of him . . ." (that is to say, of Adam) "that was first made of the earth," because Adam's very name is a pun upon the red clay from which he is formed by Yahweh. And Solomon goes on, "In my mother's womb was I fashioned to be flesh in ten months. I was brought together into blood of the seed of man and by the pleasure that comes with sleep."

Lear directly paraphrases and improves upon this: ". . . and when I was born I received the common air and fell upon the earth which is of like nature, crying and weeping at the first as all other do. I was nourished in swaddling clothes and with cares. For there is no king that had any other beginning of birth, all men have one entrance unto life and a like going out."

Stage of Fools

And then follows a passage that transcends any other in Shakespeare, even in *Hamlet,* even in *Macbeth.* The tremendous cognitive music of this, the verbal harmony of this, has not been matched by any poet, by any writer, in any language. Lear cries out:

When we are born, we cry that we are come
To this great stage of fools.

That is to say, people intuit even as newborn infants that they are entering upon a world in which they are eventually going to be victimized to the point at which they may well become murdered, and thus end forever in a very terrible kind of fashion.

Reconciliation

An extraordinary scene ends act 4: the reconciliation between Lear and Cordelia. He wakes from his madness to the sound of healing music. Cordelia is waiting for him, and he cries out:

You must bear with me.
Pray you now, forget and forgive
I am old and foolish.

But that moment is only a moment, alas, because after he enters later with the dead Cordelia in his arms, that joy of reunion will be lost to him forever. But this is the triumphal moment in the play, the moment of rejoicing, the moment of reunion of father and beloved daughter fully forgiving each other, and there is nothing quite like it elsewhere in Shakespeare.

Why does the fourth act of *King Lear,* and in particular that remarkable exchange between the blinded Gloucester and the mad old king, have the enormous poetic and dramatic force and impact upon us that it does? In one sense, it is all gratuitous. You could eliminate this extraordinary scene between Gloucester and Lear, with Edgar serving as a despairing chorus, and the action of the play, and even the characterization of the play, would in no way be altered. But you would lose the greatest eloquence in all of *King Lear* and therefore in all of Shakespeare's seven major tragedies (indeed, in all of Shakespeare's giant art). You would lose a magnificent fusion of sublimity and pathos, of a grace beyond the reach of art, on the one side, and on the other, of a suffering, a felt pathos, an enormous assault upon our deepest affections unparalleled in the history of literature.

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING

Questions

1. Why is the allusion to the piercing of Christ's side considered an intrusion?
2. Why does Lear need to "sweeten" his imagination?

Suggested Reading

Bloom, Harold. *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human*. New York: Penguin, 1998.

Other Books of Interest

Shakespeare, William. *King Lear: Arden Shakespeare*. 3rd edition. Ed. R.A. Foakes. London: Arden, 2001.

Lecture 10:
King Lear: Part III

The Suggested Reading for this lecture is Harold Bloom's *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human,* Part VII, "The Great Tragedies: *King Lear.*"

The fifth and final act of *King Lear* takes a great deal of its power from the terrible situation that is unfolding. Edmund is involved with both sisters and quite clearly sees himself as a kind of extraordinary mixture of Don Giovanni and Machiavelli. He is directly juxtaposed with Edgar, who is giving Albany a letter, which has been intercepted by Edgar, from Goneril, Albany's wife, to Edmund, which makes very clear indeed that Edmund is a traitor and is plotting against Albany in his own drive for power.

A Short-lived Ecstasy

In act 5, scene 1, Edmund coolly says:

To both these sisters have I sworn my love,
Each jealous of the other, as the stung
are of the adder. Which of them shall I take?
Both, one, or neither? . . .
Neither can be enjoyed
if both remain alive. To take the widow
Exasperates, makes mad her sister Goneril,
And hardly shall I carry out my side
Her husband being alive. Now then we'll use
His countenance . . .

That is to say, Albany's:

. . . for the battle, which being done,
Let her who would be rid of him devise
His speedy taking off.

In other words, let Goneril do it. As for the mercy that Albany intends to Lear and to Cordelia, Edmund says:

The battle done and they within our power,
Shall never see his pardon. For my state
Stands on me to defend, not to debate.

The battle takes place, and Edgar sees that Lear and Cordelia have lost. He dashes back to reclaim Gloucester, who still does not know Edgar's identity.

And then follows one of the great passages in all of Shakespeare. Edgar says:

Men must endure
Their going hence even as their coming hither;
Ripeness is all. Come on.

And he leads Gloucester away.

The stage shifts in scene 3 to the British camp near Dover. Edmund enters with Lear and Cordelia, now prisoners guarded by soldiers and officers. Lear is in the ecstasy of being reunited with Cordelia and in total sanity and, indeed, in feeling that his daughter has forgiven him, as she has.

Edmund says simply: "Take them away." Lear comes forth with an Old Testament allusion:

Upon such sacrifices, my Cordelia,
The gods themselves throw incense.
Have I caught thee?
He that parts us shall bring a brand from heaven
And fire us hence like foxes.

It is an allusion to a stratagem of Samson's in the Book of Judges when he sets fire to the tails of a number of foxes and turns them loose amid the wheat fields of the Philistines.

Cordelia's Exit

Lear and Cordelia go out together guarded. This is the last time Cordelia is seen alive. Edmund summons a captain and says:

Go, follow them to prison.
One step I have advanced thee.
If thou dost as this [a paper commanding their death] *instructs thee,*
Thou dost make thy way to noble fortunes.

This will lead to the horror of Lear entering with the slain Cordelia in his arms. Albany comes on the scene after they are led away, and a confrontation breaks out between Albany on the one side and Edmund, Regan, and Goneril on the other. Albany says to Edmund, because he now knows the truth about Edmund from Edgar's intercepted note:

Sir, by your patience,
I hold you but a subject of this war,
Not as a brother.

And Regan angrily replies:

That's as we list to grace him.
Methinks our pleasure might have been demanded
'Ere you had spoke so far. He led our powers,
Bore the commission of my place and person,
The which immediacy may well stand up
And call itself your brother.

And Goneril in furious jealousy says:

Not so hot!
In his own grace he doth exalt himself
More than in your addition.

And Regan cries out:

In my rights,
By me invested he compeers the best.

And Albany says, with tremendous bitterness:

That were the most that he should husband you.

To which the horrible Regan replies:

Gestures do oft prove prophets.

And Goneril in desperation screams:

Holla, holla!
That eye that told you so looked but asquint.

And it becomes apparent that Regan has already been poisoned by Goneril.

Avenging Fury

There has been the long, long progression of Edgar's change from a gullible young man to a Bedlamite to a poor peasant to someone who directly intervenes in the plot when he saves his father by striking down the rascal Oswald, who would murder the blinded Gloucester, and now Edgar will come in black armor as a nameless knight, as an avenging fury, to strike down his treacherous half brother.

Edgar is clearly an absolutely changed person, though, by a terrible irony, it is Edmund who has, as it were, created his avenging doom in Edgar.

Psychologically, it's a remarkable situation. Edmund does not know who this is. He need not by the laws of knighthood duel with a nameless person, who, for all he knows, could be a professional assassin. But he has throughout the play been motivated by a deep resentment against his only half-noble origin. And he now falls victim to that. It's a strange parallel here: just as Iago never calculates that Emelia, who knows everything, will risk her own life—and she does, and dies for it, by betraying Iago to the truth—so Edmund, so magnificent a cognitive strategist who can outwit everyone else in the play, has that one blind spot, which is the need to demonstrate his own innate nobility.

They fight, and Edmund has no chance whatsoever. This is a destined avenger. Edmund falls with what will prove to be his death wound.

From here to the end of the play, one wants to look carefully at the extraordinary change that takes place in Edmund, perhaps the least likely person in all of Shakespeare to have made a change toward the good. Indeed, there is an ebbing eloquence in Edmund as he slowly dies onstage and then is carried offstage, and the moment of his death is not seen any more than Macbeth's. Edmund speaks:

What you have charged me
with, that I have done,
And more, much more.
The time will bring it out.

This is something that carries more suspense with it than anything even in Alfred Hitchcock's films, because what that half line, "The time will bring it out," most certainly refers to is the order he has given to murder Lear and Cordelia.

Edgar fully reveals himself for the first time in the play since he adopted the disguise of Tom of Bedlam.

Edmund, with tremendous power, says hesitantly, because he is dying:

The wheel is come full circle; I am here.

This is the wheel of fortune, but it also refers back to an earlier passage in the play in which Lear in his madness speaks of being bound upon a wheel of fire. Edgar now tells the story of his reconciliation with Gloucester, when he revealed himself to Gloucester.

An Extraordinary Change

At the end of the play, Lear is torn between immense grief, knowing that his daughter is dead, and a momentary, renewed madness of believing that he actually sees her resurrected. But why did Shakespeare not actually represent this great scene of the mutual recognition and reconciliation of Edgar and poor Gloucester on the stage, rather than simply make it a recital or narrative on Edgar's part? Perhaps it is because this final act, and this remarkable final scene, are already so turbulent and immensely rich with significant emotion, that it would simply expose the audience to too much pressure. Edmund, hearing of the death of his father, is beginning to undergo an extraordinary change.

Edgar goes on to talk about his reconciliation with Kent, also in disguise. Someone runs onstage with a bloody knife, crying out, "Help, help, O help." This is the knife with which Goneril has just stabbed herself to the heart. And Edmund, hearing that Goneril with her dying breath has confessed that she poisoned Regan to her death, magnificently and ironically says:

I was contracted to them both. All three
Now marry in an instant.

The bodies of the queens are brought onstage. There follows a moment in Shakespeare that cannot be overpraised. It cannot be overpraised because in it is seen the extraordinary process in which Shakespeare is the great pioneer, in which a major character overhears something that he himself says almost as though someone else had said it, as the audience under Shakespeare's influence performs a sudden start because it feels as though it is overhearing someone else, when in fact it is overhearing itself. Edmund stares at the bodies of the dead queens Goneril and Regan and utters four amazing words:

Yet Edmund was beloved.

It is a great shock to him that even though it was these two monsters of the deep who loved him, nevertheless he was beloved.

Edmund is carried offstage. He will not know as he dies whether or not he saved Cordelia and Lear or whether he is responsible for their murders. Shakespeare wants the audience to try to think themselves into that extraordinary changing consciousness as it dies, because it scarcely will know itself who or what it is as it dies any more than the audience can recognize Edmund. He is carried offstage to die, and the most colossal moment perhaps in all of Shake-speare arrives, something that goes beyond the

resources of even a great actor's voice. Lear enters with a triple howl, carrying his slain daughter in his arms:

Howl, howl, howl. O ye are men of stones!
Had I your tongues and eyes, I'd use them so
That heaven's vault shall crack. She's gone forever.
I know when one is dead and when one lives;
She's dead as earth. Lend me a looking glass;
If that her breath will mist or stain the stone,
Why, then she lives.

Kent, Edgar, and Albany are to be the only three survivors of this play.

Kent cries:

Is this the promised end?

And Edgar cries out:

Or image of that horror?

And Albany cries out:

Fall and cease.

And these are all apocalyptic outcries. They presage the end of a world. Suddenly, the others on stage, Kent, Albany, and Edgar, desperately speak to Edmund, trying to explain who they are.

An officer enters to say:

Edmund is dead, my lord.

Edgar, here dressed as himself, and Kent talk about how they will, in effect, share power.

Lear cries out:

And my poor fool is hanged!

He means at once Cordelia and his fool. In his madness, Lear thinks he sees Cordelia's lips move, and the joy is too great. He dies of a sudden heart attack.

Kent says, most memorably:

The wonder is he hath endured so long.
He but usurped his life.

Albany, full of grief and guilt, feeling that he suffers his own culpability in the tragedy, says:

Friends of my soul [speaking to Kent and Edgar], *I abdicate:*
You twain rule in this realm, and the gored state sustain.

But Kent says:

No, I have a journey, sir, shortly to go.
My master calls me; I must not say no.

In other words, Kent is saying that if Lear is dead, he will go off to serve him in the afterworld. The final four lines of the play are spoken magnificently, and the audience would know what we at first did not know; that Edgar came to the throne several reigns after the death of his godfather, and he spent his

entire brief life as monarch fighting the wolves that had overrun all of England. He speaks these immense last lines of the play. Every other tragedy by Shakespeare ends with a clear sense that the continuity of the kingdom will go on, but Edgar ends in despair:

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.

And everyone exits from the stage with Lear's body in a death march.

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING

Questions

1. What is meant by Lear's allusion to the Old Testament?
2. How does Edgar change throughout the play?

Suggested Reading

Bloom, Harold. *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human*. New York: Penguin, 1998.

Other Books of Interest

Shakespeare, William. *King Lear: Arden Shakespeare*. 3rd edition. Ed. R.A. Foakes. London: Arden, 2001.

Lecture 11:
Macbeth: Part I

The Suggested Reading for this lecture is Harold Bloom's *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human,* Part VII, "The Great Tragedies: *Macbeth.*"

The particular fascination of *Macbeth* is its ruthless economy. It is just half the length of *Hamlet,* and the hallucinatory intensity of this Scottish drama, which causes us to identify our own imaginations with Macbeth's phantasmagoric imagination, is simply extraordinary. Indeed, Shakespeare compels us to all but totally identify ourselves with Macbeth, despite his incredibly bloody career. Lady Macbeth is taken off stage after act 3, scene 4, and returns only briefly at the start of act 5. Thus Macbeth is left wholly at the center of our attention, and Shakespeare declines to individualize Duncan, Banquo, Macduff, or Malcolm, let alone the minor characters.

A Phantasmagoric Imagination

Because Macbeth speaks fully a third of the drama's lines, nearly 700 lines out of the 2,000, he is more central than any of Shakespeare's other tragic protagonists, except Hamlet. *King Lear* divides the audience's fascination between Lear and the Fool and the half brothers Edgar and Edmund. But *Hamlet* and *Macbeth* center our attention on the title characters.

Shakespeare represented the capaciousness and brilliance of his own intellect in Hamlet's mind and the preternatural intensity of his own imagination in Macbeth's, which is the most proleptic in all of literature. In other words, Macbeth so anticipates an event that it seems to have happened already before it actually takes place. He barely is conscious of an ambition before he sees himself having performed the bloody crimes that fulfill his ambition.

Act 1 is dominated by Macbeth and Banquo's common victory over the traitor Macdonwald and also by the weird sisters, the famous Three Witches. A wounded captain has come out of the battle to tell King Duncan about the manner in which Macbeth has destroyed the merciless Macdonwald. The passage is perhaps the most violent of its kind in all of Shakespeare.

> *Till he unseamed him from the nave to th' chaps*
> *And fixed his head upon our battlements.*

Later, one of the nobles is explaining to King Duncan about another tremendous victory of Macbeth and Banquo's in which Macbeth is described as Bellona's bridegroom. Because Bellona is the goddess of war, this means that Macbeth is being called the god Mars himself, a great killing machine. It is this extraordinary personage, a man of ordinary intellect but a fantastic power of imagination and a tremendous potential for killing, who suddenly finds himself, in the third scene of act 1, confronting the three weird sisters. The first hails him by his proper title, Thane or Earl of Glamis, the second as Thane of

Cawdor, Cawdor being a recent traitor to King Duncan. The third cries out:

All Hail Macbeth, that shalt be King hereafter!

Macbeth speaks:

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?

At this point, the proleptic element becomes strong in him, and he contemplates the murder of Duncan.

My thought, whose murder is yet fantastical,
Shakes so my single state of man that function
is smothered in surmise and nothing is
But what is not.

The "single state of man" means the unaided or iso-lated state of man. When Macbeth says that function is "smothered in surmise," "function" means intellect and its conscious workings; "surmise" means the prophetic or proleptic imagination.

Shakespeare, when he wants to, can take an extremely minor character (for example, Barnardine in *Measure for Measure)* and give that character a voice of his or her own, so that they are forever memorable. But he declines to do that in this play. He focuses only on Macbeth and, to a certain extent, until she's removed, Lady Macbeth. In doing so, he has a deep, dark design. He wishes to push us into the heart of darkness. He wants us to make a journey into the interior. Audiences find themselves alone with Macbeth, so that they cannot exclude themselves from what is happening to him.

In act 1, scene 4, Duncan, after honoring Macbeth and Banquo, nevertheless proclaims that his oldest son, Malcolm, is going to become the Prince of Cumberland and thus the acknowledged heir to the Scottish throne. As Macbeth hears what he takes to be a threat to his own ambition, he again speaks in a rapt aside:

Let not night see my black and deep desires.

The lines remind one that this play is unique among Shakespeare's dramas, with the partial exception of *A Midsummer Night's Dream.* Both take place mostly at night upon a darkened stage, which has to do with the darkness of Macbeth's own nature and the increasing darkness of the audience's nature while under his influence.

The Happiest Marriage in All of Shakespeare?

There is a furious, passionate attachment between Macbeth and Lady Macbeth. The history of Scotland upon which Shakespeare bases the drama of Macbeth tells us that Lady Macbeth, a high noblewoman and a cousin of King Duncan's, was originally married to another great nobleman, by whom

she had a son. Both her first husband and her son were murdered. Macbeth then wooed her and won her reluctant consent—she being a woman of great power and complexity—by promising her that he shares her immense ambitions. But they are childless, and there is an implication that Macbeth's violently prophetic imagination has created sexual difficulties for them. By, in a sense, overpreparing the event, by anticipating it too strongly, he arrives too quickly, and so a proper sexual relationship does not seem to have been worked out between them. As seen in *Othello,* this is far from un-Shakespearean. After reading aloud a letter from her husband, Lady Macbeth says:

Yet do I fear thy nature.
It is too full of the milk of human kindness. . . .

In short, she is saying that Macbeth is deeply divided against himself. She cries out:

That I may pour my spirits in thine ear
And chastise with the valor of my tongue
All that impedes thee from the golden round
Which fate and metaphysical aid doth seem
To have thee crowned withal.

There again is one of those fascinating Shakespearean elliptical touches. Whenever you have the image of spirits or liquid of any kind being poured in the ear, it is difficult not to remember that Claudius poisoned King Hamlet by pouring poison in his ear. There is a hint indeed of what is coming.

The news is given to Lady Macbeth that King Duncan is coming to stay at her castle. Macbeth meditates upon Duncan, and Lady Macbeth says:

What news?

Macbeth says to her:

We will proceed no further in this business.

She is absolutely furious, and there is an insinuation of his complex sexual difficulty with her. Macbeth says in great anxiety:

If we should fail?

And she says:

We fail?
But screw your courage to the sticking place . . .

This is, of course, phallic in its implications and clearly has to do with what she feels is his sexual failure. Lady Macbeth says:

What cannot you and I perform upon
The unguarded Duncan?

At this point, she is talking about herself as being, if necessary, a fellow assassin. And at the very end of act 1, Macbeth is overcome by her and is persuaded.

The Second Act

In act 2, scene 1, Macbeth is on his way to actually perform the murder. Suddenly, in front of him, he sees a purely visionary dagger.

Is this a dagger which
I see before me,
The handle towards
my hand?

His hand goes right through it; it is a hallucination. Macbeth draws his own dagger as he continues to stare at the visionary dagger.

I see thee still,
And on thy blade
and dudgeon,
gouts of blood,

What an extraordinary imagination he has. He's actually seeing the vision with a terrible form of clarity, and then the vision changes and the dagger becomes bloody.

Next is a moment that must have startled Shakespeare's audience, many of whom had read his remarkable narrative poem, "The Rape of Lucrece," in which Tarquin goes off to rape Lucrece.

Macbeth says:

With Tarquin's ravishing stride . . .

Macbeth has the vision of a potential rapist, as though in stabbing phallically King Duncan to death, he is also accomplishing a ravishment.

At the opening of act 2, scene 2, Lady Macbeth awaits word from Macbeth, who enters and says:

I have done the deed, didst thou not hear a noise?

Lady Macbeth says:

Why are you still carrying these bloody daggers?

He answers:

I'm afraid to look at what I've done.

Lady Macbeth says bitterly to him:

Your constancy
Hath left you unattended.

This is more sexual innuendo.

The Fool

There is only one comic scene in this drama, which otherwise excludes all comedy, as indeed *Othello* excludes all comedy. It is the Fool who keeps *King Lear* from excluding it. In *Macbeth,* he appears in the great scene of the knocking at the gate, in which the clown of the company comes up to the gate and says:

Knock, knock, knock, who's there?

The clown tells a series of violent jokes, but the crucial one is this:

What three things does drink
especially provoke?

Because the porter of the gate himself is dead drunk, he says:

Marry sir, nosepainting, sleep, and urine.
Lechery sir it provokes and unprovokes: it provokes
the desire, but takes away the performance,
Equivocates him in a sleep.

The term "equivocate" will be heard again and again in this play. Undoubtedly, this usage involves the famous trial of a Jesuit, Father Garnet, who supposedly conspired against the life of King James. In the trial, rather than answer the questions of the court, Father Garnet took up what the Jesuits had taught was virtuous and permissible, which was to give equivocal answers in such a situation.

A Ruthless Economy

The first two acts conclude with scene 4, in which one of the noblemen, a minor character, enters with an otherwise unidentified old man. They speak of the extraordinary portents that accompanied the murder of King Duncan.

The emphasis is that the terrible murder of King Duncan has violently altered the course of nature, and the audience, or the readership, is being instructed that very strange things lie ahead. But before moving on, the ruthless economy of this drama should be noted. It is amazing that, in fewer than 800 lines, Shakespeare has managed to take us so deeply into what could be called, following Joseph Conrad, the heart of darkness in *Macbeth.*

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING

Questions

1. What is the effect produced by Macbeth's being so much the center of attention in the play?
2. What is it about Macbeth that is speculated to stand in the way of his sexual fulfillment with Lady Macbeth?

Suggested Reading

Bloom, Harold. *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human*. New York: Penguin, 1998.

Other Books of Interest

Shakespeare, William. *Macbeth: Arden Shakespeare*. 2nd edition. Ed. Kenneth Muir. London: Arden, 1997.

Lecture 12:
Macbeth: Part II

The Suggested Reading for this lecture is Harold Bloom's *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human,* Part VII, "The Great Tragedies: *Macbeth.*"

In act 3, Macbeth has sent murderers to kill Banquo and his son, Fleance. Banquo is murdered, but his son gets away, which is crucial for this play, because it has been prophesied by the weird sisters that the descendants of Banquo will become the kings of Scotland.

A Poor Player?

In this act, there is a fascinating transposition between the previously ferocious Lady Macbeth and her until-now recalcitrant husband, in terms of deeds of horror. Macbeth says:

There shall be done
A deed of dreadful note.

Lady Macbeth says:

What's to be done?

He replies:

Be innocent of the knowledge, dearest chuck,
Till thou applaud the deed.

Macbeth then speaks a crucial line: "Things bad begun make themselves strong by ill." This is of course the quandary in which he finds himself in this play. When he is informed that Fleance has escaped, he is mortified. But he is assured that Banquo at least is dead, even if Fleance has gotten away.

At dinner, the ghost of Banquo appears. Because it is visible only to Macbeth, it might actually be a ghost or it might be his hallucinatory imagination making itself quite literal. When Macbeth sees this, he becomes absolutely furious, and there begins a motif that will become stronger and stronger throughout acts 3, 4, and 5. No one could be more consistently outrageous than Macbeth, but increasingly, he feels more outraged than outrageous. He begins to have the horrible sensation that outrages are being visited upon him, because all his expectations are continually unfounded. He becomes increasingly like a poor player upon the stage. He becomes the equivalent of a bad actor who is always missing his cues.

The Night World

Act 4 is an act in which Macduff's family is massacred and in which Macbeth enters into the night world of the Three Witches. When they confront Macbeth, they assure him of two things: that none that is of a woman born will be able to harm him and that he is safe in his kingdom until Birnam wood

comes to Dunsinane, his high castle or fortification. Because Macbeth's castle is up on a hill, he believes there is nothing he need fear.

After Macbeth discovers that Macduff has fled to England, he has Lady Macduff and all her children butchered. Macbeth says:

The very firstlings of my heart shall be
The firstlings of my hand.

That is to say, as soon as he feels an impulse, he will act on it. Clearly, he is reaching the edge of madness, but it is very different from Lady Mac-beth's madness, which opens the extraordinary fifth act, itself one of the most complex and beautiful structures in all of Shakespeare.

Act 5 opens with Lady Macbeth sleepwalking, which should in itself suggest the transposition that has taken place. She who was so absolutely resolute and bloody minded has become increasingly fearful and contrite. She has turned mad and will be out of act 5 until her death, undoubtedly through suicide. In act 5, scene 1, as she sleeps, she cries out that she still has the blood on her hands that she had washed off, the blood of the slain Duncan:

Out, damned spot! Out, I say!

Her mind is gone, and she speaks one of the most frightening sentences in this terrifying play:

Yet who would have thought the old man to have had
so much blood in him?

Macbeth is told that he is going to be dethroned. He is absolutely defiant and could not present a greater contrast to his wife, who is terribly oppressed by the bloodiness of everything that has happened.

A servant enters and reports that 10,000 troops are advancing on them. Macbeth calls to Seyton, and it's very curious indeed that this evil subordinate should have a name that puns on "Satan."

Seyton confirms the report, and Macbeth says:

I'll fight till from my bones my flesh be hacked.
Give me my armor. . . .
I will not be afraid of death and bane
Till Birnam Forest come to Dunsinane.

But then to his immense shock, the English army and the Scottish rebels cut down branches, the wood of Birnam, and bear it before them as a kind of moving forest.

Time for Such a Word

Within the castle in Dunsinane, Macbeth enters with Seyton and armed men. Women are heard crying out in anguish because they have discovered that Lady Macbeth has committed suicide. Macbeth says something quite remarkable— that he is suddenly afraid.

I have almost forgot the taste
of fears. . . .

After Macbeth learns from Seyton that Lady Macbeth is dead, he delivers his most famous speech, the most famous speech in all of Shakespeare, except

for Hamlet's "To be, or not to be" soliloquy. Macbeth's is a speech that has always been much argued about by critics and directors.

She should have died hereafter:
There would have been a time for
such a word.

Clearly, the antecedent, the word being referred to by the word "word," is the word "hereafter." But the greatest of all Shakespearean critics, Dr. Samuel Johnson, was so upset by this that he insisted that it did not make sense, that the text had been misread and that Macbeth was actually saying, "There would have been a time for such a world." When it was proved that this could not be the case, Johnson still insisted that "word" simply meant intelligence or information. But for once, the great critic was wrong. The meaning is "time," which is Macbeth's true antagonist. It is time that increasingly is outraging him and driving him further to depredations in his fury. Time has now reversed itself on him. She should have died hereafter, not now. There would have been a time for such a word as hereafter, but now there is no hereafter.

And then the famous lines:

Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow,
Creeps in this petty pace from day to day
Till the last syllable of recorded time,
And all our yesterdays have lighted fools
The way to dusty death.

"Fools" means, as it means in *King Lear*, victims.

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.

It is worth noting that William Faulkner took the title of one of his great novels, *The Sound and the Fury,* from that passage, so it rings a special bell in our intellect.

After Macbeth is informed that Birnam wood has indeed come to Dunsinane, he again becomes absolutely outraged:

I pull in resolution, and begin
To doubt th' equivocation of the fiend
That lies like truth.

That is to say, he is outraged by the equivocal nature of the prophecies that the weird sisters have made.

I 'gin to be a-weary of the sun,
And wish the estate o' th' world were now undone.

These apocalyptic longings on the part of Macbeth lead to an even greater sense of having been outraged on his part. Suddenly, in the midst of the battle, as Macbeth is heroically but horribly fighting, Macduff enters. Macbeth refuses to fight him at first:

Of all men else I have avoided thee.
But get thee back. My soul is too much charged
With blood of thine already.

They fight, and Macbeth cries:

Let fall thy blade on vulnerable crests.
I bear a charmed life, which must not yield
To one of woman born.

And Macduff shouts at him:

Tell thee, Macduff was from his mother's womb
Untimely ripped.

That is to say, Macduff's was a cesarean birth. Macbeth is utterly outraged and terrified. He utters his final words:

I will not yield,
To kiss the ground before young Malcolm's feet
And to be baited with the rabble's curse.
Though Birnam wood come to Dunsinane,
And thou opposed, being of no woman born,
Yet I will try the last. Before my body
I throw my warlike shield. Lay on, Macduff,
And damned be him that first cries, 'Hold! Enough!'

They go out together fighting. And then Macduff enters, carrying the head of Macbeth in his hand. It is interesting that Shakespeare does not actually show Macbeth at the moment of his death, perhaps because the audience's identity with him has been so overwhelmingly established that it would be almost too much of a shock to see it.

Macduff holds up the head and cries out:

The time is free.

And so essentially ends this extraordinary drama in which the oppressive sense of time has finally amounted to a dread burden from which at last the audience is liberated. This is the most fearsome of all Shakespeare's tragedies, and one that lingers perpetually in one's thoughts after seeing it properly performed. In the end, the astonishing thing about this play is that the audience is deeply implicated in the fate of Macbeth and is forced into intimate sympathy with someone who is almost a mass murderer.

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING

Questions

1. What is it that makes Macbeth seem to become a “poor player” upon the stage?
2. How does Shakespeare bring the audience into such great intimacy with the fate of Macbeth?

Suggested Reading

Bloom, Harold. *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human*. New York: Penguin, 1998.

Other Books of Interest

Shakespeare, William. *Macbeth: Arden Shakespeare*. 2nd edition. Ed. Kenneth Muir. London: Arden, 1997.

Lecture 13:
Antony and Cleopatra: Part I

The Suggested Reading for this lecture is Harold Bloom's *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human,* Part VII, "The Great Tragedies: *Antony and Cleopatra.*"

Of all the wonders of Shakespeare, the most amazing is that in fourteen consecutive months, he wrote *King Lear, Macbeth,* and then *Antony and Cleopatra. Hamlet, Othello, Lear,* and *Macbeth* are all tragedies of blood. *Antony and Cleopatra* is something radically new and is a play that no one has been able to match. It swings out and away from domestic tragedies of blood into a vast political and historical conspectus involving the whole world as well as the struggle between Antony and Cleopatra, lovers and political allies against Octavius Caesar, who by the end of the play is the first of the crowned emperors of Rome.

Perspectivism

In *Antony and Cleopatra,* more than ever before, Shakespeare hands over the whole problem of perspectivism to the audience and to his readers ("perspectivism" is the attitude the audience assumes toward the apparent hero and heroine of this great work, Antony and Cleopatra). The crucial question for spectators and readers of this play is what perspective they should adopt for Antony and Cleopatra. Are they both heroic and authentically in love with each other, or was theirs only a political alliance involving mutual betrayals? And are they something less than they present themselves to be and that their followers take them as being?

Cleopatra is a Venus, though she is not exactly in first youth. She is going on forty, and Antony himself is a man in his middle to late fifties.

Enobarbus, the faithful lieutenant of Antony, pays what may be the greatest tribute ever paid to the beauty of any woman, and to the mystery of women, in literature:

> *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.*

The play throughout its first four acts offers many manifestations of what is beautiful, mysterious, intriguing, endlessly seductive, and politically shrewd about Cleopatra, but it will trace in Antony something very different: a pattern of decline as his fated defeat becomes clearer and clearer. It is a defeat that he meets with enormous dignity, but again and again, he makes serious mistakes in judgment and is utterly baffled when Cleopatra first sells him out.

Antony is never more heroic, never more impressive, than when he gradually comes to accept the imminence and reality of his defeat. And as that decline continues, the audience and readership value him more and more. As he becomes more and more humanized, he shows the enormous generosity of his spirit. Thus when Enobarbus abandons Antony, Antony sends all of Enobarbus's treasure after him. That breaks the heart of Enobarbus, and eventually he just lies down in a ditch and allows himself to die. That he can inspire loyalty and, in the case of Enobarbus, a disloyalty that breaks and kills its bearer, is an extraordinary sign of the kind of personage that Antony is.

A Great Ellipsis

Antony and Cleopatra is marked by the most remarkable ellipsis, or the deliberate handing over of something essential in the play to the audience's perspectivism. Shakespeare does not provide a single scene showing the domestic life of Antony and Cleopatra when they are not surrounded by their loyal followers and worshippers. They are never seen alone together, except for one particular moment practically in the wings, and this lasts for only a second or two. The enormous fascination of this deliberately left-out matter is that Shakespeare wishes the audience to use its imagination to conceive what could transpire between this exceptional emperor and this empress of the East, who have had children together, and though they betray each other, they nevertheless always go back to each other in the end, and who finally do seem to have been authentically in love with each other (though the full force of this does not appear to strike Cleopatra until Antony dies in her arms).

One must wonder how Antony and Cleopatra behave when they are alone together. They probably don't spend much time plotting or talking about Octavius, who will become Augustus, their sworn enemy and ultimately their undoer. As lovers, no doubt a great part of their activity necessarily is erotic. And yet, because they are both quite mature, what passes between them, whatever the degree of sexual intimacy—and it must be considerable—has to be conversation. To try to envision what that conversation would be like, Shake-speare wishes to leave entirely in the audience's hands.

Classic Virtue

There is a last glorious moment that Antony and Cleopatra achieve together onstage, surrounded by all of their followers. He has just come back from a highly successful battle against the legions of Augustus, and she greets him magnificently by crying out:

Lord of lords!
O infinite virtue . . .

"Virtue" does not mean virtue in the modern sense, that is, being honest or kind or charitable, but has something of the older meaning of virtue, which is still preserved in the word "virile," the Latin sense of what it is to be a man.

Clearly Cleopatra had never expected to see Antony again. Augustus carefully avoids going into battle himself, but Antony, Herculean hero that he is, always battles at the very forefront of his men.

But this moment is followed by her betrayal, when, by prearrangement with

the envoys, undoubtedly, of Octavius, her fleet dashes away, leaving Antony to be defeated.

Cleopatra flees to a monument from which she will not come down, and because she is a master of duplicity, she sends one of her chamberlains to tell Antony that she has killed herself.

Needing to be alone for a moment, Antony grieves for Cleopatra and for his own lost identity. He then says to Eros, his servant, that Eros has long pledged that, should the occasion rise, he would strike Antony dead. But Eros will not do it. Antony says:

Eros,
Wouldst thou be windowed in great Rome and see
Thy master thus with pleached arms, bending down
His corrigible neck, his face subdued
To penetrative shame, whilst the wheeled seat
Of fortunate Caesar, drawn before him, branded
His baseness that ensued?

Antony says that he therefore must do this. Antony turns away from him. Eros says:

My sword is drawn.

Antony says with great nobility:

'Tis said, man, and farewell.

And Eros kills himself. Dying, he says:

Why there then! Thus I do escape the sorrow
Of Antony's death.

Humiliated by this, and believing Cleopatra dead and having seen Eros die rather than kill him, Antony, who has botched everything throughout this play, now botches his suicide. He falls upon his own sword. But he has only wounded himself to a slow dying. The guard comes in with the other guards, and they are shocked at what they see. They break into apocalyptic and magnificent language, because they regard him as a god. They all refuse to give him the death wound. Only then does Cleopatra send for him, and he is carried to her monument for their magnificent last scene together.

Cleopatra is the most theatrical personage in all of Shakespeare, surpassing even Hamlet in that regard. That is indeed why she is the most difficult role ever created by Shakespeare for an actress to play. How do you act the part of someone who herself seems always to be acting a part? She cries out:

O sun!
Burn the great sphere thou mov'st in, darkling stand
The varying shore o' th' world.

She urges her friends and followers, including her two handmaidens and friends, to help draw him up, because she still fears to come down from the monument. Antony cries out:

Peace!
Not Caesar's valor hath o'erthrown Antony,
But Antony's hath triumphed on itself.

Antony says, addressing her as “Egypt”:

I am dying, Egypt, dying; only
I hear importune death awhile, until
Of many thousand kisses the poor last
I lay upon thy lips.

But Cleopatra will not come down. They heave Antony aloft to her, and she cries out:

And welcome, welcome! Die when thou hast lived,
Quicken with kissing. Had my lips that power,
Thus would I wear them out.

And Antony repeats again that magnificent line:

I am dying, Egypt, dying.
Give me some wine and let me speak a little.

And then Antony tries to give her good advice and, as usual, gives her bad advice:

Trust but Proculeius of those about Caesar.

In fact, Proculeius will lie to her and say that she will not be led in triumph. Antony dies, and she utters a lament, which is undoubtedly the greatest instance of the high sublime in English:

O, withered is the garland of
the war;
The soldier’s pole is fallen.
Young boys and girls
Are level now with men.
The odds is gone,
And there is nothing left
remarkable
Beneath the visiting moon.

If in some sense the whole of these glorious first four acts is a kind of scaffolding for Cleopatra to ascend to her tremendous glory and apotheosis in the fifth act, that in itself would more than justify them. But of course they are something more than that. They are an extraordinary image of the teeming life of the ancient world at the moment the Roman Empire truly begins.

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING

Questions

1. In *Antony and Cleopatra*, in what way did Shakespeare task his audience with the problem of perspectivism?
2. Why is Cleopatra such a difficult role to play?

Suggested Reading

Bloom, Harold. *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human*. New York: Penguin, 1998.

Other Books of Interest

Shakespeare, William. *Antony and Cleopatra: Arden Shakespeare*. 3rd edition. Ed. John Wilders. London: Arden, 1995.

Lecture 14:
Antony and Cleopatra: Part II

The Suggested Reading for this lecture is Harold Bloom's *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human,* Part VII, "The Great Tragedies: *Antony and Cleopatra.*"

Act 5 begins with the news of Antony's death being brought to Octavius, who, though he desires this death, is nevertheless shocked and startled. He cries out:

The breaking of so great a thing should make
A greater crack. The round world
Should have shook lions into civil streets
And citizens to their dens. The death of Antony
Is not a single doom, in the name lay
A moiety of the world.

That is to say, Antony was a considerable part of the world. Octavius recognizes the immensity of this death of a very different kind of great man, and the last Herculean hero.

Triumph?

Octavius's next order of business is that he wishes to lead Cleopatra in a magnificent procession of triumph in Rome, which would be to his immemorial glory—and her enormous shame. In the second scene of act 2, Proculeius, whom Antony had wrongly advised her to trust, comes to lie to her.

Proculeius insists that she will not be led in triumph, and yet even as he does so, he gives a signal and Roman soldiers seize her. She pulls out her dagger, but they take it from her. She says that she will starve herself.

And then Dolabella enters. Proculeius goes off, and in a dialogue between Cleopatra and Dolabella, Cleopatra moves Dolabella, though he has fought on the side of Octavius, by her amazing and accurate praise of Antony.

And Cleopatra asks:

He'll lead me, then, in triumph?

And Dolabella says:

Madam, he will. I know 't.

When an Asp Is More Than an Asp

Cleopatra sends for the asps, the serpents of the Nile whose bite causes a swift, but painless, death. They will be brought by a fig seller, who will hide the fatal serpents underneath the figs in his basket. Cleopatra then begins her quite gorgeous farewell, and thinks back to that magnificent moment when Enobarbus spoke glowingly of her: ". . . the barge she sat in like a burnished throne, burned on the water."

Cleopatra says:

Go fetch
My best attires. I am again for Cydnus,
To meet Mark Antony.

That is to say, she will meet him in the next world.

Then follows a great scene featuring the clown of Shakespeare's company, undoubtedly the marvelous actor Robert Armin, who had played the fool in *King Lear* and the porter in the knocking at the gate in *Macbeth.* A guard comes in and says:

Here is a rural fellow that will not be denied your highness's presence.
He brings you figs.

And Cleopatra muses out loud:

What poor an instrument
May do a noble deed! He brings me liberty.
My resolution's placed, and I have nothing
Of woman in me. Now from head to foot
I am marble-constant; now the fleeting moon
No planet is of mine.

If in a sense she is denying her own humanity, or her status as a human, in another sense, a deeper sense, she is moving the audience by affirming her status. The guardsman reenters with the clown, who is one of the most fascinating minor figures in all of Shakespeare. Cleopatra says:

Hast thou the pretty worm of Nilus there,
That kills and pains not?

She is playing upon another meaning of "worm," which is not only the serpent, but the phallus. And the clown replies, with a mode of speech entirely his own:

Truly I have him; but I would not be the party
That should desire you to touch him.

That is to say, as he gazes on her beauty, he realizes that he doesn't wish her to destroy herself. And he says of the asp:

For his biting is immortal . . .
Those that do die of it do seldom or never recover.

And then follows a moment that can hardly be overpraised, a moment unlike any other even in Shakespeare, a moment that makes the audience love Cleopatra, because suddenly she is a little child again. She says:

Will it eat me?

And the clown, partly encouraged by this, says:

You must not think I am so simple but I know the devil himself will not eat a woman. I know that a woman is a dish for the gods, if the devil dress her not. But truly, these same whoreson devils do the gods great harm in their women, for in every ten that they make the devils mar five.

Which is a way of saying that she is so wonderfully made, she is such an extraordinary kind of being, that she should not throw her life away.

It is a scene that transcends any other scene of its kind in Shakespeare. It goes beyond the knocking at the gate. Its only real rival has to be the graveyard scene in *Hamlet,* in which the gravedigger, played undoubtedly by the same great comic actor, Robert Armin, actually matches the wit and dark wisdom of Hamlet himself. But this is now very different from *Hamlet,* Shakespeare allows Cleopatra a dying music that in grandeur and glory surpasses that of her now-beloved Antony. She says:

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. . . .
Husband, I come:
Now to that name my courage prove my title!
I am fire and air; my other elements
I give to baser life.

And she speaks to the mortal wretch, the asp, which she applies to her breast, and says:

Poor venomous fool,
Be angry and dispatch.

A Suicide, or Something More?

Cleopatra is already in a kind of death hallucination as the poison enters her, and she feels that the asp is one of her babies that she is nursing at her breast. She says:

Peace, peace!
Dost thou not see the baby at my breast,
That sucks the nurse asleep? . . .
As sweet as balm, as soft as air, as gentle—
O Antony! Nay, I will take thee too.

She speaks as though she is having Antony take suck from her breast. She applies another asp to her arm.

Augustus Caesar Octavius enters with his men and stares at her and cries out:

O noble weakness!
If they had swallowed poison, t'would appear
By external swelling . . .

And then magnificently:

. . . but she looks like sleep,
As she would catch another Antony
In her strong toil of grace.

That is as if to say, she is in no way disfigured; she is as beautiful as ever. And her suicide somehow doesn't seem like a suicide; it seems indeed like a kind of immortal ascent, as much an apotheosis as the death of Hamlet, though this is altogether a different person. The great Edwardian critic of Shakespeare, A.C. Bradley, said that the four characters in all of Shakespeare most endless to meditation are Falstaff, Iago, Hamlet, and Cleopatra.

Lear and Macbeth could be added to make six, but one understands what Bradley meant. This subtle and magnificent consciousness, this remarkable woman, glorious if histrionic, invariably witty, surpassingly, magnificently seductive, of the audience as much as of Antony, is never more extraordinary than in the moment of her self-immolation. And something glorious forever passes out of Shakespearean tragedy with her death.

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING

Questions

1. What is the nature of Antony's greatness?
2. How is Cleopatra's death not like a suicide?

Suggested Reading

Bloom, Harold. *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human*. New York: Penguin, 1998.

Other Books of Interest

Shakespeare, William. *Antony and Cleopatra: Arden Shakespeare*. 3rd edition. Ed. John Wilders. London: Arden, 1995.

Websites to Visit

1. Theatre History website: "*Antony and Cleopatra*: An Analysis of the Play" by William Hazlitt (originally published in *Characters of Shakespeare's Plays,* 1908 — www.theatrehistory.com/british/antony001.html
2. University of California, San Francisco, website article, "Antony and Cleopatra," from *Shakespeare's Plutarch,* edited by T.J.B. Spencer, 1968 — www.itsa.ucsf.edu/~snlrc/encyclopaedia_romana/miscellanea/cleopatra/alma-tadema.html
3. University of California, San Francisco, website article, "The Tragedy of Imagination: Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra*" by Joyce Carol Oates, originally published in *Bucknell Review,* 1964 — www.usfca.edu/fac-staff/southerr/antony.html

Suggested Readings:

Bloom, Harold. *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human*. New York: Penguin Putnam, 1998.

Other Books of Interest:

Bloom, Harold. *Hamlet: Poem Unlimited*. New York: Penguin, 2003.

Shakespeare, William. *Antony and Cleopatra: Arden Shakespeare*. 3rd edition. Ed. John Wilders. London: Arden, 1995.

———. *Hamlet: Arden Shakespeare*. 2nd edition. Ed. Harold Jenkins. London: Arden, 1982.

———. *Julius Caesar: Arden Shakespeare*. 3rd edition. Ed. David Daniel. London: Arden, 1998.

———. *King Lear: Arden Shakespeare*. 3rd edition. Ed. R.A. Foakes. London: Arden, 2001.

———. *Macbeth: Arden Shakespeare*. 2nd edition. Ed. Kenneth Muir. London: Arden, 1997.

———. *Othello: Arden Shakespeare*. 2nd edition. Ed. E.A.J. Honigmann. London: Arden, 1996.

———. *Romeo and Juliet: Arden Shakespeare*. 2nd edition. Series ed. Brian Gibbons. London: Arden, 1980.

The exact date of Shakespeare's birth is not known, but is believed to have been April 23, 1564, in Stratford-upon-Avon. When just eighteen, he married Anne Hathaway (eight years his senior), on November 27, 1582. Their first child, Susanna, was born five months later, on May 26, 1583. Twins Judith and Hamnet were born on February 2, 1585. Hamnet died at age eleven. Shakespeare died at age fifty-two, on April 23, 1616.

A timeline of Shakespeare's works, including the seven major tragedies covered in this course (these are highlighted in red), is presented below.

Work	Written	Published
The Comedy of Errors	1589–1594	1623
The Two Gentlemen of Verona	1589–1593	1623
King John	1590–1595	1623
Henry VI [Part I]	1590–1592	1623
Henry VI [Part II]	1591	1594
Henry VI [Part III]	1592	1595
Venus and Adonis	1593	1593
Richard III	1593	1597
The Taming of the Shrew	1593–1594	1623
Titus Andronicus	1593–1594	1594
The Rape of Lucrece	1594	1594
Romeo and Juliet	1594	1597
Love's Labours Lost	1594	1598
The Sonnets	1594	1609
Richard II	1595	1597
A Midsummer Night's Dream	1595	1600
The Merchant of Venice	1596	1600
Henry IV [Part I]	1596	1598
Henry IV [Part II]	1597	1600
The Merry Wives of Windsor	1597	1602
Much Ado About Nothing	1598	1600
As You Like It	1599	1623
Julius Caesar	1599	1623
Henry V	1599	1600
Hamlet	1600	1603
Troilus and Cressida	1600–1603	1609

Work	Written	Published
Twelfth Night	1601	1623
All's Well That Ends Well	1601–1602	1623
Othello	1602–1603	1622
Measure for Measure	1603	1623
Timon of Athens	1604–1606	1623
King Lear	1605	1608
Macbeth	1606	1623
Pericles	1606–1607	1609
Antony and Cleopatra	1607–1608	1623
Coriolanus	1608	1623
Cymbeline	1609	1623
The Winter's Tale	1609	1623
The Tempest	1610	1623
The Two Noble Kinsmen	1611	1634
Cardenio	1612	–
Henry VIII	1613	1623