

Appreciating English Literature

Part Three

Shakespeare

Dramas written in the late 16th and early 17th centuries are some of the most exciting forms of literature ever produced in England. It is a time of great experimentation with language, revealing a multitude of dramatic and linguistic potential. It is also a time when the full force of the Renaissance had reached Northern Europe. The age of geographical discovery had a similarly profound effect on creativity.

Shakespeare was born in 1564, eleven years after Queen Elizabeth 1 became Queen. He died in 1616 during the reign of her successor, King James 1. He was active in London between 1585 and 1612. Before 1585 he grew to manhood in Stratford-Upon-Avon and retired there as a man of some means, dying four years later. He is buried in Stratford's Holy Trinity Church.

At 18, he married Anne Hathaway, who was eight years older. She outlived him as did one daughter, Susanna, born six months after her parents married. These bare facts are all we can be 100% sure of about his life.

Shakespeare's Plays

We can divide the 39 plays into distinct categories: History, Comedy, Tragedy and what are usually referred to as the last plays. Some critics prefer to separate the Roman plays (e.g. Julius Caesar, Antony & Cleopatra, Coriolanus) from the history group.

Whatever the system of classification, it is fair to say that he examines the human condition through these various themes. For most people, the mature tragedies such as Hamlet and King Lear, represent the profoundest study of humanity ever attempted by a writer and have never been equalled.

It is worth mentioning that on every day of every year, a play of Shakespeare's is performed somewhere in the world. They have been translated, filmed, turned into opera, updated to our own time (or set in other historical periods), gender reversed, lampooned, adapted and turned into cartoons.

It's time now to look briefly at individual plays from each category.

Shakespeare

History

Henry V

But pardon, gentles all,

The flat unraised spirits that have dared

On this unworthy scaffold to bring forth

stage

So great an object: can this cockpit hold

theatre

The vasty fields of France? or may we cram

Within this wooden O the very casques

helmets

That did affright the air at Agincourt?

Shakespeare

History

Henry V

Of all the history plays, Henry V is the most triumphant. No wonder it was used as a propaganda film in World War II. The first quote is from the prologue, spoken by the Chorus. He encourages us to suspend disbelief and imagine the scene in France when the English, grossly outnumbered, defeated the French and stormed to victory.

Henry V is one of Shakespeare's most noble heroes. He fights like a tiger but inspires his men on to great things. This famous speech is the one he gives before storming the walls of Harfleur:

Shakespeare

History

Henry V

And you, good yeoman,
Whose limbs were made in England, show us here
The mettle of your pasture; let us swear
That you are worth your breeding, which I doubt not;
For there is none of you so mean and base,
That hath not noble lustre in your eyes.
I see you stand like greyhounds in the slips,
Straining upon the start. The game's afoot:
Follow your spirit, and upon this charge
Cry 'God for Harry, England, and Saint George!'

Shakespeare

History

Henry V

We few, we happy few, we band of brothers;
For he to-day that sheds his blood with me
Shall be my brother; be he ne'er so vile,
This day shall gentle his condition:
And gentlemen in England now a-bed
Shall think themselves accursed they were not here,
And hold their manhoods cheap whiles any speaks
That fought with us upon Saint Crispin's day.

The end of Henry's speech
before the battle of Agincourt

Shakespeare

Comedy

Much Ado About Nothing

This is one of Shakespeare's wittiest plays. Puns, plays on words and double *entendres* abound, while the relationship between Beatrice and Benedick is sharp, sarcastic and full of quick fire one liners. The love story of Hero and Claudio is threatened by the evil intentions of Don Antonio, but all comes right in the end: the lovers marry, the villain is unmasked and everyone looks to be happy and fulfilled.

Shakespeare's comedies all have similar happy endings. The plots may be complex, farcical, sometime dark and troubled, but to quote the title of one of his own plays, all's well that ends well.

The quotes that follow are a selection of some of the memorable lines of the play.

Shakespeare

Comedy

Much Ado About Nothing

Sigh no more, ladies, sigh no more,

Men were deceivers ever,-

One foot in sea and one on shore,

To one thing constant never

Shakespeare

Comedy

Much Ado About Nothing

‘I can see he's not in your good books,' said the messenger.

‘No, and if he were I would burn my library.’

I had rather hear my dog bark at a crow, than a man swear he loves me.

When I said I would die a bachelor, I did not think I should live till I were married.

Shakespeare

Tragedy

King Lear

Lear is a tragedy of old age, or rather about someone who is old but has not acquired wisdom with the years. Like Hamlet, playing the title character is a supreme test of an actor's skill and maturity. While some have attempted it in middle age, it is usually the last great mountain to climb for an actor who is in the autumn of his career. Most recently, the actress Glenda Jackson took on the role, in a reversal of genders that wowed critics on both sides of the Atlantic.

The story is relatively simple: as king, Lear wishes to retire from active duty and divide his kingdom into three according to which of his daughters he perceives loves him the most. Goneril and Regan, the older two, flatter the old man, but Cordelia, his youngest and favourite, tells it like it is. Hurt, Lear banishes her and she marries the King of France, only for her father to realise later what a terrible error he has made.

Shakespeare

Tragedy

King Lear

There is a subplot where the Duke of Gloucester is led to believe that his illegitimate son, Edmond, has uncovered a plot by Edgar, his heir, to supplant him. Only after losing his sight, does he realise that he has been betrayed.

Blindness and madness, then, are the two themes of the play. Lear has to go mad in order to become sane, while Gloucester has to be blinded to see the deception that has been played upon him.

Gloucester dies, happily, having become reconciled to Edgar, but Cordelia is hanged on the orders of the evil Edgar, and Lear dies of a broken heart.

Shakespeare

Tragedy

King Lear

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

As flies to wanton boys are we to the gods.

They kill us for their sport.

Thou shouldst not have been old till thou hadst been wise.

How sharper than a serpent's tooth it is to have a thankless child!

Shakespeare

Last Plays

The Tempest

The last plays are *The Tempest*, *Pericles* and *The Winter's Tale*. Another late play, *Henry VIII* is a collaboration.

There is little of the humour in them to remind us of the comedies, while the “happy” ending suggests they can’t be linked to the tragedies. Instead, we see Shakespeare aiming for an ending that seeks truth and reconciliation.

The Tempest starts with a great storm that gives the play its title. A ship is wrecked on an island where Prospero, once the Duke of Milan, has been banished by his evil brother Antonio. Knowing that Antonio was on board the ship, Prospero, who has spent his years of island banishment becoming a powerful wizard, conjures up the storm which brings his enemies to him so that he can exact revenge.

Shakespeare

Last Plays

The Tempest

On Prospero's island, he liberates Ariel, a sprite and Caliban, a brute beast. Critics have taken the three characters to represent intellect (Prospero), creativity (Ariel) and base human instinct (Caliban) – his name is a virtual anagram of cannibal.

Prospero's daughter, Miranda, falls in love with Ferdinand, son of the King of Naples, Antonio's partner in crime who was also on the same ship.

At the play's end, Prospero forgives his brother, blesses the union of Miranda and Ferdinand, liberates Ariel and Caliban and returns to take up his Dukedom. Before leaving the island, he casts his book of spells into the sea. This has been seen as Shakespeare saying farewell to his art, and this final speech by Prospero is worth looking at:

Shakespeare

Last Plays

The Tempest

Our revels now are ended. These our actors,
As I foretold you, were all spirits and
Are melted into air, into thin air:
And, like the baseless fabric of this vision,
The cloud-capp'd towers, the gorgeous palaces,
The solemn temples, the great globe itself,
Yea, all which it inherit, shall dissolve
And, like this insubstantial pageant faded,
Leave not a rack behind. We are such stuff
As dreams are made on, and our little life
Is rounded with a sleep.

Shakespeare

Shakespeare's Theatre

For most of his working life in London, Shakespeare wrote for the Globe Theatre on the South Bank of the River Thames. It was not by any means a classy address. The theatres competed for space with cockpits, bull-baiting arenas as well as brothels and ale houses. In times of plague, the theatres were forced to close – something that happened at least twice in Shakespeare's time. To make ends meet, theatre companies might then go on the road and perform in provincial towns in courtyards of public houses. It's possible that a touring company of players visited Stratford when Shakespeare was a young man and he joined them in the hope of making his fortune.

The original Globe Theatre burned down in 1613. The pictures you are about to see are of the 20th century version, built in 1997. It is situated about 250 metres from the original location of Shakespeare's theatre.

Shakespeare

Shakespeare's Theatre Today



Shakespeare

Shakespeare's Language

"If you cannot understand my argument, and declare: **It's all Greek to me**, you are quoting Shakespeare; if you claim to be **more sinned against than sinning**, you are quoting Shakespeare; if you recall your **salad days** you are quoting Shakespeare; if you act **more in sorrow than in anger**, if your wish is **father to the thought**, if your **lost property** has **vanished into thin air**, you are quoting Shakespeare; if you have ever refused **to budge an inch** or suffered from **green-eyed jealousy**, if you have **played fast and loose**, if you have been **tongue-tied**, **a tower of strength**, **hoodwinked** or **in a pickle**, if you have **slept not one wink**, **stood on ceremony**, **danced attendance** (on your lord and master), **laughed yourself into stitches**, **had short shrift**, **cold comfort** or **too much of a good thing**, if you have seen better days or lived in a fool's paradise - why be that as it may, the **more fool you**, for it is a **forgone conclusion** that you are (as **good luck would have it**) quoting Shakespeare; if you think it is **early days** and **clear out bag and baggage**, if you believe that the **game is up** and **the truth will out** even if it involves **your own flesh and blood**, if you lie low till the **crack of doom** because you suspect **foul play**, if you have **set your teeth on edge** (at one fell swoop) without rhyme or reason, then **to give the devil his due** - even if the truth were known (for surely you have a tongue in your head) you are quoting Shakespeare; even if you bid me **good riddance** and **send me packing** if you wish **I was dead as a door-nail**, if you think I am **an eyesore**, **a laughing stock**, **the devil incarnate**, **a stony-hearted villain**, **bloody-minded** or a **blinking idiot**, then **by Jove! O Lord! Tut, tut! for goodness' sake! what the dickens! but me no buts** - it is all **one to me**, for you are quoting Shakespeare."

Robert McNeil: *The Story of English*

Shakespeare

Shakespeare's Enduring Legacy

Shakespeare's stories are timeless and are constantly being reworked. How many young people, for example, appreciate that Disney's *Lion King* is essentially the story of *Hamlet*? As we saw in the last page, his language is part of everyday speech, even if we are unaware of its origin.

Above all, Shakespeare offers us a view of humanity in all its good and bad aspects. This is why, in the words of one famous writer, Shakespeare is for all time.

