

OEDIPUS THE KING (c. 429 b.c.)

by Sophocles

The place of the Oedipus Tyrannus in literature is something like that of the Mona Lisa in art. Everyone knows the story, the first detective story of Western literature; everyone who has read or seen it is drawn into its enigmas and moral dilemmas. It presents a kind of nightmare vision of a world suddenly turned upside down: a decent man discovers that he has unknowingly killed his father, married his mother, and sired children by her. It is a story that, as Aristotle says in the Poetics, makes one shudder with horror and feel pity just on hearing it. In Sophocles' hands, however, this ancient tale becomes a profound meditation on the questions of guilt and responsibility, the order (or disorder) of our world, and the nature of man. The play stands with the Book of Job, Hamlet, and King Lear as one of Western literature's most searching examinations of the problem of suffering.

—Charles Segal, *Oedipus Tyrannus: Tragic Heroism and the Limits of Knowledge*

No other drama has exerted a longer or stronger hold on the imagination than Sophocles' *Oedipus the King* (also known as *Oedipus Tyrannus* or *Oedipus Rex*). Tragic drama that is centered on the dilemma of a single central character largely begins with Sophocles and is exemplified by his *Oedipus*, arguably the most influential play ever written. The most famous of all Greek dramas, Sophocles' play, supported by Aristotle in the *Poetics*, set the standard by which tragedy has been measured for nearly two-and-a-half millennia. For Aristotle, Sophocles' play featured the ideal tragic hero in Oedipus, a man of "great repute and good fortune," whose fall, coming from his horrifying discovery that he has killed his father and married his mother, is masterfully arranged to elicit tragedy's proper cathartic mixture of pity and terror. The play's relentless exploration of human nature, destiny, and suffering turns an ancient tale of a man's shocking history into one of the core human myths. Oedipus thereby joins a select group of fictional characters, including Odysseus, Faust, Don Juan, and Don Quixote, that have entered our collective consciousness as paradigms of humanity and the human condition. As classical scholar Bernard Knox has argued, "Sophocles' Oedipus is not only the greatest creation of a

major poet and the classic representative figure of his age: he is also one of a long series of tragic protagonists who stand as symbols of human aspiration and despair before the characteristic dilemma of Western civilization—the problem of man's true stature, his proper place in the universe."

For nearly 2,500 years Sophocles' play has claimed consideration as drama's most perfect and most profound achievement. Julius Caesar wrote an adaptation; Nero allegedly acted the part of the blind Oedipus. First staged in a European theater in 1585, *Oedipus* has been continually performed ever since and reworked by such dramatists as Pierre Corneille, John Dryden, Voltaire, William Butler Yeats, André Gide, and Jean Cocteau. The French neoclassical tragedian Jean Racine asserted that *Oedipus* was the ideal tragedy, while D. H. Lawrence regarded it as "the finest drama of all time." Sigmund Freud discovered in the play the key to understanding man's deepest and most repressed sexual and aggressive impulses, and the so-called Oedipus complex became one of the founding myths of psychoanalysis. *Oedipus* has served as a crucial mirror by which each subsequent era has been able to see its own reflection and its understanding of the mystery of human existence.

If Aeschylus is most often seen as the great originator of ancient Greek tragedy and Euripides is viewed as the great outsider and iconoclast, it is Sophocles who occupies the central position as classical tragedy's technical master and the age's representative figure over a lifetime that coincided with the rise and fall of Athens's greatness as a political and cultural power in the fifth century b.c. Sophocles was born in 496 near Athens in Colonus, the legendary final resting place of the exiled Oedipus. At the age of 16, Sophocles, an accomplished dancer and lyre player, was selected to lead the celebration of the victory over the Persians at the battle of Salamis, the event that ushered in Athens's golden age. He died in 406, two years before Athens's fall to Sparta, which ended nearly a century of Athenian supremacy and cultural achievement. Very much at the center of Athenian public life, Sophocles served as a treasurer of state and a diplomat and was twice elected as a general. A lay priest in the cult of a local deity, Sophocles also founded a literary association and was an intimate of such prominent men of letters as Ion of Chios, Herodotus, and Archelaus. Urbane, garrulous, and witty, Sophocles was remembered fondly by his contemporaries as possessing all the admired qualities of balance and tranquillity. Nicknamed "the Bee" for his "honeyed" style of flowing eloquence—the highest compliment the Greeks could bestow on a poet or speaker—Sophocles was regarded as the tragic Homer.

In marked contrast to his secure and stable public role and private life, Sophocles' plays orchestrate a disturbing challenge to assurance and certainty by pitting vulnerable and fallible humanity against the inexorable forces of nature and destiny. Sophocles began his career as a playwright in 468 b.c. with a first-prize victory over Aeschylus in the Great, or City, Dionysia, the annual Athenian drama competition. Over the next 60 years he produced more than

120 plays (only seven have survived intact), winning first prize at the Dionysia 24 times and never earning less than second place, making him unquestionably the

most successful and popular playwright of his time. It is Sophocles who introduced the third speaking actor to classical drama, creating the more complex dramatic situations and deepened psychological penetration through interpersonal relationships and dialogue. “Sophocles turned tragedy inward upon the principal actors,” classicist Richard Lattimore has observed, “and drama becomes drama of character.” Favoring dramatic action over narration, Sophocles brought offstage action onto the stage, emphasized dialogue rather than lengthy, undramatic monologues, and purportedly introduced painted scenery. Also of note, Sophocles replaced the connected trilogies of Aeschylus with self-contained plays on different subjects at the same contest, establishing the norm that has continued in Western drama with its emphasis on the intensity and unity of dramatic action. At their core, Sophocles’ tragedies are essentially moral and religious dramas pitting the tragic hero against unalterable fate as defined by universal laws, particular circumstances, and individual temperament. By testing his characters so severely, Sophocles orchestrated adversity into revelations that continue to evoke an audience’s capacity for wonder and compassion.

The story of Oedipus was part of a Theban cycle of legends that was second only to the stories surrounding the Trojan War as a popular subject for Greek literary treatment. Thirteen different Greek dramatists, including Aeschylus and Euripides, are known to have written plays on the subject of Oedipus and his progeny. Sophocles’ great innovation was to turn Oedipus’s horrifying circumstances into a drama of self-discovery that probes the mystery of selfhood and human destiny.

The play opens with Oedipus secure and respected as the capable ruler of Thebes having solved the riddle of the Sphinx and gained the throne and Thebes’s widowed queen, Jocasta, as his reward. Plague now besets the city, and Oedipus comes to Thebes’s rescue once again when, after learning from the oracle of Apollo that the plague is a punishment for the murder of his predecessor, Laius, he swears to discover and bring the murderer to justice. The play, therefore, begins as a detective story, with the key question “Who killed Laius?” as the initial mystery. Oedipus initiates the first in a seemingly inexhaustible series of dramatic ironies as the detective who turns out to be his own quarry. Oedipus’s judgment of banishment for Laius’s murderer seals his own fate. Pledged to restore Thebes to health, Oedipus is in fact the source of its affliction. Oedipus’s success in discovering Laius’s murderer will be his own undoing, and the seemingly percipient, riddle-solving Oedipus will only see the truth about himself when he is blind. To underscore this point, the blind seer Teiresias is summoned. He is reluctant to tell what he knows, but Oedipus is adamant: “No man, no place, nothing will escape my gaze. / I will not stop until I know it all.” Finally goaded by Oedipus to reveal that Oedipus

himself is “the killer you’re searching for” and the plague that afflicts Thebes,

Teiresias introduces the play's second mystery, "Who is Oedipus?"

You have eyes to see with, But you do not see yourself, you do not see The horror shadowing every step of your life, . . . Who are your father and mother? Can you tell me?

Oedipus rejects Teiresias's horrifying answer to this question—that Oedipus has killed his own father and has become a "sower of seed where your father has sowed"—as part of a conspiracy with Jocasta's brother Creon against his rule. In his treatment of Teiresias and his subsequent condemning of Creon to death, Oedipus exposes his pride, wrath, and rush to judgment, character flaws that alloy his evident strengths of relentless determination to learn the truth and fortitude in bearing the consequences. Jocasta comes to her brother's defense, while arguing that not all oracles can be believed. By relating the circumstances of Laius's death, Jocasta attempts to demonstrate that Oedipus could not be the murderer while ironically providing Oedipus with the details that help to prove the case of his culpability. In what is a marvel of ironic plot construction, each step forward in answering the questions surrounding the murder and Oedipus's parentage takes Oedipus a step back in time toward full disclosure and self-discovery.

As Oedipus is made to shift from self-righteous authority to doubt, a messenger from Corinth arrives with news that Oedipus's supposed father, Polybus, is dead. This intelligence seems again to disprove the oracle that Oedipus is fated to kill his father. Oedipus, however, still is reluctant to return home for fear that he could still marry his mother. To relieve Oedipus's anxiety, the messenger reveals that he himself brought Oedipus as an infant to Polybus. Like Jocasta whose evidence in support of Oedipus's innocence turns into confirmation of his guilt, the messenger provides intelligence that will connect Oedipus to both Laius and Jocasta as their son and as his father's killer. The messenger's intelligence produces the crucial recognition for Jocasta, who urges Oedipus to cease any further inquiry. Oedipus, however, persists, summoning the herdsman who gave the infant to the messenger and was coincidentally the sole survivor of the attack on Laius. The herdsman's eventual confirmation of both the facts of Oedipus's birth and Laius's murder produces the play's staggering climax. Aristotle would cite Sophocles' simultaneous conjunction of Oedipus's recognition of his identity and guilt with his reversal of fortune—condemned by his own words to banishment and exile as Laius's murderer—as the ideal artful arrangement of a drama's plot to produce the desired cathartic pity and terror.

The play concludes with an emphasis on what Oedipus will now do after he knows the truth. No tragic hero has fallen further or faster than in the real time of Sophocles' drama in which the time elapsed in the play coincides with the performance time. Oedipus is stripped of every illusion of his authority, control,

righteousness, and past wisdom and is forced to contend with a shame that is impossible to expiate—patricide and incestual relations with his mother—in a world lacking either justice or alleviation from suffering. Oedipus's heroic grandeur, however, grows in his diminishment. Fundamentally a victim of circumstances, innocent of intentional sin whose fate was preordained before his birth, Oedipus refuses the consolation of blamelessness that victimization confers, accepting in full his guilt and self-imposed sentence as an outcast, criminal, and sinner. He blinds himself to confirm the moral shame that his actions, unwittingly or not, have provoked. It is Oedipus's capacity to endure the revelation of his sin, his nature, and his fate that dominates the play's conclusion. Oedipus's greatest strengths—his determination to know the truth and to accept what he learns—sets him apart as one of the most pitiable and admired of tragic heroes. "The closing note of the tragedy," Knox argues, "is a renewed insistence on the heroic nature of Oedipus; the play ends as it began, with the greatness of the hero. But it is a different kind of greatness. It is now based on knowledge, not, as before on ignorance." The now-blinded Oedipus has been forced to see and experience the impermanence of good fortune, the reality of unimaginable moral shame, and a cosmic order that is either perverse in its calculated cruelty or chaotically random in its designs, in either case defeating any human need for justice and mercy.

The Chorus summarizes the harsh lesson of heroic defeat that the play so majestically dramatizes:

Look and learn all citizens of Thebes. This is Oedipus. He, who read the famous riddle, and we hailed chief of men, All envied his power, glory, and good fortune. Now upon his head the sea of disaster crashes down. Mortality is man's burden. Keep your eyes fixed on your last day. Call no man happy until he reaches it, and finds rest from suffering.

Few plays have dealt so unflinchingly with existential truths or have as bravely defined human heroism in the capacity to see, suffer, and endure.

ORESTEIA (458 b.c.) by *Aeschylus*

[The *Oresteia* is a] trilogy whose special greatness lies in the fact that it transcends the limitations of dramatic enactment on a scale never achieved before or since.

—Richard Lattimore, “Introduction to the *Oresteia*” in *The Complete Greek Tragedies*

Called by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe “the masterpiece of masterpieces” and by Algernon Charles Swinburne “the greatest achievement of the human mind,” Aeschylus’s *Oresteia* is the monumental accomplishment of drama’s greatest early visionary and progenitor. Considered by the Greeks the “father of tragedy,” Aeschylus, “more than anyone,” according to classical scholar C. M. Bowra, “laid the true foundations of tragedy and established the forms and spirit which marked it out from other kinds of poetry.” The *Oresteia*, the only surviving Attic tragic trilogy, dramatizes the working out of the curse on the house of Atreus from Agamemnon’s homecoming from Troy and his murder by his wife, Clytemnestra, through her subsequent death at the hands of her son, Orestes, and the consequences for human justice and cosmic order. Aeschylus presents the archetypal family tragedy, the influences of which can be felt in subsequent theatrical depictions of the houses of Oedipus, Tyrone, Loman, Corleone, and Soprano and other uses of the family as the locus for dramatic conflict. Aeschylus points the way by which a domestic tragedy can serve in the hand of a great poet and stage craftsman as a profound enactment of the human condition and human destiny on a truly colossal dramatic scale.

To understand Aeschylus’s originality and achievement in the *Oresteia*, it is necessary to place the trilogy in the context of the origins and development of drama in ancient Greece. Western drama’s beginnings are obscure, but most authorities have detected a connection with religious rituals that enact the central myths of a society’s understanding of the powers that govern its well-being and its own interrelationships. Greek drama derived from the religious

festivals that paid tribute to Dionysus, the Greek god of fertility, wine, revelry, and regeneration, who was celebrated and worshipped in choral song and dance. Aristotle, in the *Poetics* (c. 335–323 b.c.), the earliest extant account of how Greek drama originated, asserted that tragedy began with the speeches of “those who led the dithyramb,” the choral lyric honoring Dionysus, and that comedy came from the “leaders of the phallic songs” performed by a group of singers and dancers representing satyrs—half men, half goats—who were the attendants of Dionysus.

At some point during the sixth century b.c., the choral leader began to impersonate imaginary characters and to imitate, rather than narrate, the story of a deity or a mythical hero. Tradition credits Thespis (none of whose plays survive) with first combining the choral songs and dances with the speeches of a masked actor in an enacted story. As the first known actor, Thespis is memorialized in the term *thespian*, a synonym for actor. It is believed that Thespis first performed his plays at festivals throughout Greece before inaugurating, in 534 b.c., Athens's reorganized annual spring festival, the Great, or City, Dionysia, as a theatrical contest in which choruses competed for prizes in a festival that lasted for several days. During the City Dionysia, performed in an open-air theater that held audiences of 15,000 or more, businesses were suspended and prisoners were released on bail for the duration of the festival. The first day was devoted to traditional choral hymns, followed by the competition in which three dramatists each presented a tetralogy of three tragedies, as well as a comic satyr play.

If Thespis is responsible for the initial shift from lyric to dramatic performance by introducing an actor, it is Aeschylus who, according to Aristotle, added the second actor to performances and thereby supplied the key ingredient for dialogue and dramatic conflict between characters on stage that defines drama. Aeschylus was born near Athens around 525 b.c. The known facts of his life are few. He fought during the wars against the Persians in the battle of Marathon in 490, and his eyewitness account of the battle of Salamis in his play *The Persians*, the only surviving Greek drama based on a contemporary historical event, suggests that he was also a participant in that battle. Although his role in Athenian politics and his political sympathies are subject to differing scholarly conjecture, it is incontestable that in his plays Aeschylus was one of the principal spokesmen for the central values of the Greeks during a remarkable period of political and cultural achievement that followed the defeat of the Persians and the emergence of Athens to supremacy in the Mediterranean world. Aeschylus wrote, acted in, and directed or produced between 80 and 90 plays, of which only seven—among the earliest documents in the history of the Western theater—survive. No other playwright can be credited with as many innovations as Aeschylus. Besides adding the second actor, Aeschylus also, according to Aristotle, reduced the number of the chorus from 50 to 12 and “gave the leading role to the spoken word.” Aeschylus thereby centered the interest of his plays on the actors and their speeches and dialogue. He is also credited with perfecting the conventions of tragedy's grand poetic diction and introducing rich costuming and spectacular stage effects. Underlying his grandiloquence, Aeschylus produced some of the greatest poetry ever created for the theater and used masterful representational stagecraft as a fundamental element in his plays, which helped turn the theater into an arena for exploring essential human questions. “In all probability,” literary historian Philip Whaley Harsh has concluded, “Aeschylus is chiefly responsible for the essentially realistic nature of European drama—qualities which can be

fully appreciated only by making a comparison between Greek tragedy and Sanskrit or Chinese drama. European drama, then, is perhaps more heavily indebted to Aeschylus than to any other individual.”

Aeschylus won his first victory at the City Dionysia in 484 b.c. and followed it with 12 subsequent prizes, a clear indication of his great acclaim and preeminence as a dramatist. It is Aeschylus whom Dionysus recalls from the underworld as the greatest of all tragic poets in Aristophanes' *Frogs*. Aeschylus's plays include *The Persians*, *Seven against Thebes*, *The Suppliants*, and *Prometheus Bound*. Each is a third of a trilogy whose companion plays have been lost. With the *Oresteia*, however, we have the only intact tragic trilogy. If his fellow Greek tragedians, Sophocles and Euripides, concentrated on the individual play as their basic unit of composition, Aeschylus was the master of the linked dramas that explored the wider implications and consequences of a single mythic story, thus extending the range of tragedy to a truly epic scale. The three plays making up the *Oresteia*—*Agamemnon*, *The Libation Bearers*, and *The Eumenides*—can be seen as three acts of a massive epic drama that invites comparison in its range, grandeur, and spiritual and cultural significance to the heroic epics of Homer, Virgil's *Aeneid*, Dante's *Divine Comedy*, and John Milton's *Paradise Lost*.

Aeschylus reportedly stated that his plays were merely “slices of fish from Homer's great feasts.” However, the *Oresteia*, combining themes from both the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, is in every sense a dramatic main course in which the playwright attempts nothing less than to explore with a truly Homeric amplitude the key conflicts in the human condition: between humans and the gods, male and female, parent and child, passion and reason, the individual and community, vengeance and justice. The background for his drama is the curse laid upon the ruling house of Argos when Atreus revenged himself on his brother Thyestes for having seduced his wife by serving Thyestes' children to him at a banquet. Cursing Atreus, Thyestes leaves Argos with his one remaining son, Aegisthus, vowing retribution. Thyestes' curse is visited on the next generation, on Atreus's sons, Menelaus and Agamemnon, through the seduction of Menelaus's wife, Helen, by the Trojan Paris, which provokes the Trojan War. The Greek force, led by Agamemnon, sets out to regain Helen and take revenge on the Trojans, but their fleet is initially beset by unfavorable winds. Agamemnon, choosing his duty as a commander over his responsibilities as a father, sacrifices his daughter Iphigenia as the price for reaching Troy and ultimate victory. The *Oresteia* considers the consequences of Agamemnon's act and the Greek's defeat of the Trojans at the decisive moment of his homecoming to Argos.

Agamemnon, the first play of the trilogy, which has been called by some the greatest of all Greek tragedies, works out the revenge of Agamemnon's wife, Clytemnestra, for their daughter's death. Having taken Thyestes' son, Aegisthus,

as her lover, Clytemnestra both betrays her husband and plots to usurp his throne with his bitterest enemy. Agamemnon returns to a disordered homeland in which all is not as it appears. Clytemnestra's welcoming of her returned husband is shockingly revealed as a sinister pretense for his murder in what critic Shirley J. Stewart has called "a play of distortion." Agamemnon is shown arriving in his chariot, proud, self-willed, and oblivious to the insincerity of his wife or his own hypocrisy, riding alongside his prize from Troy, Cassandra, the embodiment of his excessive destruction of the Trojans and an insult to his wife. He is invited to walk on an outspread crimson carpet into his palace. The red carpet, one of drama's first great visual stage effects, becomes a striking symbol of Agamemnon's hubris, for such an honor is reserved for the gods, and Agamemnon figuratively treads a trail of blood to his own demise. "Let the red stream flow and bear him home," Clytemnestra states, "to the home he never hoped to see." After Cassandra's prediction of both Agamemnon's and her own death comes true, Clytemnestra returns to the stage, blood-spattered, revealing for the first time her savage hatred of Agamemnon and her bitter jealousy of Cassandra. Clytemnestra justifies her act as the avenger of the house of Atreus who has freed it from the chain of murder set in motion by Atreus's crime. Clytemnestra's murder of Agamemnon, however, only continues the series of retributive murders afflicting the house of Atreus, while demonstrating the seemingly unbreakable cycle that "Blood will have blood." The play ends with Clytemnestra and Aegisthus ruling Argos by force and intimidation with the renewal of the demands of blood vengeance suggested by the Chorus's reference to Agamemnon's son, Orestes, who must someday return to avenge his father's death.

In *The Libation Bearers* Orestes does arrive, echoing the homecoming of his father in the first play. Meeting his sister Electra before their father's grave, Orestes, Hamlet-like in his indecision, reveals his dilemma and the crux of the trilogy's moral, religious, and political conflict. Ordered by Apollo to avenge his father, by doing so, Orestes must kill his mother, thereby incurring the wrath of the Furies, primal avengers charged with protecting the sanctity of blood-kinship. By doing what is right—avenging his father—Orestes must do what is wrong—murdering his mother. His conflict is dramatized as a kind of cosmic schism between two divine imperatives and world orders, as a fundamental conflict between the forces of vengeance and justice. Orestes' seemingly insolvable quandary sets the tragic conflict of the entire trilogy that dramatizes the means by which the seemingly unbreakable cycle of violence begetting violence can come under the rule of law and the primal can give way to the civilized. If, as it has been argued, the essence of tragedy is the moment of concentrated awareness of irreversibility, then Orestes' decision to act, accepting the certain punishment of the Furies, is the decisive tragic moment of the trilogy. Entering the palace by a stratagem, Orestes kills Aegisthus but hesitates before killing Clytemnestra, who bears her breast before him to remind Orestes that she has given him life. Orestes,

sustained by the command of Apollo, finally strikes, but he is shortly beset by a vision of the Furies, women, “shrouded in black, their heads wreathed, / swarming serpents!”

In *The Eumenides* Orestes is pursued by the Furies first to Delphi, where Apollo is unable to protect him for long, and then to Athens, where Athena, the patroness of the city, arranges Orestes’ trial. In a trilogy that alternates its drama from the domestic conflict of Agamemnon and Clytemnestra to the internal conflict of Orestes, the third play widens its subject to the truly cosmic scale as Apollo, Hermes, the Furies, and Athena all take the stage, and the full moral, political, and spiritual implication of Orestes’ crime is enacted. Aeschylus searches for nothing less than the meaning of human suffering itself and the ways by which evil in the world can be overruled by justice and chaos can be replaced by order.

Ancient critics indicated that Aeschylus’s dramatic method was to aim at “astonishment,” and all of the playwright’s verbal and stage magic are fully deployed in *The Eumenides*. It is said that the first appearance of the Furies in *The Eumenides* caused members of the audience to faint and women to miscarry. In the trilogy’s great reversal the competing gods’ dilemma over what to do about Orestes’ crime—matricide according to the Furies, justifiable manslaughter according to Apollo—is finally resolved by representatives of the play’s first audience, Athenian citizens gathered by Athena into a jury. The Athenian legal system, not the gods, Aeschylus suggests, becomes the means for mercy and equity to enter the treatment of crime, breaking the seemingly hopeless cycle of blood requiring blood and ultimately lifting the curse on the house of Atreus. Orestes is acquitted, and the Furies are placated by being persuaded to become Athens’s protectors. Old and new gods are reconciled, and a new cosmic order is asserted in which out of the chaos of sexual aggression and self-consuming rage, justice and civilization can flourish. The final triumphal exodus led by Athena of the jurors out of the theater into the city where the principles of justice and civilization are embodied must have been overwhelming in its civic, moral, and spiritual implications for its first spectators. For later audiences it is the force and intensity of Aeschylus’s dramatic conception and his incomparable poetry that captivates. The *Oresteia* remains one of the most ambitious plays ever attempted, in which Aeschylus succeeds in uniting the widest possible exploration of universal human themes with an emotionally intense and riveting drama.

MEDEA (431 b.c.) by Euripides

Medea, with its conflict between the boundless egoism of the husband and the boundless passion of the wife, was a completely up-to-date play. Accordingly, the disputes, the abuse, and the logic used by all its characters are essentially bourgeois. Jason is stiff with cleverness and magnanimity; while Medea philosophizes on the social position of women—the dishonourable necessity which makes a woman surrender herself in marriage to a strange man and pay a rich dowry for the privilege—and declares that bearing children is far more brave and dangerous than fighting in battle. It is impossible for us to admire the play wholeheartedly; yet it was a revolution in its time, and it shows the true fertility of the new art.

—Werner Jaeger, *Paideia: The Ideals of Greek Culture*

When *Medea*, commonly regarded as Euripides' masterpiece, was first performed at Athens's Great Dionysia, Euripides was awarded the third (and last) prize, behind Sophocles and Euphorion. It is not difficult to understand why. Euripides violates its audience's most cherished gender and moral illusions, while shocking with the unimaginable. Arguably for the first time in Western drama a woman fully commanded the stage from beginning to end, orchestrating the play's terrifying actions. Defying accepted gender assumptions that prescribed passive and subordinate roles for women, Medea combines the steely determination and wrath of Achilles with the wiles of Odysseus. The first Athenian audience had never seen Medea's like before, at least not in the heroic terms Euripides treats her. After Jason has cast off Medea—his wife, the mother of his children, and the woman who helped him to secure the Golden Fleece and eliminate the usurper of Jason's throne at Iolcus—in order to marry the daughter of King Creon of Corinth, Medea responds to his betrayal by destroying all of Jason's prospects as a husband, father, and presumptive heir to a powerful throne. She causes a horrible death of Jason's intended, Glauce, and Creon, who tries in vain to save his daughter. Most shocking of all, and possibly Euripides' singular innovation to the legend, Medea murders her two sons, allowing her vengeful passion to trump and cancel her maternal affections. Clytemnestra in Aeschylus's *ORESTEIA* conspires to murder her husband as well, but she is in turn executed by

her son, Orestes, whose punishment is divinely and civilly sanctioned by the trilogy's conclusion. Medea, by contrast, adds infanticide to her crimes but still escapes Jason's vengeance or Corinthian justice on a flying chariot sent by the god Helios to assist her. Medea, triumphant after the carnage she has perpetrated, seemingly evades the moral consequences of her actions and is shown by Euripides apotheosized as a divinely sanctioned, supreme force. The play simultaneously and paradoxically presents Medea's claim on the audience's sympathy as a woman betrayed, as a victim of male oppression and her own divided nature, and as a monster and a warning. Medea frightens as a female violator and overreacher who lets her passion overthrow her reason, whose love is so massive and all-consuming that it is transformed into self-destructive and boundless hatred. It is little wonder that Euripides' defiance of virtually every dramatic and gender assumption of his time caused his tragedy to fail with his first critics. The complexity and contradictions of Medea still resonate with audiences, while the play continues to unsettle and challenge. *Medea*, with literature's most titanic female protagonist, remains one of drama's most daring assaults on an audience's moral sensibility and conception of the world.

Euripides is ancient Greek drama's great iconoclast, the shatterer of consoling illusions. With Euripides, the youngest of the three great Athenian tragedians of the fifth century b.c., Attic drama takes on a disturbingly recognizable modern tone. Regarded by Aristotle as "the most tragic of the poets," Euripides provided deeply spiritual, moral, and psychological explorations of exceptional and domestic life at a time when Athenian confidence and certainty were moving toward breakup. Mirroring this gathering doubt and anxiety, Euripides reflects the various intellectual, cultural, and moral controversies of his day. It is not too far-fetched to suggest that the world after Athens's golden age in the fifth century became Euripidean, as did the drama that responded to it. In several senses, therefore, it is Euripides whom Western drama can claim as its central progenitor.

Euripides wrote 92 plays, of which 18 have survived, by far the largest number of works by the great Greek playwrights and a testimony both to the accidents of literary survival and of his high regard by following generations. An iconoclast in his life and his art, Euripides set the prototype for the modern alienated artist in opposition. By contrast to Aeschylus and Sophocles, Euripides played no public role in the life of his times. An intellectual and artist who wrote in isolation (tradition says in a cave in his native Salamis), his plays won the first prize at Athens's annual Great Dionysia only four times, and his critics, particularly Aristophanes, took on Euripides as a frequent target. Aristophanes charged him with persuading his countrymen that the gods did not exist, with debunking the heroic, and with teaching moral degeneration that transformed Athenians into "marketplace loungers, tricksters, and scoundrels." Euripides' immense reputation and influence came for the most part only after his death, when the themes and

innovations he pioneered were better appreciated and his plays eclipsed in popularity those of all of the other great Athenian playwrights.

Critic Eric Havelock has summarized the Euripidean dramatic revolution as “putting on stage rooms never seen before.” Instead of a palace’s throne room, Euripides takes his audience into the living room and presents the conflicts and crises of characters who resemble not the heroic paragons of Aeschylus and Sophocles but the audience themselves—mixed, fallible, contradictory, and vulnerable. As Aristophanes accurately points out, Euripides brought to the stage “familiar affairs” and “household things.” Euripides opened up drama for the exploration of central human and social questions embedded in ordinary life and human nature. The essential component of all Euripides’ plays is a challenging reexamination of orthodoxy and conventional beliefs. If the ways of humans are hard to fathom in Aeschylus and Sophocles, at least the design and purpose of the cosmos are assured, if not always accepted. For Euripides, the ability of the gods and the cosmos to provide certainty and order is as doubtful as an individual’s preference for the good. In Euripides’ cosmogony, the gods resemble those of Homer’s, full of pride, passion, vindictiveness, and irrational characteristics that pattern the world of humans. Divine will and order are most often in Euripides’ dramas replaced by a random fate, and the tragic hero is offered little consolation as the victim of forces that are beyond his or her control. Justice is shown as either illusory or a delusion, and the myths are brought down to the level of the familiar and the recognizable. Euripides has been described as drama’s first great realist, the playwright who relocated tragic action to everyday life and portrayed gods and heroes with recognizable human and psychological traits. Aristotle related in the *Poetics* that “Sophocles said he drew men as they ought to be, and Euripides as they were.” Because Euripides’ characters offer us so many contrary aspects and are driven by both the rational and the irrational, the playwright earns the distinction of being considered the first great psychological artist in the modern sense, due to his awareness of the complex motives and ambiguities that make up human identity and determine behavior.

Euripides is also one of the first playwrights to feature heroic women at the center of the action. Medea dominates the stage as no woman character had ever done before. The play opens with Medea’s nurse confirming how much Medea is suffering from Jason’s betrayal and the tutor of Medea’s children revealing that Creon plans to banish Medea and her two sons from Corinth. Medea’s first words are an offstage scream and curse as she hears the news of Creon’s judgment. The Nurse’s sympathetic reaction to Medea’s misery sounds the play’s dominant theme of the danger of passion overwhelming reason, judgment, and balance, particularly in a woman like Medea, unschooled in suffering and used to commanding rather than being commanded. Better, says the Nurse, to have no part of greatness or glory: “The middle way, neither high nor low is best. . . . Good

never comes from overreaching.” Medea then takes the stage to win the sympathy of the Chorus, made up of Corinthian women. Her opening speech has been described as one of literature’s earliest feminist manifestos, in which she declares, “Of all creatures on earth, we women are the most wretched,” and goes on to attack dowries that purchase husbands in exchange for giving men ownership of women’s bodies and fate, arranged marriages, and the double standard:

When a man grows tired of his wife and home,
He is free to look about for someone new.
We wives are forced to count on just one man.
They say, we live safe at home while men go to battle.
I’d rather stand three times in the front line
than bear one child!

Medea wins the Chorus’s complicit silence on her intended intrigue to avenge herself on Jason and their initial sympathy as an aggrieved woman. She next confronts Creon to persuade him to postpone his banishment order for one day so she can arrange a destination and some support for her children. Medea’s servility and deference to Creon and the sentimental appeal she mounts on behalf of her children gain his concession. After he departs, Medea reveals her deception of and contempt for Creon, announcing that her vengeance plot now extends beyond Jason to include both Creon and his daughter.

There follows the first of three confrontational scenes between Medea and Jason, the dramatic core of the play. Euripides presents Jason as a self-satisfied rationalist, smoothly and complacently justifying the violations of his love and obligation to Medea as sensible, accepted expedience. Jason asserts that his self-interest and ambition for wealth and power are superior claims over his affection, loyalty, and duty to the woman who has betrayed her parents, murdered her brother, exiled herself from her home, and conspired for his sake. Medea rages ineffectually in response, while attempting unsuccessfully to reach Jason’s heart and break through an egotism that shows him incapable of understanding or empathy. As critic G. Norwood has observed, “Jason is a superb study—a compound of brilliant manners, stupidity, and cynicism.” In the drama’s debate between Medea and Jason, the play brilliantly sets in conflict essential polarities in the human condition, between male/female, husband/wife, reason/passion, and head/heart.

Before the second round with Jason, Medea encounters Aegeus, king of Athens, who is in search of a cure for his childlessness. Medea agrees to use her powers as a sorceress to help him in exchange for refuge in Athens. Aristotle criticized this scene as extraneous, but a case can be made that Aegeus’s despair over his lack of children gives Medea the idea that Jason’s ultimate destruction would be to leave him similarly childless. The evolving scheme to eliminate Jason’s intended bride

and offspring sets the context for Medea's second meeting with Jason in which she feigns acquiescence to Jason's decision and proposes that he should keep their children with him. Jason agrees to seek Glauce's approval for Medea's apparent self-sacrificing generosity, and the children depart with him, carrying a poisoned wedding gift to Glauce.

First using her children as an instrument of her revenge, Medea will next manage to convince herself in the internal struggle that leads to the play's climax that her love for her children must give way to her vengeance, that maternal affection and reason are no match for her irrational hatred. After the Tutor returns with the children and a messenger reports the horrible deaths of Glauce and Creon, Medea resolves her conflict between her love for her children and her hatred for Jason in what scholar John Ferguson has called "possibly the finest speech in all Greek tragedy." Medea concludes her self-assessment by stating, "I know the evil that I do, but my fury is stronger than my will. Passion is the curse of man." It is the struggle within Medea's soul, which Euripides so powerfully dramatizes, between her all-consuming vengeance and her reason and better nature that gives her villainy such tragic status. Her children's offstage screams finally echo Medea's own opening agony. On stage the Chorus tries to comprehend such an unnatural crime as matricide through precedent and concludes: "What can be strange or terrible after this?" Jason arrives too late to rescue his children from the "vile murderess," only to find Medea beyond his reach in a chariot drawn by dragons with the lifeless bodies of his sons beside her. The roles of Jason and Medea from their first encounter are here dramatically reversed: Medea is now triumphant, refusing Jason any comfort or concession, and Jason ineffectually rages and curses the gods for his destruction, now feeling the pain of losing everything he most desired, as he had earlier inflicted on Medea. "Call me lioness or Scylla, as you will," Medea calls down to Jason, ". . . as long as I have reached your vitals."

Medea's titanic passions have made her simultaneously subhuman in her pitiless cruelty and superhuman in her willful, limitless strength and determination. The final scene of her escape in her god-sent flying chariot, perhaps the most famous and controversial use of the *deus ex machina* in drama, ultimately makes a grand theatrical, psychological, and shattering ideological point. Medea has destroyed all in her path, including her human self, to satisfy her passion, becoming at the play's end, neither a hero nor a villain but a fearsome force of nature: irrational, impersonal, destructive power that sweeps aside human aspirations, affections, and the consoling illusions of mercy and order in the universe.

BACCHAE (c. 406 b.c.) by Euripides

In one key scene Dionysus asks the question which has perplexed theorists of tragedy: “would you really like to see what gives you pain?” Dionysus, ironic questioner and stage- manager of the action, is a double of the poet himself. The difference is that the god lacks the dramatist’s compassion.

—John Davie, Preface to *Bacchae*, in *The Bacchae and Other Plays*

Euripides’ *Bacchae* claims a preeminent place in both classical Greek drama and Euripides’ career as his and his age’s last great tragic drama. Written in Macedonia after the playwright’s voluntary exile from Athens, the *Bacchae* was produced after Euripides’ death around 406 b.c. A play of great poetry and suggestiveness, the *Bacchae* is in many ways Euripides’ most provocative work. The only Greek drama to feature the god Dionysus as a central character, the *Bacchae* is a drama about belief and faith, expressed with Euripides’ characteristic willingness to complicate easy answers. It has been interpreted as both Euripides’ approval of Dionysian nature worship and his condemnation of its excesses. The violent natural forces Dionysus embodied are treated as both essential and terrifyingly destructive with Dionysus and his resister, Pentheus, presented in ways that raise as many questions as consolations. “*The Bacchae*,” poet and historian Thomas Macaulay wrote “is a glorious play. It is often very obscure; and I am not sure that I understand its general scope. But, as a piece of language, it is hardly equaled in the world. And, whether it was intended to encourage or to discourage fanaticism, the picture of fanatical excitement which it exhibits has never been rivaled.” Critic J. Michael Walton has observed that “The sheer power and mystery of the *Bacchae* is so startling that it rightly belongs in the forefront of the greatest plays ever written.” The *Bacchae* persists largely because of the play’s astonishing capacity to harness psychological and emotional forces to form a central myth with far-reaching psychological, moral, and ontological implications.

As the Peloponnesian War (431–404 b.c.) ground on toward Athens’s eventual defeat, Euripides completed a series of tragedies—*Electra* (413), *Phoenician Women* (409), and *Orestes* (408)—reflecting the playwright’s bitterness and growing despair. In 408 Euripides left Athens at the invitation of the Macedonian king Archelaus, who hoped to establish a cultural center to rival Athens. Euripides’ departure from Athens in his old age has been attributed to the

playwright's disappointment with the hostility that greeted his works. Although invited to produce tetralogies for at least 22 of Athens's Dionysian festivals, Euripides won the competition only three times before his departure, compared to his contemporary Sophocles, who won 24 first prizes. Aristotle reported that, outraged by Euripides' disrespectful treatment of the immortals, the archon (chief magistrate) Kleon prosecuted him for blasphemy, but no record indicates the trial's outcome. Whatever the reason for his departure, Euripides spent his last 18 months enjoying royal patronage and support. Legends surrounding his death, no doubt influenced by the subject of his last completed play, suggest that Euripides was either killed accidentally or deliberately by the king's hunting dogs or torn apart by women outraged by the playwright's treatment of their sex. Found among his effects were three plays—the *Bacchae*, *Iphigenia at Aulis*, and the *Alcmaeon* (now lost)—produced as a trilogy in Athens in 407 under the direction of Euripides' son and securing posthumously the fourth first-place prize for the playwright whom Aristotle would call in the *Poetics* “the most tragic of dramatists.”

What is initially striking about the *Bacchae* is its return to many of the themes treated in *Medea* and other plays written 20 or 25 years earlier, along with its being, for the iconoclastic and innovative Euripides, one of his most conventional dramatic structures. Summarizing Euripides' development, scholar H. D. F. Kitto has stated:

Love and vengeance are the basis of the *Medea*; Aphrodite and Artemis in the *Hippolytus* are instinctive, non-moral forces, jealous of each other, beneficent to man only when each receives her due honour. The [Peloponnesian] war brought a new tragic theme to the fore, and the tragedy of rational man preyed on by irrational but necessary passions is pushed into the background. The war continued and the spirit of Athens flagged. Athens, and Euripides with her, turned from high tragic issues to a lighter or a more intellectual drama. At last Euripides escaped from the agony and weariness of Athens, and in Macedonia, where spirits were fresher and the tragic implications of political life were out of sight, he returned to his sources.

The *Bacchae* restages the primal battle between rationality and irrationality for a final summary statement on both divine and human natures. The mythic backstory for the *Bacchae* is the relationship between Semele, the daughter of Cadmus, king of Thebes, and Zeus. Bearing a child by the god, Semele incurs the jealous wrath of Zeus's wife, Hera, who tricks her rival into demanding to see Zeus in all his godly splendor. Appearing to her in the form of bolt of lightning, Semele is immolated, but Zeus saves the unborn child, taking it into his thigh before delivering a son named Dionysus, an embodiment of the power of nature, revelry, wine, frenzy, and the irrational. Semele's sisters, however, refuse to

believe that she could have given birth to a god, thinking that instead Zeus has killed her for blasphemously claiming an affair with him. It is the doubt about his divinity in Thebes that Dionysus intends to correct as the play opens, and the god himself, in human form, disguised as a priest in his cult, delivers the prologue. Standing beside his mother's tomb, where flames ignited at the time of her death still smolder, Dionysus announces his mission to call the Greeks to his worship, beginning in Thebes. To teach the nonbelievers a lesson Dionysus has driven the town's women into an ecstatic frenzy and away from their homes and responsibilities:

up to the mountains where they wander, crazed of mind, and compelled to wear my orgies' livery. Every woman in Thebes—but the women only— I drove from home, mad. There they sit,

rich and poor alike, even the daughters of Cadmus, beneath the silver firs on the roofless rocks. Like it or not, this city must learn its lesson: it lacks initiation in my mysteries;

that I shall vindicate my mother Semele and stand revealed to mortal eyes as the god she bore to Zeus.

Dionysus is particularly incensed by the doubt and disrespect of Pentheus, Cadmus's grandson and Dionysus's cousin, who now rules Thebes and is to be tested. The prologue establishes the play's crushing central irony: The audience knows what the Thebans do not—the god's true identity and intention at the outset. Their doubt is therefore our certainty. Disbelieving the divinity of Dionysus, Pentheus considers what has happened to the Theban women to be perverse and abhorrent and the newly arrived foreign priest of a false god to be a charlatan who must be persecuted, thereby sealing his doom.

Following his monologue, Dionysus introduces the Chorus, women devotees who have followed him from the east and who sing an ode in Dionysus's honor and of the delight they feel in worshipping him. They, in turn, are followed on stage by the prophet Teiresias and Cadmus. Both old men are wearing the same garb as the Bacchants but offer different reason for their conversion. Cadmus embraces the worship of Dionysus out of family pride rather than from any genuine belief, while Teiresias rationalizes Dionysus's divinity, accepting the new god as a concept rather than a felt force. Pentheus enters, furious at both men for succumbing to the cult, and announces his determination to stamp it out by seizing the newly arrived priest. Certainly Pentheus's willful blindness merits Teiresias's condemnation: "Reckless fool, you do not know the consequences of your words. You talked madness before, but this is raving lunacy!" Yet Pentheus is responding to a crisis in which the women's departure has led to a breakdown of order in the city, threatening their survival. He has been called "prejudiced, rash, violent, deaf

to advice” and a “Puritan with a prurient mind” in his obsession with what the women are up to in the mountains, yet Pentheus’s skepticism and insistence on order are not unworthy attributes of a responsible leader. These virtues, when pursued exclusively and blindly, ignoring the unmistakable signs of Dionysus’s godly powers, will produce his tragic fall. Euripides, however, complicates the audience’s sympathy by not turning Pentheus into a simple tyrant who deserves his fate and by presenting Dionysus as brutally pursuing the vengeance aimed at destroying his entire human family.

Soldiers enter with the captured Dionysus. Pentheus taunts him; has some of his long hair cut; seizes his thyrsus, his staff tipped with a pinecone and twined with ivy; and interrogates him about the mysteries and rites of the new religion, though Dionysus warns him that it is forbidden to reveal anything to the uninitiated. Threatened with imprisonment, Dionysus insists that “The god himself will set me free whenever I wish,” but Pentheus persists and orders him chained and locked in the palace stables, prompting a final set of warnings from Dionysus:

You do not know the limits of your strength. You do not know

what you do. You do not know who you are. . . . I go,

though not to suffer, since that cannot be. But Dionysus whom you outrage by your acts, who you deny is god, will call you to account. When you set chains on me, you manacle the god.

In all Greek tragedy there is no clearer or more effective dramatization of hubris than Pentheus’s defiance of these warnings, made even more certain by the audience’s knowledge that the speaker is divine. The Chorus calls upon the gods to punish Pentheus, and their pleas are answered at the end of their song as an earthquake shakes the palace and Dionysus emerges unbound. Pentheus follows, enraged at seeing his prisoner free, and receives a report about the Theban women, including Pentheus’s mother, Agave, who are on a nearby mountain and whose nature worship includes the slaughtering of cattle and ravaging the countryside. Under Dionysus’s spell Pentheus expresses a desire to see the women at their worship. Dressed as a woman to avoid detection, Pentheus, now feeling the effects of Dionysus’s power, appears to be intoxicated, sees double, and foolishly and vainly fusses with his female attire. “The god is with us,” says Dionysus sinisterly. “Now you are seeing what you ought to see.” Here the absurdity of Pentheus’s loss of control and rationality is mixed with the tragic suggestion offered by both Dionysus and the Chorus that Pentheus is going to his doom.

After Pentheus’s departure the Chorus sings an ode calling for his destruction, followed by what is surely the most horrific messenger speech in Greek drama. Announcing Pentheus’s death, the messenger reports that, led to the woods to spy

on the women, Pentheus is seen, and thinking him a lion, the women, including his mother, Agave, tear him apart. Impaling his head on her thyrsus, Agave enters to display her prize:

You citizens of this towered city, men of Thebes, behold the trophy of your women's hunting! *This* is the quarry of our chase, taken not with nets nor spears of bronze but by the white and delicate hands of women. What are they worth, your boastings now and all that uselessness your armor is, since we, with our bare hands, captured this quarry and tore its bleeding body limb from limb?

This extraordinary challenge to masculine power and gender conventions under the influence of Dionysian power is followed by one of the most excruciating moments in all of drama: Agave is slowly restored to her senses and made aware by Cadmus that she has murdered her son and his grandson. It is a scene of wrenching self-recognition and suffering as Agave realizes that her punishment for doubting the divinity of her sister's child is the death of her son by her own hands. "All our house," Cadmus exclaims, "the god has utterly destroyed." Cadmus draws the moral that "If there be any man who slights divinity, / let him look at Pentheus' death—and believe in gods."

Dionysus appears in all his glory atop the palace, and although lines from his speech are lost, it is clear from context and other sources that he proclaims his divinity and banishes Agave and Cadmus, who acknowledge their sins and beg for mercy but are refused. "Gods should not show anger like men," Cadmus asserts. Implacably, Dionysus responds "My father Zeus decreed this long ago." To which Agave says, "It is fated, Father. We must go." Euripides suggests that the powerful, instinctual, and irrational forces Dionysus embodies are repressed or ignored at our peril. Pentheus's rationality is no match for the power like a force of nature, that defies his understanding and owes nothing to human compassion or sympathy. Euripides' tragedy unleashes that force and shows how susceptible we are to it. Ultimately, the play is less about faith in the gods than an acknowledgment of the contradictory forces that rule the universe and human nature.

ANTIGONE (441 b.c.) by Sophocles

Within this single drama—in great part, a harsh critique of Athenian society and the Greek city-state in general—Sophocles tells of the eternal struggle between the state and the individual, human and natural law, and the enormous gulf between what we attempt here on earth and what fate has in store for us all. In this magnificent dramatic work, almost incidentally so, we find nearly every reason why we are now what we are.

—Victor D. Hanson and John Heath, *Who Killed Homer? The Demise of Classical Education and the Recovery of Greek Wisdom*

With *Antigone* Sophocles forcibly demonstrates that the power of tragedy derives not from the conflict between right and wrong but from the confrontation between right and right. As the play opens the succession battle between the sons of Oedipus—Polynices and Eteocles—over control of Thebes has resulted in both of their deaths. Their uncle Creon, who has now assumed the throne, asserts his authority to end a destructive civil war and decrees that only Eteocles, the city's defender, should receive honorable burial. Polynices, who has led a foreign army against Thebes, is branded a traitor. His corpse is to be left on the battlefield "to be chewed up by birds and dogs and violated," with death the penalty for anyone who attempts to bury him and supply the rites necessary for the dead to reach the underworld. Antigone, Polynices' sister, is determined to defy Creon's order, setting in motion a tragic collision between opposed laws and duties: between natural and divine commands that dictate the burial of the dead and the secular edicts of a ruler determined to restore civic order, between family allegiance and private conscience and public duty and the rule of law that restricts personal liberty for the common good. Like the proverbial immovable object meeting an irresistible force, *Antigone* arranges the impact of seemingly irreconcilable conceptions of rights and responsibilities, producing one of drama's enduring illuminations of human nature and the human condition.

Antigone is one of Sophocles' greatest achievements and one of the most influential dramas ever staged. "Between 1790 and 1905," critic George Steiner reports, "it was widely held by European poets, philosophers, [and] scholars that Sophocles' *Antigone* was not only the finest of Greek tragedies, but a work of art nearer to perfection than any other produced by the human spirit." Its theme of the

opposition between the individual and authority has resonated through the centuries, with numerous playwrights, most notably Jean Anouilh, Bertolt Brecht, and Athol Fugard grafting contemporary concerns and values onto the moral and political dramatic framework that Sophocles established. The play has elicited paradoxical responses reflecting changing cultural and moral imperatives. Antigone, who has been described as “the first heroine of Western drama,” has been interpreted both as a heroic martyr to conscience and as a willfully stubborn fanatic who causes her own death and that of two other innocent people, forsaking her duty to the living on behalf of the dead. Creon has similarly divided critics between censure and sympathy. Despite the play’s title, some have suggested that the tragedy is Creon’s, not Antigone’s, and it is his abuse of authority and his violations of personal, family, and divine obligations that center the drama’s tragedy. The brilliance of Sophocles’ play rests in the complexity of motive and the competing absolute claims that the drama displays. As novelist George Eliot observed,

It is a very superficial criticism which interprets the character of Creon as that of hypocritical tyrant, and regards Antigone as a blameless victim. Coarse contrasts like this are not the materials handled by great dramatists. The exquisite art of Sophocles is shown in the touches by which he makes us feel that Creon, as well as Antigone, is contending for what he believes to be the right, while both are also conscious that, in following out one principle, they are laying themselves open to just blame for transgressing another.

Eliot would call the play’s focus the “antagonism of valid principles,” demonstrating a point of universal significance that “Wherever the strength of a man’s intellect, or moral sense, or affection brings him into opposition with the rules which society has sanctioned, *there* is renewed conflict between Antigone and Creon; such a man must not only dare to be right, he must also dare to be wrong—to shake faith, to wound friendship, perhaps, to hem in his own powers.” Sophocles’ *Antigone* is less a play about the pathetic end of a victim of tyranny or the corruption of authority than about the inevitable cost and consequence between competing imperatives that define the human condition. From opposite and opposed positions, both Antigone and Creon ultimately meet at the shared suffering each has caused. They have destroyed each other and themselves by who they are and what they believe. They are both right and wrong in a world that lacks moral certainty and simple choices. The Chorus summarizes what *Antigone* will vividly enact: “The powerful words of the proud are paid in full with mighty blows of fate, and at long last those blows will teach us wisdom.”

As the play opens Antigone declares her intention to her sister Ismene to defy Creon’s impious and inhumane order and enlists her sister’s aid to bury their brother. Ismene responds that as women they must not oppose the will of men or

the authority of the city and invite death. Ismene's timidity and deference underscores Antigone's courage and defiance. Antigone asserts a greater allegiance to blood kinship and divine law declaring that the burial is a "holy crime," justified even by death. Ismene responds by calling her sister "a lover of the impossible," an accurate description of the tragic hero, who, according to scholar Bernard Knox, is Sophocles' most important contribution to drama: "Sophocles presents us for the first time with what we recognize as a 'tragic hero': one who, unsupported by the gods and in the face of human opposition, makes a decision which springs from the deepest layer of his individual nature, his *physis*, and then blindly, ferociously, heroically maintains that decision even to the point of self-destruction." Antigone exactly conforms to Knox's description, choosing her conception of duty over sensible self-preservation and gender-prescribed submission to male authority, turning on her sister and all who oppose her. Certain in her decision and self-sufficient, Antigone rejects both her sister's practical advice and kinship. Ironically Antigone denies to her sister, when Ismene resists her will, the same blood kinship that claims Antigone's supreme allegiance in burying her brother. For Antigone the demands of the dead overpower duty to the living, and she does not hesitate in claiming both to know and act for the divine will. As critic Gilbert Norwood observes, "It is Antigone's splendid though perverse valor which creates the drama."

Before the apprehended Antigone, who has been taken in the act of scattering dust on her brother's corpse, lamenting, and pouring libations, is brought before Creon and the dramatic crux of the play, the Chorus of Theban elders delivers what has been called the finest song in all Greek tragedy, the so-called Ode to Man, that begins "Wonders are many, and none is more wonderful than man." This magnificent celebration of human power over nature and resourcefulness in reason and invention ends with a stark recognition of humanity's ultimate helplessness—"Only against Death shall he call for aid in vain." Death will test the resolve and principles of both Antigone and Creon, while, as critic Edouard Schuré asserts, "It brings before us the most extraordinary psychological evolution that has ever been represented on stage."

When Antigone is brought in judgment before Creon, obstinacy meets its match. Both stand on principle, but both reveal the human source of their actions. Creon betrays himself as a paranoid autocrat; Antigone as an individual whose powerful hatred outstrips her capacity for love. She defiantly and proudly admits that she is guilty of disobeying Creon's decree and that he has no power to override divine law. Nor does Antigone concede any mitigation of her personal obligation in the competing claims of a niece, a sister, or a citizen. Creon is maddened by what he perceives to be Antigone's insolence in justifying her crime by diminishing his authority, provoking him to ignore all moderating claims of family, natural, or divine extenuation. When Ismene is brought in as a co-conspirator, she accepts her

share of guilt in solidarity with her sister, but again Antigone spurns her, calling her “a friend who loves in words,” denying Ismene’s selfless act of loyalty and sympathy with a cold dismissal and self-sufficiency, stating, “Never share my dying, / don’t lay claim to what you never touched.” However, Ismene raises the ante for both Antigone and Creon by asking her uncle whether by condemning Antigone he will kill his own son’s betrothed. Creon remains adamant, and his judgment on Antigone and Ismene, along with his subsequent argument with his son, Haemon, reveals that Creon’s principles are self-centered, contradictory, and compromised by his own pride, fears, and anxieties. Antigone’s challenge to his authority, coming from a woman, is demeaning. If she goes free in defiance of his authority, Creon declares, “I am not the man, she is.” To the urging of Haemon that Creon should show mercy, tempering his judgment to the will of Theban opinion that sympathizes with Antigone, Creon asserts that he cares nothing for the will of the town, whose welfare Creon’s original edict against Polynices was meant to serve. Creon, moreover, resents being schooled in expediency by his son. Inflamed by his son’s advocacy on behalf of Antigone, Creon brands Haemon a “woman’s slave,” and after vacillating between stoning Antigone and executing her and her sister in front of Haemon, Creon rules that Antigone alone is to perish by being buried alive. Having begun the drama with a decree that a dead man should remain unburied, Creon reverses himself, ironically, by ordering the premature burial of a living woman.

Antigone, being led to her entombment, is shown stripped of her former confidence and defiance, searching for the justification that can steel her acceptance of the fate that her actions have caused. Contemplating her living descent into the underworld and the death that awaits her, Antigone regrets dying without marriage and children. Gone is her reliance on divine and natural law to justify her act as she equivocates to find the emotional source to sustain her. A husband and children could be replaced, she rationalizes, but since her mother and father are dead, no brother can ever replace Polynices. Antigone’s tortured logic here, so different from the former woman of principle, has been rejected by some editors as spurious. Others have judged this emotionally wrought speech essential for humanizing Antigone, revealing her capacity to suffer and her painful search for some consolation.

The drama concludes with the emphasis shifted back to Creon and the consequences of his judgment. The blind prophet Teiresias comes to warn Creon that Polynices’ unburied body has offended the gods and that Creon is responsible for the sickness that has descended on Thebes. Creon has kept from Hades one who belongs there and is sending to Hades another who does not. The gods confirm the rightness of Antigone’s action, but justice evades the working out of the drama’s climax. The release of Antigone comes too late; she has hung herself. Haemon commits suicide, and Eurydice, Creon’s wife, kills herself after cursing

Creon for the death of their son. Having denied the obligation of family, Creon loses his own. Creon's rule, marked by ignoring or transgressing cosmic and family law, is shown as ultimately inadequate and destructive. Creon is made to realize that he has been rash and foolish, that "Whatever I have touched has come to nothing." Both Creon and Antigone have been pushed to terrifying ends in which what truly matters to both are made starkly clear. Antigone's moral imperatives have been affirmed but also their immense cost in suffering has been exposed. *Antigone* explores a fundamental rift between public and private worlds. The central opposition in the play between Antigone and Creon, between duty to self and duty to state, dramatizes critical antinomies in the human condition. Sophocles' genius is his resistance of easy and consoling simplifications to resolve the oppositions. Both sides are ultimately tested; both reveal the potential for greatness and destruction.

LYSISTRATA (411 b.c.) by Aristophanes

The Lysistrata has behind it much suffering and a burning pity. Aristophanes had more than once risked his civic rights and even his life in his battle for peace, and is now making his last appeal. It is owing to this background of intense feeling that the Lysistrata becomes not exactly a great comedy, but a great play, making its appeal not to laughter alone but also to deeper things than laughter.

—Gilbert Murray, *Aristophanes: A Study*

With its perennially relevant antiwar and gender themes, *Lysistrata* speaks to modern audiences more forcefully than any other of the playwright's remarkable comedies, making it one of the most frequently produced Greek dramas and the most famous of Aristophanes' plays. If Aristophanes cannot be credited with the actual invention of stage comedy, he is the earliest practitioner whose plays have survived intact. Aristophanes provides us with our only surviving examples of Greek Old Comedy, the raucous, profane, and intellectually daring dramatic form that, along with choral tragedy, was the great achievement of Attic drama during the fifth century b.c.

We know very little about Aristophanes' life and personality, but a great deal about his times as reflected in his plays (11 of his more than 40 works have survived). A native Athenian, Aristophanes was a political and intellectual gadfly whose dramas offer some of the best reflections of the period's controversies and preoccupations. It is said that when Dionysius, the tyrant of Syracuse, wanted to learn about the people and the institutions of Athens, Plato advised him to consult the comedies of Aristophanes. He was born around 450 b.c., in the years when Pericles was initiating the reforms that created the golden age of Athenian democracy and lived through the period of Athens's growth as an empire and as a center of extraordinary intellectual and cultural achievement. Nine of his surviving plays, however, reflect the tragic consequences of the punishing Peloponnesian War with Sparta, which was waged from 431 to 404 and culminated in Athens's defeat and rapid decline. When Aristophanes died in 385 b.c., the last surviving great fifth-century playwright, his passing ended a century of unparalleled

dramatic accomplishment. His final years, however, were spent in a very different milieu from his heyday as a dramatist, one hostile to the freewheeling, nothing-is-sacred tolerance upon which his great comedies depended. The Old Comedy of Aristophanes would be replaced by the more sedate New Comedy of the fourth century, a more prosaic, less outrageous and fantastical comedy of manners. As written most notably by Menander, and adapted by the Roman dramatists Plautus and Terence, the New Comedy with its stock characters and situations formed the main tributary for Western comic drama. Aristophanes' comedy, however, should be regarded as more than a dead end and a cultural curiosity. His plays as a form established the bedrock of comedy's greatest resources by offering a serious reflection of the world while encouraging our ability to laugh at its absurdity, excesses, and pretensions. Aristophanes' dramas have remained a rich comic inspiration and influence, to be reworked and refashioned through the centuries. Echoes of his inventiveness and comic methods are readily found in the epic theater of Bertolt Brecht, the absurdist, existential dramas of Samuel Beckett, and the intellectual high jinks of Tom Stoppard. If later comic drama is less exuberant and more predictable than Aristophanes' plays, the essential elements in his works—irreverence, a mix of serious themes and low comic farce, a celebration of human nature's foibles and vitality, and an exhilarating liberation from repression and pretensions in their many guises—established comedy's core ethos and strategies.

The origins of Greek comedy are as obscure as those of tragedy. Both dramatic forms seem to have derived from the communal and ritual celebration of the god Dionysus. The Greek word *kômoidia*, from which the term *comedy* is derived, means the "song of a band of revelers"; the *komos* was a procession of revelers who sang and danced through towns or festivals, often dressed as and impersonating animals while celebrating the vital force of nature and fertility. Their raucous performances, filled with obscenity, scatology, and the direct taunts of the onlookers, were intended to disrupt routine and to provoke an emotional and sexual release. The *komos* formed the prototype for the comedy that Greek playwrights in the fifth century b.c. adapted into a chorus, with actors taking the parts of characters in a plot in which obstacles are surmounted, often in fantastical manner, to end in celebration and affirmation. Elements of these early comedies are found in the satyr plays that concluded tragic trilogies, and comedies were first included in Athens's annual drama festival, the City Dionysia, in 486 b.c., with a second festival, the Lenaea, featuring comedies, established in 442 b.c.

Aristotle, in the *Poetics*, established the accepted contrast between tragedy and comedy by the latter's depiction of less exalted characters and situations. The method and outcome of comedy are the opposite of tragedy in which pity and fear are evoked by a telling dramatization of a hero's exposed limitations. In comedy laughter is the desired outcome, derived from the breaking of boundaries, from the

shattering of illusions, and an emotionally satisfying transcendence over the ordinary or the preordained. Tragedy moves from order to disorder and death; comedy from disorder to a renewed stability, marked by obstacles overcome and a restored harmony in the repaired breach from the opposing forces that condemn the tragic hero. Different from tragedy's familiar mythological subjects involving heroes who are paragons, Attic comedy was original and invented, making use of both the fantastical and the details of ordinary life, with characters as flawed and as recognizable as anyone in the audience. If tragedy aspired to the timeless and universal, Greek Old Comedy exploited the local, reflecting specific controversies in the political, cultural, literary, and intellectual issues of the day. Aristophanes' comedies also make use of actual figures, such as Socrates, Euripides, Aeschylus, and the Athenian political leader Cleon. During a performance of the *Clouds*, it is said, Socrates stood up in the audience to show how well done his likeness was on the mask of the actor who played him. Aristophanes' targets include such revered institutions as Athenian democracy and the Athenian jury system that are exposed as falling comically short of the ideal. Euripides is ridiculed in several of Aristophanes' plays, making Aristophanes in a sense the original dramatic critic. Almost all of Aristophanes' surviving plays were produced during the Peloponnesian War, which the playwright daringly condemns as unjust and morally reprehensible. There is perhaps no better example of Aristophanes' topicality, as well as Athenian toleration of dissent and self-assessment, than Aristophanes' comic attack on war and its conduct as it is being waged. In the *Acharnians* (425), the earliest extant comedy, Dicaeopolis makes a separate peace with the Spartans and must get the better of a hard-line general whose patriotism is exposed as a destructive fraud. In *Peace* (421) the Goddess of Peace must be rescued from the pit in which she is imprisoned by Trygaeus, who ascends to heaven on a dung beetle. *Lysistrata* presents the provocative fantasy that war could be stopped by the women through denying sex to the combatants until peace is secured.

Aristophanes mounts his case in *Lysistrata* through paradox and inversion. It is the only extant ancient Greek comedy in which women take center stage and control the action. Lysistrata (whose name means "disbander of armies") conceives the so-called happy idea central to Old Comedy that women can end the madness of war and restore common sense and sanity, jeopardized by male dominance of public affairs, by withholding women's most powerful weapon: sexuality. As critic A. M. Bowie has observed, "*Lysistrata* portrays the temporary imposition of a gynaeocracy on the city of Athens." As the play opens Lysistrata summons females from across Greece to present her radical notion. Women simply convening an assembly before the sacred gates of the Acropolis would have struck Aristophanes' first audience as unthinkable and as an outrageous violation of accepted standards. Confined to domestic duties in their homes, Athenian women had no power and no place in the public sphere. Conspiring to take charge of the

patriarchal Athenian society asserts the play's topsy-turviness that escalates into a series of comic reversals and witty ironies. To save the state its subservient dependents must take control of it. To make peace the women must go to war. There will be a battle of the sexes in which their opponents are their own husbands. Women's sexual power is to be asserted by withholding sex; a normal, peaceful sexual life is to be reclaimed by foregoing it. To restore domestic tranquillity gender roles are reversed, with women becoming more masculine and men reduced to helpless dependence on their newly empowered mates. The men will be vanquished by their own virility to make peace and resume enjoying its blessings. Aristophanes' clever, dizzying inversions set in motion a delightful series of bawdy comic situations, an apparently inexhaustible stream of double entendres in which the erotic principle seems to infect every comment and aspect of Athenian life, outrageous sight gags of the males sporting near-crippling erections, as well as the playwright's many profound and serious points about the true cost of war and the true value of peace.

To start her rebellion Lysistrata must first get her sisters to assemble on time and then convince them to abstain from sex themselves. This proves to be no mean feat, and Aristophanes' play opens with confirmation of comic female stereotypes in the women's triviality, deceitfulness, drunkenness, and licentiousness. For Lysistrata's scheme (and Aristophanes' comedy) to work the physical realities of women and men's lives must be acknowledged. Sexual desire and the carnal must be shown as far stronger and far more important than political power or other abstract virtues. Erotic passion must trump the rational, and the life force must be shown superior to any death wish for conquest or vengeance in order to break war's hold on Greece that has subverted what is most central in human life. As Aristophanes makes clear, the women assembled are no more virtuous paragons of principles than their mates but are the first to recognize in their appetites and passions what truly matters. Wittingly Aristophanes shows that women's gender liabilities—confinement to the domestic and their sexual preoccupations—are actually strengths and worth protecting, and Lysistrata manages to convince Athenian and Spartan women alike to just say no, as the play's rambunctious assault on dignity, propriety, and pretension commences.

Reflecting the gender discord that ensues, the play's chorus is divided into sparring, antiphonal contingents of old men and women who enact a version of the frustrated sexual act as the men try to storm the barred gates of the Acropolis held by the women with battering rams and flaming torches. The women, having taken control of the city's treasury as the younger women have kept their physical treasures from their husbands, extinguish the assault and cool the ardor of their attackers by throwing water on them. An Athenian magistrate arrives to reassert order, and his verbal combat with Lysistrata over the role and responsibilities of women to the state forms the core debate in the play. He asserts that state affairs

and the conduct of war are no business of women, to which Lysistrata responds with an extended comparison between her plan for saving Greece and the domestic art of weaving. The Magistrate replies: "It takes a woman to reduce state questions to a matter of carding and weaving." Lysistrata powerfully responds to his charge of women's irrelevance by pointedly observing that women have the most to lose from a mismanaged state that leaves them widowed and unmarried. "Instead of the love that every woman needs," Lysistrata states, "we have only our single bed, where we can dream of our husbands off with the army." For maidens there is an urgency that war disrupts. A bald and toothless man can still find a mate, but, as Lysistrata points out, "A woman's beauty is gone with the first gray hair," and an aging woman will wait in vain for a husband.

Having successfully turned away a physical and verbal male assault, Lysistrata and her rebellion must next deal with internal dissension as the women begin to waver, inventing elaborate ruses to return home for sex. Lysistrata is only able to steel the women's resolve by the promise of an oracle that Zeus will "set the lower higher." The strategy of delaying the gratification of the men is comically played out as the husband Cinesias, "simply bulging with love," tries to convince his wife Myrrhine to gratify the love that is "killing me." Myrrhine appears to comply but agonizingly delays in successive searches for a bed, mattress, pillow, coverlet, and perfume before leaving Cinesias cold after her failures to commit to the desired treaty. An embassy of erect Spartans arrive, and under the spell of an enormous statue of a naked woman representing reconciliation, they agree to peace terms with the Athenians. Lysistrata is allowed a final and moving speech on behalf of a common Greek heritage and past common cause that should cancel current differences before feasting and dancing conclude the play. The gender divide is repaired; the chorus joins in harmony, and the values of hearth and home and the life force have been reestablished as central under the temporary, comic management of the women. Aristophanes' dramatization of the principle "Make Love, Not War" pushes to a delightfully preposterous extreme certain absurdities in gender relationships and civic affairs to reach more basic truths in the power of life over death and love over hate.

TROJAN WOMEN (415 b.c.) by Euripides

The play . . . ends in total nihilism. What the Greeks felt as a subtle contradiction, the contradiction of the world in which they had to live, appears to us who see the play from the outside as a negation, a refusal. . . . Hecuba's final despair . . . answers the terrible words of Poseidon. The gods are killed with the men, and that common death is the lesson of the tragedy.

—Jean-Paul Sartre, “Why the *Trojan Women*?” Introduction to Sartre’s adaptation of the *Trojan Women*

Troades (Trojan Women) is one of the most harrowing plays ever staged, perhaps the darkest drama in the ancient Greek canon, and a consensus choice as one of the greatest antiwar plays ever written. Exploring the annihilating consequences of war as well as key existential truths, the play dramatizes the aftermath of the fall of Troy to the Greeks. Following the successful stratagem of the Trojan Horse, after a 10-year siege, Troy has been taken, sacked, and is being set aflame as the Greeks prepare to return home. The city’s male inhabitants have all been massacred, and the women of Troy await their fate, to be distributed as booty to their new Greek masters. The history of a once grand kingdom has ended in catastrophe. Perhaps no other of Euripides’ plays better illustrates the contention that he is the most modern of the classical dramatists, our contemporary in his apocalyptic, nihilistic vision. The *Trojan Women* remains an unsettling work of complex meanings and unconventional methods. In the play Euripides violates virtually every dictum of Aristotelian tragedy while establishing an alternative, revolutionary dramatic strategy whose impact can be detected in later expressionistic and symbolic drama, in the theater of cruelty and absurdist modern drama.

Critic E. M. Blaiklock has described Euripides as “the most historically significant of Greek dramatists,” whose innovations helped define persistent dramatic traditions. By adapting standard mythic subjects so freely and radically Euripides brought a new kind of invention, of both plot and character, into drama. By extending the range of drama from paragons and exceptional circumstances to ordinary and complex characters in recognizable situations, Euripides enhanced dramatic realism and psychological truthfulness. Euripides would establish a precedent for Shakespearean and later tragicomedy by blurring the distinction between comedy and tragedy. Finally, in the *Trojan Women* especially, Euripides decenters his play from a focus on a single protagonist—the usual focus of a tragedy’s action—to multiple centers of interest, with action virtually halted to display a central tragic situation, unified by theme and symbol. The *Trojan Women* is perhaps the most extreme example of Euripides’ “flaunting of our conception of dramatic form,” in the words of critic H. D. F. Kitto. In the *Trojan Women* the prescribed plot elements admired and advised by Aristotle are eliminated. The entire play is aftermath; Troy has fallen, and the time for dramatic action is essentially over. Euripides’ focus shifts to what critic Jasper Griffin has called a “mournful pageant of suffering.” There is neither suspense nor surprises, neither reversal of fortune nor relief by divine or human intercession or mitigation. Instead of the revelation of the tragic destiny of a central hero through a series of arranged crises and conflicts, Euripides relies on a sequence of episodic intensification, of escalating tension and misery to test the limit of endurance for both the play’s characters and audience in revealing the brutality and horror of the human condition. The *Trojan Women* offers a new conception of tragedy with a collective tragic hero, the mainly offstage Greek victors, and a collective tragic victim, the Trojan survivors, who claim primacy. It also employs a radical dramatic structure in which the logic of steadily evolving action is replaced by a deepening awareness and intensification of the play’s central subject of human suffering. Plot, character, and situation are conceived symbolically rather than realistically, orchestrated into a stark and terrifying tragic spectacle.

Ever the iconoclast and violator of consoling illusions, Euripides presents war stripped of any heroism except in suffering and the will to survive under the worst possible circumstances. The *Trojan Women* reverses convention by assigning dignity and compassion to the defeated and inhumanity to the conquerors. If the saying is true that history is written by the victors, Euripides counters by presenting the story of the vanquished. War is displayed devoid of any grandeur and glory as the most destructive and futile of human endeavors, brutalizing and dehumanizing winners and losers alike. Troy, symbolic of civilization itself, is wiped out in an apocalypse of flames and cruelty. Wives, mothers, and sisters are stripped of their identities and human roles, to become the chattel of their new masters, who have violated every revered human bond and source of reverence—home, family, religion, and nation. Ironically, in the background, as consequence

for the Greeks' hubris, is the certain doom that awaits them on their homeward voyage. Beyond its radical challenge to the accepted heroic code of battlefield honor and glory based on enemies vanquished and prizes taken, the *Trojan Women* asked its first Greek audience to sympathize with their mythical archenemies, the Trojans, and to censure the storied accomplishments of their greatest heroes, such as Odysseus, Achilles, and Agamemnon. Moreover, Euripides fills the stage for the first time on such a scale with a predominately female cast—Hecuba, Cassandra, Andromache, Helen, and the chorus of captive Trojan women—whose collective endurance in bondage and insights offer a new definition of heroism. Euripides asks, where is the bottom to human misery? How one copes with utter defeat is Euripides' subject here. No playwright before Euripides had to such a degree explored the psychological and emotional complexity of women on stage, and in the *Trojan Women* their perspective on peace, war, life, and death takes center stage. If it is true, as some have speculated, that only men attended Athenian dramatic performances, the radical challenge Euripides poses in the play is even more obvious as males are asked to reassess central cultural standards from an alternative gender perspective that had traditionally been ignored and devalued.

When the *Trojan Women* was first staged in 415 b.c. the Athenians had been fighting a crippling war with Sparta for 16 years, and there still remained more than a decade before Athens's ultimate defeat in 404. Having written patriotic plays, such as the *Heracleidae* and the *Suppliants* at the early stages of the Peloponnesian War, Euripides, as the war futilely dragged on, increasingly dramatized its costs and consequences in the suffering of the defeated and moral corruption of the victors (in *Hecuba* and the *Trojan Women*), in its irrational causes (*Helen*), and in its destructiveness and wasteful sacrifice (in *Andromache*, *Iphigenia in Tauris*, and *Iphigenia in Aulis*). Beyond detecting disillusionment over the course of the Peloponnesian War some scholars have identified an even more immediate context for the *Trojan Women* in Euripides' response to Athens's siege and destruction in 414 b.c. of the neutral island state of Melos in which Athenians slaughtered all the men and enslaved the women and children. Thucydides would regard the event as a tipping point in the moral decline of Athens. Such an ignominious use of Athenian might must have contributed to Euripides' skepticism about the concept of a just and ennobling war, and he subversively refracts the circumstances of the recent victims of Athens's brute force to the mythical nemeses of the Greeks, the Trojans, and the Greeks' most celebrated military triumph.

The *Trojan Women* opens with a prologue by the god Poseidon, who surveys the ruin of the city that he had helped to build. "Nothing remains for me," he declares, "but to abandon my shrines and altars in this city . . . bitter enemies of Troy have prevailed." The Greeks have triumphed in large measure because of the divine

assistance they have received from the goddess Athena, who joins Poseidon and shocks him with her request for his assistance in punishing the Greeks on their homeward voyage. Angered that the virgin priestess of Apollo, Cassandra, has been dragged by Ajax from Athena's altar and violated, the goddess now wants to punish the Greeks for their transgressions and "fill their journey home with pain." Poseidon readily agrees, delivering a final judgment on the Greeks: "Blind is the man who sacks cities with temples and tombs . . . himself so soon to die." The two gods depart having established the play's situation, sympathy for the Trojans, and central irony that the Greeks' triumph offends the gods and their well-known disastrous homecomings will result. Although Poseidon and Athena ally to punish the Greeks' offenses, they offer neither aid nor comfort to the prostrate figure of Hecuba, queen of Troy, below them, or the other Trojan victims. Hecuba has witnessed the death of her husband and two sons, Hector and Paris, and has fallen further, from queen to slave, than any other Trojan woman. She will serve as the human reference point for the drama, onstage from beginning to end, and will reflect the escalating suffering that surrounds her. Described by Poseidon as the "queen of grief," Hecuba, the classical archetype for tragic misfortune, is recalled by Hamlet as he measures the misery of one of the players: "What's he to Hecuba, or she to him, / That he should weep?" Hecuba invites the chorus of Trojan women captives to join her in a lament for their past lives while summoning their courage and forbearance to accept their fate. The play begins, therefore, with the proud assertion of Hecuba's fortitude, and it will proceed by successive, escalating assaults on her resolve and her conception of the limits of human despair.

A Greek herald, Talthibius, enters to carry out the order of distributing the Trojan captives to their new masters. One of the play's most disturbing and modern touches is keeping the agents of the play's agony offstage, with their decisions delivered by one who is only following orders. Hecuba's daughter, Cassandra, is to be the concubine of Agamemnon; her sister Polyxena is "to serve at Achilles' tomb." We know, through Poseidon, that Polyxena has already been sacrificed, news that will be later revealed to Hecuba by her daughter-in-law Andromache, who has been given to the son of her husband's slayer, Achilles' son Neoptolemus. Hecuba herself is to be the prize of Odysseus, who conceived the wooden horse and therefore is the man most responsible for Hecuba's fall from power and most hateful to her. Cassandra enters with a bridal torch in hand, singing to Hymen, the goddess of marriage, in a terrible parody of the marital rites that here links marriage and murder. As a seer fated not to be believed, Cassandra breaks her mother's heart in her presumed madness in joyfully celebrating her enslavement and death, though she actually reveals sinister truths. As Agamemnon's concubine she will become the agent of his and her own death and the destruction of his entire family. The victims here, she asserts, are not the Trojans, whose sacrifice in defense of family and home is noble, but the Greeks, and Cassandra's ultimate consolation is her awful prediction of mutually assured

destruction. “Let us get on with it,” she declares on exiting to her fate. “I am a bride—but a bride of death.”

Cassandra’s joyful embrace of her own destruction crushes Hecuba. She is revived by the thought that she still has another daughter left to her. That consolation is removed with the arrival of her daughter-in-law Andromache with her grandson Astyanax, amid Hector’s possessions as trophies of war. Andromache tells Hecuba of Polyxena’s death but argues that dying is better than living as Andromache must, as the most loyal of wives who must now commit the ultimate disloyalty to her husband’s memory by giving herself to another. Hecuba counsels survival, urging Andromache to yield to the forces beyond her control in order to raise her son “to be a hero of Troy once again.” This glimmering hope in Troy’s future through Astyanax is extinguished as Talthybius returns to announce that the Greeks, convinced by Hecuba’s new master Odysseus, have decided that the child must be killed, thrown from the city walls, thereby ending the Trojan royal line. “This scene,” critic Gilbert Murray has stated, “with the parting between Andromache and the child which follows, seems to me perhaps the most absolutely heart-rending in all the tragic literature of the world. After rising from it one understands Aristotle’s judgment of Euripides as ‘the most tragic of the poets.’” Andromache is made to learn what is worse than disloyalty to a dead husband: the fate of her child whom she cannot protect. Her grandmother’s response is the stark, despairing realization: “There is nothing now. No justice.”

However, Hecuba is roused for a final assertion to gain some justification for the pain and suffering endured by her, her family, and her kingdom as Helen is brought onstage for a reckoning. Invoked frequently up to this point as the cause of the Trojan’s misery, Helen is tried, with Hecuba serving as the prosecutor. In the words of critic Eric A. Havelock, Euripides here succeeds in carrying “disillusionment one stage further” to expose “the sheer vacuity of normal moral pretensions.” If someone is to blame, if there is a consequence and responsibility for human actions, Hecuba’s prosecution suggests the existence of some moral order and justice in the world. Helen’s “acquittal” will deal Hecuba a final, ultimate blow to the justification for the queen’s and Troy’s suffering. Menelaus has resolved to take Helen home to be killed there in punishment for the deaths her infidelity has caused. Hecuba tries to convince him to bring Helen to justice immediately in Troy. Helen defends herself by evading her complicity and blaming everyone from Aphrodite to Paris and Hecuba herself for her actions in a bravado performance of self-serving equivocation. Hecuba fails to rouse Menelaus to immediate punishment, and Helen departs, allowing her the opportunity to reverse her husband’s death sentence through her wiles and sexual attractions. Ironically the one woman who gains a happy future in Euripides’ play is the woman most responsible for the war in the first place. Hecuba is left realizing that Helen has triumphed and that there is no moral order in the universe.

The *Trojan Women* ends with a final heartbreak for Hecuba as the lifeless, broken body of Astyanax is carried in on Hector's shield. Hecuba delivers a concluding lament, judged by many the most moving speech Euripides ever wrote. Like Lear cradling the dead Cordelia, Hecuba has been taken from worse to worst, and the audience is presented with an ultimate nullity of human hopes and illusions that Hecuba bitterly summarizes as the final burning of Troy commences and the captives depart:

The man who believes his Fortune is secure is blind. Fortune knows no reason. She is mad, giving and taking at will. No one controls one's own happiness.

AMPHITRYON (c. 186 b.c.) by Plautus

The Amphitruo is a resoundingly comic and healthy response to man's dilemma in the face of the caprices of the gods. Plautus takes the dark despair of the Bacchae and converts it into a celebration of the powers of comic theatre. . . . The object of this joyous celebration is the traditional Roman theater itself, with its adultery plots, clever slaves, and mass confusion. Plautus dethrones Dionysos and puts in his place the benevolent genius of comedy.

—Niall W. Slater, “*Amphitruo, Bacchae, and Metatheatre*,” in *Oxford Readings in Menander, Plautus, and Terence*

Amphitryon (*Amphitruo* in Latin) is the masterwork of the Roman dramatist Plautus, who has been hailed as the father of European comedy and farce. In this exuberantly bawdy, topsy-turvy tale of mistaken identity and intrigue, Jupiter dupes the Theban general Amphitryon by impersonating him to bed Amphitryon's wife, Alcmena, while Mercury complicates matters by assuming the likeness of Amphitryon's slave, Sosia. The story of Amphitryon and Alcmena stands behind only that of Oedipus and Medea as the most popular classical dramatic subjects, and Plautus's version is the only extant example of mythological travesty in Roman comedy. The play has been reworked and adapted in subsequent eras, by Molière, John Dryden, and Heinrich von Kleist, and in modern versions by Jean Giraudoux (*Amphitryon* 38, 1929) and by Harold Pinter (*The Lovers*, 1963). Even though William Shakespeare relied mainly on Plautus's *Twin Menaechmi* (the first ancient play to be translated into a modern European language and put on stage in Italy in 1486) for *The Comedy of Errors*, he had the precedent in *Amphitryon* for identical twin servants and the exclusion of Antipholus from his own house while his twin was inside. Plautus's drama has served as a storehouse of comic effects—of clever word-play and farcical situations—and one of the most influential of all comedies that helped to establish Plautus as a contentious but unavoidable dramatist. “Of all the Greek and Roman playwrights,” classicist Erich Segal has asserted, “Titus Maccius Plautus is the least admired and the most imitated. ‘Serious’ scholars find him insignificant, while serious writers find him

indispensable.” The first known professional playwright, Plautus left the largest corpus of classical dramatic works (20 extant complete plays), and he is, along with Terence, the principal source for our understanding of the development of drama from the Attic to the Roman stage and from classical to modern European theater.

Little is certain beyond legend regarding Plautus’s life and career. Believed to have been born in the Umbrian city of Sarsina c. 254 b.c., Plautus is said to have gained a fortune in connection with the theater, possibly as an actor, which he subsequently lost on a failed mercantile venture. Tradition has it that he was then forced to subsist as a worker in a flour mill. During this time, at the age of 50, he wrote his first surviving comedies. He would amass a second fortune from the stage and become the most popular and successful of all Roman playwrights, with as many as 130 plays attributed to him, including *The Pot of Gold*, *The Captives*, *The Braggart Warrior*, and *Pseudolus*. Plautus’s success in pleasing a diverse (and often unsophisticated) popular audience with rollicking farce and bawdy language drew the ire of such literary custodians as Horace, who criticized the playwright for breaking all the rules of proper dramatic construction and decorum to please and to profit. Subsequent critics have echoed Horace’s high-minded condescension regarding Plautus’s pandering to the vulgar demands of his audience. Plautus is intriguing and significant, however, as the first dramatist to depend solely on his audience’s approval for economic survival. His works therefore provide instructive examples of popular Roman entertainment, showing how, like Shakespeare in a similar era of commercial theater, a dramatist could cater to, modify, and transform popular taste. Plautus is best appreciated as a dramatic pioneer who in gratifying his audience’s tastes discovered many of the essential methods, situations, and characters of comic drama that have persisted for more than two millennia. After Plautus died in 184 b.c., Cicero is said to have memorialized him with these words: “After Plautus has met his death, Comedy goes into mourning, the theater is deserted; then Laughter, Sport and Jest, and Immeasurable Measures with one accord have burst into tears.”

To understand *Amphitryon* and Plautus’s dramatic achievement it is instructive to consider the drama that he inherited. Tradition dates the beginning of Roman drama to 240 b.c. when a Greek from Tarentum, a Greek settlement in southern Italy, named Livius Andronicus first presented Latin translations of Greek plays at the Ludi Romani, the annual festival in Rome of games and entertainments. If Livius Andronicus is credited with introducing the first “plays with plots” to a Roman audience and the first to expose Romans to the Greek dramatic tradition, preliterate, indigenous dramatic forms had previously flourished in Italy. Horace traced the origin of Roman theater back to the Etruscan Fescennine songs—improvised satirical and bawdy choral performances of masked singers at harvest and wedding celebrations—associated with the Etruscan city of Fescennium. Livy

pointed to another Etruscan source in the 364 b.c. arrival at Rome of Etruscan musical and dancing performers. Improvised dialogue was subsequently added to these performances, first by amateurs and later by professionals, and according to Livy, the Romans derived their term for actors (*histriones*) from the Etruscan word *ister* for player, affirming an Etruscan basis for Roman drama. As adapted by the Romans, Livy called these early theatrical entertainments *saturna*, or medleys of song, dance, and dialogue. Another native source for Roman drama is the so-called *fabula Atellana*. Named for the town in Campania where they are thought to have originated, these were short farces performed by masked actors representing, as in the commedia dell'arte, stock characters such as the clown Maccus (from whom Plautus's middle name may have derived), the glutton or braggart Bucco, the gullible old man Pappus, and the trickster Dossennus. The Roman drama that Plautus inherited, therefore, was an amalgam of Greek New Comedy models and indigenous farcical, satirical, musical, dance, and bawdy elements.

Roman plays, like the Greek's, were performed in connection with festivals several times a year but not, like the Athenian drama competitions, as the centerpiece of a celebration. Roman stage plays instead had to compete with other forms of popular entertainment, including athletic competitions, gladiatorial fights, chariot races, and animal baiting for audience share. Roman playgoers lacked the sophisticated appreciation of dramatic tradition acquired by the Greeks and restively demanded diversion and entertainment over edification or challenge to immediate gratification. There were no permanent theaters in Rome before 55 b.c., so plays were performed on temporary wooden stages made to resemble a city street. Most actors were slaves owned by a theatrical company's manager or freedmen of notoriously low esteem who could be beaten for a bad performance, as Mercury reminds the audience in the prologue to *Amphytrion*. Something of the knockabout, carnival quality of Roman theater is captured in the prologue to Plautus's *The Carthaginian* in which the audience is instructed in proper decorum:

Let no worn-out harlot sit in front of the stage, nor the magistrate or his rods make a sound, nor the usher roam about in front of people or show anyone to a seat while the actor is on the stage. Those who have had a long leisurely nap at home should now cheerfully stand, or at least refrain from sleeping. Keep slaves from occupying the seats, that there will be room for free men, or let them pay money for their freedom. . . . And let the nurses keep tiny children at home and not bring them to see the play, lest the nurses themselves get thirsty and the children die of hunger or cry for food like young goats. Let matrons view the play in silence, laugh in silence, refrain from tinkling tones of chatter; they should take home their gossip, so as not to annoy their husbands both here and at home.

And, now, as to what concerns the directors of the games, no actor should receive the prize unjustly, nor should any be driven out through favoritism so that

inferior actors are preferred to the good ones. And there's this point, too, which I had almost forgotten: while the show is going on, lackeys, make an attack on the bakery; rush in now while there is an opportunity, while the tarts are hot.

Plautus conjures a theater that is a vital, unruly, raucous meeting place for all comers—freedman and slave alike—who were easily distracted, hard to please, easy to displease, and a challenge for the dramatist to subdue and master.

All of Plautus's comedies are believed to be adaptations of lost Greek New Comedy originals, begging the question of Plautus's innovations and genius. Plautus's craftsmanship and originality were, however, decisively confirmed with the discovery in 1958 of the first complete text of a comedy by Menander, *Dyskolos* (*The Grouch*), and in 1969 of 42 lines from Menander's *Dis Exapaton* (*The Double Dealer*), a play that Plautus adapted as *Bacchides*. Comparison with both Menandrian sources makes it clear that Plautus should be credited with far more genius than just ability as a translator. Plautus demonstrates his gifts as a comic craftsman who transformed his subdued, decorous, and somewhat threadbare New Comedy sources into a robust and rollicking situational comedy of ingenious invention and clever wordplay. He eliminated the chorus used in Greek comedies and thereby abandoned Attic drama's episodic division between dialogue and song, shifting the force of his dramas to nonstop action. Plautus also integrated the musical elements associated with the chorus throughout his plays. It is believed that about two-thirds of each of Plautus's works were accompanied by music, causing Plautine drama to resemble modern musical comedy with some scenes spoken and others sung to musical accompaniment. Like Greek New Comedy, Plautus's comedies steer away from political and social issues to concentrate on everyday, domestic situations surcharged with sufficient bawdiness and slapstick to hold the widest possible audience.

Amphitryon shows Plautus's comic inventiveness and stagecraft at his innovative and daring best. If Plautine comedy is ruled by comic misunderstandings and fueled by mistaken identities, misunderstood motives, and deliberate deceptions, all three are ingeniously featured in Jupiter's duping of Amphitryon and Alcmena. All of Plautus's comedies begin with a prologue to clarify the background of the dramatic action, identify the performers, and, in a sense, let the audience in on the jokes to come. The prologue of *Amphitryon* is delivered by Jupiter's son, Mercury, who, taking the form of Sosia, Amphitryon's slave, prepares the audience for the play's comic inversions. Mercury makes clear that the greatest of the gods, Jupiter, will here take the part of an actor in a play of his own devising. Impersonating Amphitryon, returning after an absence on the battlefield, Jupiter will enjoy a "reunion" with the Theban general's wife, Alcmena. The presence of gods on stage as an adulterer is far from a laughing matter, and Mercury conjures a new hybrid dramatic genre to justify both as

subjects for the audience's amusement:

Now first I'll tell you what I come to say; And then explain the plot, which underlies This tragedy; but why contract your brows, When I say tragedy? For I'm a god

And soon can change it; if you like I'll make These selfsame verses be a comedy. Shall I or not? But sure I am a fool, Being a god, and yet not knowing what you wish. Ah, yes! I know your mind; and I will make it

A tragicomedy; for it is not right To make a play where kings and gods do speak All comedy. But since a slave takes part I'll make it for you tragicomedy.

Amphitryon begins then with a cosmic and aesthetic reversal. Gods are usually not shown conspiring to cuckold a valiant general; nor should the potentially tragic themes of the gods' relationship with humankind as well as the revered Roman value of marital chastity be mixed with the practical joke of duping master, mistress, and servant. Subversively, Plautus collides tragedy and comedy and daringly subjects the sacrosanct to unsettling and liberating misrule.

Sosia, whose arrival threatens to interrupt Jupiter's lovemaking, confronts his own likeness in the form of the disguised Mercury. The scene, one of the comic triumphs of the classical stage, has been called by the critic Niall W. Slater, "the *locus classicus* of the Doppelgänger (double) theme," in which Sosia begins to doubt his own identity: "Tell me where I've lost myself. Where was I transformed? Where did I misplace my face?" Sosia retreats in disarray to his master, and Jupiter and Alcmena emerge from their long night of lovemaking. Jupiter exits, propitiating Alcmena for his sudden departure by giving her the golden cup awarded to Amphitryon for his noble war service. With the arrival of the real Amphitryon and Sosia, it is now the master and mistress's turn to be baffled. Alcmena is shocked by her husband's sudden return, and her references to their lovemaking cause Amphitryon to suspect her fidelity. Despite the evidence of the golden cup to substantiate Alcmena's account, Amphitryon continues to doubt his wife and leaves for a witness to substantiate his having spent the past night aboard his ship. Jupiter returns again as Amphitryon and tries to soften Alcmena's anger at her husband's accusations. The frustrated Amphitryon comes back to his home to find his door barred against him, his servant (the disguised Mercury) abusing him, and Jupiter in his own likeness treating the former master with contempt. Escalating humiliation of Amphitryon concludes with the revelation that Alcmena has given birth to two sons, one by Amphitryon, and the other, Hercules, by Jupiter. In a witty use of the *deus ex machina* Jupiter the trickster becomes the cosmic restorer of order, explaining to Amphitryon what has happened and exonerating Alcmena from blame. Amphitryon dutifully accepts the divine will, and domestic peace is restored.

With its freewheeling fantasy, its breaking of dramatic illusion with direct addresses to the audience, and its irreverent mixing of the sacred and profane, *Amphitryon* recalls Aristophanes rather than the more staid, domestic New Comedy. Synthesizing both Old and New Comedy elements, challenging decorum, and extending comic boundaries, *Amphitryon* cleverly displays the resources of both the comedy of manners and the absurdist, self-reflexive modern dramas of Luigi Pirandello, Bertolt Brecht, Samuel Beckett, and others, while more than justifying a description of its author as a progenitor of Western comic drama.

THE BROTHERS (160 b.c.) by Terence

With its well-knit plot, lifting the usual farce motifs into a high comedy of character, and with searching analysis of the eternal problem of the education of youth, The Brothers combines intrigue with intellectual interest, and is the most richly stimulating of the Roman comedies.

—Joseph T. Shipley, *Guide to Great Plays*

The two great Roman comic dramatists, Plautus and Terence, provide a study in contrasts, while together they mark out the shape and boundaries of classical comedy that would significantly influence the development of modern European drama. Plautus is the great master of invention, of broad farcical situation and extravagant verbal effects; Terence perfected the comedy of character, putting his more carefully plotted and more restrained humor to the service of a deeper exploration of human nature and actuality. Plautus's comedies are shaped and sustained by his audience's demand to be continually entertained. In his plays, the joke, prank, and pratfall are paramount, and at times Plautus shows an indifference to contradictions and irrelevancies and neglects joining his many comic elements into a unified, coherent whole. Terence, staying closer in tone and texture to the Greek New Comedy originals they both adapted, replaces Plautus's comic improvisations and irrelevancies with concentrated action and a unity of purpose in which all contribute to advancing his plots, shaping his themes, and individualizing his characters. Terence ingeniously ties together multiple story lines and generates his incidents from the nature and plausible motives of his characters. Plautus's characters are rarely more than functional types and convenient passengers for the playwright's wild ride; Terence populates his dramas with individuals whose motives and temperament drive their stories. Plautus's comedies were preferred by Roman audiences, while Terence, whose plays make few concessions to contemporary taste and required closer attention to appreciate his more subtle and sophisticated effects, endured popular failure and required patronage for support in challenging contemporary dramatic conventions. In comparing the achievements of the playwrights noted classical scholar George

E. Duckworth summarizes:

Both worked from the social drama of the New Comedy, Terence in the direction of subtlety and elegance, Plautus toward bustling vivacity and boisterous humour. Both were limited by the forms and conventions of their originals, but both deserve great credit as independent and creative dramatists. Terence remolded the Greek plays so as to reveal his interest in human character and his perfect control of dramatic structure. Plautus transformed the more serious works of the Greeks and produced laugh- able comedies to delight the audiences of his day.

Both playwrights would serve as influential models in the development of European drama. If Plautus assembled a valuable storehouse of comedic elements—plots, character types, and gags—Terence offered subsequent playwrights the example of drama’s potential in harnessing and controlling its many elements in aid of drama as a truth telling instrument.

Regarded as one of the premier Latin stylists of the second century b.c., Terence was admired and his work studied throughout the Middle Ages, serving as an important bridge figure spanning the period between classical drama and the beginning of drama in the Renaissance. In the 10th century the Saxon nun Hrotsvitha composed pious comedies in imitation of the manner of Terence, risking, as she declares in the preface to her plays, “being corrupted by the wickedness of the matter.” During the 16th century Terence’s works served as models for teaching Latin to schoolboys, and there were more than 446 complete editions of his plays available before 1600. Niccolò Machiavelli translated Terence’s *Andria* in 1517; Molière would adapt two of Terence’s plays (*The School for Husbands* is based on *The Brothers*; *The Trickeries of Scapin*, on *Phormio*); William Congreve would call Terence “the most correct writer in the world.” “What man of letters has not read his Terence more than once and does not know him almost by heart?” asked the French critic Denis Diderot. “Who has not been struck by the truth of his characters and the elegance of his diction?” Diderot would go on to assert, “Young poets, alternately turn the pages of Molière and of Terence. Learn from one to draw, from the other to paint.” Oscar Wilde’s doubling plot in *The Importance of Being Earnest* as well as George Bernard Shaw’s conjoining the structure of the well-made play with the exploration of social problems both show more than a trace of Terence’s abiding influence.

Publius Terentius Afer, Anglicized as Terence, is believed to have been born in Carthage around 195 b.c. and brought to Rome as the slave of the Roman senator Terentius Lucanus. Educated and eventually freed by his master, Terence formed a friendship with the young Roman noble Publius Cornelius Scipio Aemilianus and became a member of his literary and philosophical group known as the Scipionic Circle, united by a shared admiration of Greek art, literature, and culture.

Terence's more faithful adaptation of Greek New Comedy models compared to Plautus's would have been encouraged by Scipio and others who helped finance productions of his plays and were alleged as Terence's collaborators. In the prologue to *The Brothers* Terence neither admits nor rejects such assistance but regards the charge "as his greatest merit, that he has it in his power to please those, with whom you, and the whole people of Rome, are so much pleased." His first play is said to have been initially read to the aging comic master Caecilius for his approval. Dressed in tatters and relegated to a lowly stool as the dinner entertainment, the young dramatist made such a favorable impression after the first few lines that he was invited to join the company at table. Terence's six surviving plays—*Andria*, *The Self-Tormentor*, *The Eunuch*, *Phormio*, *The Mother-in-Law*, and *The Brothers*— were produced between the years 166 and 160 b.c. Terence's struggle for audience approval is best captured in the prologue of *The Mother-in-Law*, in which the play's leading actor recounts the play's multiple failures with the restive and easily distracted Roman theater audience:

On the first occasion when I began to act it, the great renown of some boxers (expectation of a tight-rope walker was thrown in), friends getting together, a clatter of conversation, women's penetrating voices, made me leave the theater all too soon. . . . I brought it on again: the first act was liked, and then there came a rumor that gladiators were on the program; the people came flocking in, rioting, and shouting, fighting for places: when that happened, I could not keep *my* place.

After staging *The Brothers* Terence left Rome for a tour of Greece. There he collected additional plays by Menander, but his adaptations were apparently lost in a shipwreck. The playwright either perished with them on his return voyage or died of an illness in Greece in 159 b.c.

The Brothers demonstrates the innovations that characterize all of Terence's works as well as the exceptional characteristics that justify it being regarded as his masterpiece. Based on a play by Menander (*Adelphoi*), as are three others of Terence's six plays (the other two are by Menander's disciple, Apollodorus), *The Brothers* borrows a situation (Aeschinus's abduction of a slave girl) from a play of Diphilus, which had previously been presented by Plautus. The borrowing and modification of his sources demonstrate Terence's characteristic fleshing out of the often thin New Comedy plots with multiple storylines from different sources, producing the most intricately plotted of all surviving ancient drama. *The Brothers* combines the two most common situations in Greek New Comedy—a young man who needs money for his mistress and a young man who conceals his involvement with a poor but respectable girl. The young men, Aeschinus and Ctesipho, are the natural sons of the authoritarian Demea, whose more easygoing brother Micio is entrusted with the raising of Aeschinus. The play, therefore, juggles the affairs of two sets of brothers and multiple contrasts for the father-son

theme, the standard topic of New Comedy. Terence, however, innovatively shifts emphasis from the young lovers to the contrasted attitudes and values of the older brothers who try to bring up the young men in their image. The standard New Comedy love intrigue is thereby in *The Brothers* put to a larger serious purpose of testing and evaluating contrasting philosophies of upbringing and parental authority. As critic M. S. Dimsdale points out, the play's interest "is educational and ethical as much as dramatic." *The Brothers* can therefore be regarded as one of the earliest social problem comedies.

The Brothers, like all of Terence's plays, opens with a prologue, the handling of which again underscores the playwright's originality and challenge to audience expectations. It was customary for the prologues of comic dramas to alert the audience to the characters and situations to come. Terence, however, rejecting the expository prologue, chooses to deal not with the play's content but with criticisms of his works, becoming in effect the first playwright to offer a critique and justification of his intentions at the play's outset. The prologue to *The Brothers*, while raising and dismissing the allegation by "malicious critics" of undue influence from Terence's influential patrons, counters a charge of theft for importing the incident of the slave girl's abduction from another, non-Menandrian source. Terence argues against a slavish adherence to sources with the proof of the effectiveness of his modifications in the performance. "As to what remains," the prologue concludes, "do not expect now to hear from me the subject of the play; the two old men, who come on first, will partly explain it, and the rest will gradually appear in representation." Terence makes clear that he intends to develop his characters and situations internally. Without foreknowledge of the play's circumstances and outcome Terence's audience must be alert to an unfolding drama in which suspense and surprise is increased. Once the play commences the actors resist the repeated device employed by Plautus of direct address to the audience, reinforcing a heightened dramatic realism.

In the play's opening monologue Micio establishes the fundamental contrast of *The Brothers* in his and his brother's opposed parental philosophy. Demea interrupts Micio's complacent reflections with the news that Micio's charge, Aeschinus, has broken into another's house, forcibly carried off a slave girl, and beaten her master, the pimp and slave dealer Sannio. Demea uses Aeschinus's scandalous behavior to criticize Micio's parental laxity and to contrast Micio's rearing of the evidently wild libertine Aeschinus with his own strict regime that has produced Ctesipho, the very model of a thrifty and assiduous young man. While Micio has encouraged openness and liberality with his charge to achieve right action through choice rather than fear of punishment, Demea favors intimidation and restraint. Aeschinus has actually abducted the girl that Ctesipho has secretly fallen in love with but cannot afford to buy, having agreed to procure her for his brother to shield Ctesipho from Demea's expected censure. Terence

takes great pains in these early scenes to individualize both pairs of brothers through contrast: the tolerant Micio versus the pompous authoritarian Demea; the self-reliant, decisive Aeschinus with the timid Ctesipho. Terence designs his plot to monitor their reactions and to reveal their temperaments and values under the pressure of adversity.

News of the abduction reaches the poor Athenian widow Sostrata and her daughter Pamphilia, who is about to be delivered of Aeschinus's child. Aeschinus has concealed his liaison with Pamphilia from Micio, and therefore, both sons have kept their affairs from their fathers. Neither educational philosophy, indulgence nor restraint, has produced the desired outcome of honest, trustworthy sons, and both Micio and Demea are left ignorant of what their sons are truly like. Demea, while searching for Ctesipho, whom he has learned was involved in the abduction, discovers from a kinsman of Sostrata Aeschinus's apparent desertion of Pamphilia and sets out to deliver this crushing news to Micio. Meanwhile, Micio, having gained the truth regarding the abduction and the relationship between Aeschinus and Pamphilia goes to Sostrata's house to explain everything. Encountering Aeschinus on the same mission Micio tests the moral worth of his ward and Aeschinus's true feeling for Pamphilia by pretending to represent another suitor for Pamphilia's hand. Aeschinus's agony at the prospect of losing the woman he loves confirms that he had no intention of abandoning Pamphilia, and Micio agrees to the match.

Demea's revelations about Ctesipho and the impact on his parental philosophy close the play and establish an ongoing critical debate over Terence's handling of his plot and thematic intention. Finally learning that his iron-fisted rule has turned Ctesipho into a role-playing sneak, Demea is eventually persuaded by Micio that his severe regime has forced his son to disguise his true feelings and identity from his stern father. Urged to try tolerance and generosity, Demea resolves on a change of heart in a monologue reviewing his life that neatly parallels Micio's opening monologue. "Come, come now," he convinces himself, "let me see whether I can speak gently or behave kindly, since my brother challenges me to do so." The play ends, however, not with Demea's acceptance of Ctesipho's foibles and Micio's superior philosophy but with Demea's asserting his change of heart by urging Micio to practice what he preaches and by forcing him into more and more absurd concessions to Aeschinus's wishes, even to the point of marrying Sostrata. Demea's "hasty fit of prodigality" at his brother's expense is finally revealed as Demea's testing of the limits of Micio's permissiveness. "Your passing for an easy agreeable man is not genuine," Demea tells Micio, "or founded on equity and good sense, but is due to your overlooking things, your indulgence, and giving them whatever they want." Instead of fully endorsing Micio's lenient philosophy, the play ends at the moderate mean between overindulgence and authoritarian strictness.

Demea's transformation and the humiliation of Micio has been called by critic J. W. Duff "the drollest thing in Terence," and by the classical scholar Gilbert Norwood, "the legitimate fruit of the whole play, the perfectly sound result of that collision between Micio and Demea which has created and sustained the whole wonderful drama." Others, including Diderot, Gotthold Lessing, and Goethe, have been troubled and disappointed by the play's conclusion, seeing in Demea's turnaround the sacrifice of a character's plausibility and in his testing of Micio Terence's desire for a curtain lowering dramatic reversal at the expense of the play's previously earned ethical values. What matters most in evaluating the conclusion of *The Brothers* may be the degree to which Terence complicates the simpler moral conclusion that Micio's openness and generosity are preferred to Demea's restraint. Both elements—trust and discipline—are valuable in childrearing, and Terence's play makes it clear that either in extreme or without the other produces the complications that *The Brothers* enact. Moreover the issue of Demea's change of heart, as measured by a criterion of plausibility, suggests a new standard of truthfulness that Terence helped establish in drama.

EVERYMAN (c. 1500) by Anonymous

The great vice of English drama from Kyd to Galsworthy has been its aim of realism was unlimited. In one play, Everyman, and perhaps in that one play only, we have a drama within the limitations of art. . . . It is essential that a work of art should be self-consistent, that an artist should consciously or unconsciously draw a circle beyond which he does not trespass: on the one hand actual life is always the material, and on the other hand an abstraction from actual life is a necessary condition to the creation of a work of art.

—T. S. Eliot, “Four Elizabethan Dramatists”

For T. S. Eliot the greatness of *Everyman*—the most famous medieval drama in English and the best example of the morality play—rests in its totality of vision, in its joining powerful spiritual and human insights with “ordinary dramatic interest.” “The religious and the dramatic are not merely combined,” Eliot asserts, “but wholly fused. *Everyman* is on the one hand the human soul in extremity, and on the other any man in any dangerous position from which we wonder how he is going to escape.” A dramatized parable or allegory of the final judgment of a soul, *Everyman* achieves its sustaining force by the skill with which it embodies its abstractions in the particular to reach the universal. *Everyman* accordingly serves as a crucial prototype for Western drama and a key link between classical drama and the extraordinary flowering of Renaissance drama.

Possibly an English translation of the Dutch work, *Elckerlijc* (or *Elckerlijck*), published in 1495 and attributed to Petrus Dorlandus, *Everyman* may also have been adapted, along with the Dutch play, from an earlier, now-lost common source. There are no records of actual performances of *Everyman* but printed versions of the play, first appearing in 1508, were popular through the 16th century, even as religious dramas in England became seditious during the Reformation and were banned when Elizabeth I took the throne in 1558. Although the morality play is an unmistakable influence on Elizabethan drama, *Everyman* disappeared from view. It would not be reprinted until 1773.

In 1901, it became the first medieval play to be revived in a modern production. Directed by William Poel, the revised *Everyman* was praised for its “naïve simplicity and uncompromising sincerity,” and the play became the sensation of the London theater season. William Butler Yeats and George Bernard Shaw admitted to being influenced by Poel’s successful production. After seeing it German director Max Reinhardt commissioned Austrian playwright Hugo von

Hofmannsthal to write a German adaptation, *Jedermann*, which was first produced in Berlin in 1911 and, after its debut in 1913 at the Salzburg Cathedral square, would ever after become a featured part of the annual Salzburg Festival. Echoes of *Everyman* are detectable in the existential plays of Jean-Paul Sartre and Samuel Beckett and in Bertolt Brecht's expressionistic dramas, and the play continues to be performed around the world, a testimony to its ability to communicate a powerful vision of the human condition that transcends the era and the doctrines of its origin.

Everyman serves as well as an essential text for illustrating the evolution of drama in western Europe in the period between the classical age and the Renaissance. What is most striking in considering the reemergence of drama in the Middle Ages is the role played by the Christian Church both in halting the classical dramatic tradition and in fostering the conditions for drama's revival. The number of theaters and performances of Roman drama reached a high point in the fourth century before significantly waning. Drama's decline to near extinction was precipitated both by the breakup of the Roman Empire and the burgeoning Christian Church's opposition to an art form with distinctively pagan roots. Theologians regarded drama as an illusionist art allied to idolatry, magic, and devilry. Church authorities actively dissuaded Christians from attending performances, threatening excommunication of anyone who went to the theater rather than to church on holy days. Actors were forbidden the sacraments unless they foreswore their profession. The last recorded dramatic performance in the classical tradition occurred in Rome in 549, and for almost a half-millennia organized theatrical performances effectively disappeared in western Europe, with the remnants of an acting tradition fitfully maintained by traveling entertainers. Ironically the church, which had played such a decisive role in closing the theaters and halting a literary dramatic tradition, returned drama to the similar initial conditions preceding the emergence of formal drama in Greece in the sixth century b.c. As classical comedy and tragedy originated from religious celebrations and rituals, Western drama would be restored in the Middle Ages from a comparable spiritual foundation to serve a parallel religious need. Antiphonal songs, sung responses or dialogues, like the dithyramb in Greek protodrama, were eventually incorporated into celebrations from the liturgical calendar, such as Christmas, Epiphany, and Easter. Short illustrative scenes evolved to vivify worship for a congregation that did not understand Latin, the liturgical language. First performed in the monasteries and churches around the 10th century, with clergymen or choir boys as actors, liturgical dramas would by the 13th century grow far too elaborate—with multiple scenes, actors, and stage effects—for proper staging indoors. Performances moved outdoors with nonclerical actors and secular organizations such as trade guilds producing vernacular mystery plays, scriptural dramas representing scenes from the Old and New Testament; miracle plays, dramatizing incidents from the lives of the saints; and

morality plays, enacting the allegorical spiritual struggle of an average individual. Like Attic Greek plays, medieval drama therefore evolved out of religious observances, was supported by wealthy citizens or organizations to serve both a civic and religious function, and, just as the Greek choral performances in honor of Dionysus were expanded to enact the stories of multiple gods and heroes, medieval drama gradually became more secularized by incorporating aspects of familiar life and recognizable situations and characters in its performances. Enacted episodes from the liturgical calendar were joined to form complete cycles of biblical plays in increasingly more complicated productions involving realistic stage effects. Religious dramas became all-purpose moral entertainments combining serious devotional and didactic purposes with low comic, often bawdy farce. By the 15th century religious drama had established a strong, robust theatrical tradition in western Europe that would be combined with the rediscovery of the classical dramatic tradition in the Renaissance to create the greatest explosion of dramatic achievement in history.

Everyman is the best-known example of the morality play, the late-developing medieval dramatic genre that is the essential bridge between religious and secular drama. If mystery plays treated the divine as revealed in the Bible, and miracle plays, the saintly, morality plays took for their subject the spiritual struggles of representative and recognizable mixed human characters. Morality plays, which flourished between 1400 and 1550, are didactic allegories enacting the combat between Vice and Virtue for the possession of a human soul. Examples in English include *Pride of Life* (c. 1410), *Castle of Perverse* (c. 1425), and *Mankind* (c. 1475). *Everyman* is actually atypical of the form due to its restricted scope. Instead of covering the temptations of an entire life, as do most morality plays, *Everyman* achieves its unity and intensity by concentrating only on the preparation for death, on the last act in the story of salvation or damnation. The usual enacted battle between Vice and Virtue for possession of an individual soul is over at the play's outset. *Everyman* is a confirmed sinner who is to be shocked into a reevaluation of his life and values. As the play opens, God, disappointed in humankind's sinfulness, in which "Every man liveth so after his own pleasure," ignoring their inevitable end and purpose on earth, proclaims a final reckoning. He orders Death to summon *Everyman* to "A pilgrimage he must on him take, / Which he in no wise may escape." *Everyman* greets this news with a range of psychologically believable reactions from incredulousness, delusion, and self-pity to rationalization that it might not be as bad as he fears, even attempting to bribe Death to "defer this matter till another day." Death is implacable but agrees to allow *Everyman* to gather whomever he can persuade to accompany him on his journey to the grave.

Having lost his initial battle with Death to avoid his reckoning, *Everyman* is next reduced to helpless, isolated despair as one by one his expected faithful and

steadfast companions—Fellowship, Kindred, and Cousin—abandon him. Forced to forego human companionship from friends and relatives on his journey, Everyman next turns to his Goods, which he had valued most of all, for support. Convinced that money is all powerful, Everyman is corrected by Goods, who says that love for him is “contrary to love everlasting”:

A season thou hast had me in prosperity. My condition is man's soul to kill; If I save one, a thousand I do spill. Weenest though that I will follow thee? Nay, not from this world, verily.

If the material fails him, Everyman next turns to his virtuous accomplishments on earth, to Good Deeds, who is willing to accompany him but is constrained by Everyman's sins, and the pilgrim is sent to Good Deeds's sister, Knowledge, to learn what he must do. At this point in the drama Everyman's spiritual journey has forced him to look from exterior support to internal resources. Knowledge provides the key to Everyman's salvation, leading him to Confession and Penance that releases Good Deeds to accompany him to his reckoning. The play thus embodies essential Christian doctrine—that a person's life on earth is fleeting and deceptive, that all must face death alone, and that good deeds are worthless without self-knowledge, faith, contrition, and absolution—in understandable human terms that invite audience identification. The play's message is delivered not through direct statement but in the interaction of a psychologically understandable Everyman with the personified and magnified abstractions that underscore a universal meaning.

No longer reluctant and despairing, with a renewed faith and self-understanding, Everyman now feels comforted and confident to undertake his journey, summoning Beauty, Strength, Discretion, and Five Wits to join Good Deeds as his companions. Doctrinally the play seems to have reached a secure moral conclusion. Everyman is no longer deceived about the world or himself and is now ready to face his final reckoning aided by worthy intrinsic companions. The play, however, delivers a surprising dramatic reversal. The companions that Everyman has counted on one by one fall away as he comes closer and closer to his journey's end at the grave. The allegory here captures an entire life in miniature in which a person's essential attributes eventually are defeated by time along life's journey: the beauty of youth fades, the strength of manhood weakens, mental acuity in maturity declines, and the senses of old age fail. In a neat, structural parallel the excuses of Fellowship, Kindred, Cousin, and Goods not to accompany Everyman on his journey are matched by the regrets of Beauty, Strength, Discretion, and Five Wits for failing to complete the pilgrimage. Once again Everyman is stripped of support to face death alone, forced to give up his dependence not only on the externals of life but the internal faculties and attributes as well. Everyman reaches an existential moment of dreadful isolation

that prompts his cry, “O Jesu, help! All hath forsaken me.” But he is consoled by Good Deeds, who alone will stay with him to the end:

All earthly things is but vanity: Beauty, Strength, and Discretion do man forsake, Foolish friends, and kinsmen, that fair spake— All fleeth save Good Deeds, and that am I. . . . Fear not; I will speak for thee.

Good Deeds will make the case for Everyman’s salvation, and the pilgrim seeking God’s mercy is shown sinking into his grave. An Angel is heard welcoming his soul to his heavenly reward:

Now shalt thou into the heavenly sphere, Unto the which all ye shall come That liveth well before the day of doom.

Everyman converts the theological doctrine of a soul’s recovery and redemption into a series of strikingly dramatic conflicts, each pushing Everyman to a greater understanding of the world and himself. What contrasts *Everyman* from other morality plays in which Vice and Virtue contend for the possession of a man’s soul is that the forces that essentially divide Everyman and imperil his salvation reside within him, personified both in the external aspects of a man’s life and his inherent attributes. The play takes its audience deeply into a moral and psychological arena that will increasingly form the theater to follow as religious drama gives way to the secular. Dramatic allegory is to be dressed in the costumes and traits of the particular and the individual. Notably, *Everyman* puts an average, representative man at center stage for one of the first times in theatrical history and considers his self-knowledge and salvation as its central issue. Neither a divinity nor a paragon, Everyman is made recognizable to every member of the audience— noble and peasant alike—and psychological realism, even in an allegory of contending abstractions, makes a powerful theatrical debut. *Everyman* proves triumphantly that the sufferings of someone like the rest of us can engage us emotionally and intellectually while supplying a crucial lesson on how the real, the symbolic, and insights into human nature and human existence—the key components of all drama—can be effectively combined.

DOCTOR FAUSTUS

(c. 1588–93) by

Christopher Marlowe

More than any other play, Marlowe's Doctor Faustus celebrates that God-like power of language, and shows us how words can soar, and tempts us to dizzying heights within our heads. But all the time, Marlowe is in control. He knows too much about the shaping power of words to be a Faustus. Marlowe is a magus too, all poets are, but one who tells us in this play to use that awesome power of words to fashion ourselves in God's image. Else, like his hero, we will be deformed by the servant we abuse.

—A. Bartlett Giamatti, “Marlowe: The Arts of Illusion”

Christopher Marlowe in *Doctor Faustus*, one of the earliest and the most famous non-Shakespearean Elizabethan tragedies, manages not only to bridge the gap between the medieval morality plays and the secular, classically influenced dramas of the Renaissance but to produce one of the core myths of Western civilization. Like Oedipus, Faustus, who exchanges damnation for knowledge and power, has become a resonating tragic archetype, epitomizing the doomed but daring overreacher whose rebellion and defeat enact a struggle for transcendence against the gravitational pull of the human condition. Faustus's bargain with the devil, his ambitious rise and terrifying fall, encapsulate and typify the dilemma of the modern tragic hero. As critic T. McAlindon observes, “What makes the play most remarkable is the fact that in composing it Marlowe so elicited the latent meanings of the devil compact—a type of story that had been familiar in the West for centuries—that he gave it the force and status of myth. Indeed, he shaped it into a myth that usurped the place in the Western imagination hitherto enjoyed by the myths of Lucifer and of Adam and Eve. The Faust figure has become the archetype of all human striving to reach beyond the human; more particularly, he has become the personification of that postmedieval phenomenon we call individualism.” The descendants of Faustus include Byron's romantic outlaws, Shelley's Prometheus, Melville's Ahab, Brontë's Heathcliff, and Faulkner's Thomas Sutpen. Goethe, who marveled at Marlowe's dramatic construction—“How greatly it is all planned!”—would take up the story of Faustus for his own masterwork. Oswald Spengler in *The Decline of the West* saw in the drama a metaphor for Western technological hubris and cultural self-destruction that defined the modern world, which he called the “Faustian Age.” The power of

Faustus as a spiritual and cultural myth originates from Marlowe's remarkable dramatic conception and astonishing poetic skills that helped to transform Western drama. Synthesizing the conventions of the medieval morality play and the tradition of classical tragedy, Marlowe achieved both the overwhelming concentrated force of *Everyman* and the breathtakingly expansive, existential dramatic poetry of Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides.

If *Doctor Faustus* continues to haunt our collective consciousness, its creator has proven to be no less fascinating. Christopher Marlowe was born in 1564 in Canterbury, two months before fellow playwright William Shakespeare. Both men came from the rising middle stratum of Elizabethan society, from the world of trade and the yeomanry. Like Shakespeare's father, who was a glover, Marlowe's father was a successful shoemaker, but Marlowe, unlike Shakespeare, gained a scholarship to attend Cambridge University to prepare for a clerical career. Marlowe received a bachelor's degree in 1584 and a master's in 1587, but only after Queen Elizabeth's Privy Council interceded on his behalf when university officials, suspecting Marlowe's Catholic sympathies, refused to grant his degree. Their suspicions were aroused by Marlowe's travels to Rheims a prominent center in France, for English Roman Catholic expatriates. The letter from the Privy Council on Marlowe's behalf asserted that "in all his accions he had behaved him selfe orderlie and discreetlie wherebie he had done her Majestic good service." What exactly the service was that Marlowe had provided is unknown, but his clandestine activities, possibly as a spy and informer, would continue to shadow Marlowe, as would his unorthodox, heretical ideas, as he rejected the approved point of his college education in holy orders and began to make his name as a poet and playwright in London.

As one of the so-called University Wits, a group that included such writers as John Lyly, Robert Greene, George Peele, and Thomas Nashe, Marlowe would bring his classical training and new secular humanistic ideas fostered at Cambridge to bear on English popular drama and would help to transform it into a sophisticated and expressive artistic form. Marlowe's six plays—*Dido, Queen of Carthage*; *Tamburlaine the Great*; *The Jew of Malta*; *The Massacre of Paris*; *Edward II*; and *Doctor Faustus*—were all written in a period of about six years, from 1587 to 1593. Marlowe's assault on the dramatic conventions of his day is clearly announced in the prologue of *Tamburlaine*, which first established his reputation as a dramatist, in which he contemptuously dismisses the prevailing "jygging vaines of riming mother wits" and the "conceits clownage keeps in pay." With the unprecedented power of what Ben Jonson described as his "mighty line" in some of the most eloquent poetry in English drama, Marlowe puts at center stage the larger-than-life, cruel Mongolian tyrant who threatens "the world with high astounding terms." Marlowe thereby pioneered a new breed of hero for the Elizabethan stage: the master of his own destiny who succeeds by the strength

of his will, claiming authority by his own human powers. Marlowe's dramatization of the cost of such powers would set a new focus and standard for drama that would dominate the Elizabethan period and tragedy ever since.

The violence and lawbreaking that Marlowe put on stage dogged the playwright's life as well. In 1589 Marlowe was arrested and jailed for a fortnight over his involvement in a fatal brawl. The homicide would be ruled "in self-defence" and "not by felony." For a time Marlowe shared quarters with playwright Thomas Kyd, and in 1593, when Kyd was arrested for sedition, the authorities discovered documents in his rooms containing "vile hereticall Conceiptes Denyinge the Deity of Jhesus Christ our Savior." Kyd insisted that the papers belonged to Marlowe, and the Privy Council issued an arrest warrant. Before it could be executed, however, Marlowe was killed in the house of Mrs. Eleanor Bull in Deptford, where the writer had spent the day with companions eating and drinking, in a scuffle ostensibly about who should pay the bill. An inquest ruled Marlowe's death accidental, but conspiracy theories have persisted that Marlowe was assassinated for political or religious reasons or in connection with his espionage activities. The manner of Marlowe's early death at age 29, as well as the details and rumors of a contentious and possibly shadowy secret life, have helped burnish the legend of a doomed literary artist of great genius who embodies baffling contradictions. Was Marlowe an Elizabethan apologist or an apostate? A scholar and intellectual, Marlowe was nevertheless a habitu  of the seedy underworld of Elizabethan informers, spies, and tavern brawlers. He was the praised servant of the authoritarian, theocratic Elizabethan state but was also a radical freethinker and considered a dangerous religious skeptic. Marlowe's plays exalt daring rebels even as they work out their inevitable punishment for transgressions of accepted limits. At the core of Marlowe's life and works, therefore, are some of the fundamental contradictions of the Elizabethan (and the modern) age itself in its contention between the religious and the secular, the individual and the community, restraint versus liberation, power versus morality, ambition versus responsibility. These tensions are best expressed in the tragic moral fable of *Doctor Faustus*.

Like its author, *Doctor Faustus* has generated vexing unanswered questions and endless speculation. Scholars remain divided over whether the play was an early work composed shortly after Marlowe's popular success with *Tamburlaine* or whether it is one of his last plays. The earliest record of the play's production is in 1594, but most experts do not believe this reflects the play's first staging. The textual history of the play is no less cloudy and contentious as its compositional and performance history. *Doctor Faustus* was first published in a 1,485-line version in 1604, nearly a dozen years after Marlowe's death, and a longer 2,131-line version followed in 1616. The discrepancy between these texts and the degree to which other hands were responsible for many of the play's scenes have made

Doctor Faustus one of the thorniest bibliographical puzzles in English literature. Although the origins and authorship of the pieces of the puzzle remain debatable, the impact and effectiveness of the whole trump academic conjecture. No one doubts that the overall conception of Faustus's rise and fall is Marlowe's alone, and in the power and forcefulness of its moral vision and stage spectacle, *Doctor Faustus*, in whatever version is preferred, is one of the wonders of English drama. It is a play that looks back for its effects to the allegorical, didactic roots of medieval drama while it anticipates in its psychological probing of human nature the fully developed tragedy of Shakespeare and the later Elizabethan dramatists.

The Tragical History of the Life and Death of Doctor Faustus makes clear its connections to the medieval morality play by enacting, like *Everyman*, the ultimate choice of a soul between salvation and damnation. The allegorical nature of Faustus's struggle is emphasized by the on-stage presence of devils, by the good and bad angels who externalize Faustus's inner conflicts, by the spectacular procession of the Deadly Sins that captivates him and seals his fate, and the final terrifying vision of hell of act 5. However, other elements help to pattern the drama of Faustus as a classical tragedy. Marlowe employs a chorus for exposition and commentary, and the particularity of Faustus as an exceptional hero, rather than a generic, representative Everyman, links his story with the Aristotelian tragic fall of a great man. Moreover, *Everyman* and the other morality plays end in a comic reconciliation between the wayward sinner and the sources of his salvation. *Doctor Faustus*, however, concludes with the protagonist's unconsolated damnation and hopeless extinction, caught between the irresistible drive of his nature and the immovable limitations of the human condition. Marlowe structures the play to emphasize the tragic pattern of a rise and fall, of choice and consequence.

In act 1 Faustus mounts his rebellion. "Glutted now with learning's golden gifts," but with his intellectual ambitions still unsatisfied, Faustus, a Wittenberg scholar, turns to magic and necromancy to "get a deity" and "reign sole king of all the Provinces." He conjures the devil, Mephistophilis, and makes a bargain with him: in exchange for 24 years of power and knowledge, Faustus agrees to forfeit his immortal soul. Refusing to believe "that after this life there is any pain," undeterred by his conscience, personified by the battling good and bad angel of his nature, and by Mephistophilis who frankly warns him about the torments of hell that he risks, Faustus seals his bargain in blood in act 2. Faustus reveals himself in the negotiation blinded by his desires, a megalomaniac who craves power and knowledge not to serve others but as ends in themselves, who denies the imperatives of anything but his own will. The wrong-headedness of Faustus's aspirations is emphasized in the comic scenes concluding both acts 1 and 2, in which Faustus's servant Wagner parodies his master's conjuring by trying to compel a servant of his own and in the attempt by Robin the ostler to use Faustus's magic to avoid work and satisfy his bodily appetites. In both cases, Faustus's

daring and dignity are undercut by comic foolery that diminishes Faustus's overreaching while alerting the audience to his short-sighted self-indulgence. Critics and scholars remain divided on how to regard these comic scenes as well as the farcical episodes of acts 3 and 4 in which Faustus's gained supreme powers are translated into nothing more than conjuring tricks at the expense of the pope in Rome and to provide entertainment at the court of Charles V. Contrasting so markedly with the poetic intensity of acts 1 and 2, the prosy, episodic, so-called problematical middle of *Doctor Faustus* that so flagrantly violates the classical principle of tragic decorum has been apologized for by denying Marlowe's hand in its creation. These must be the scenes, the persistent argument runs, that hacks added to the more majestic and profound existential tragedy that Marlowe first devised. The play's descent into slapstick and somewhat tiresome farce has been interpreted as a remnant of the medieval religious drama that mixed the profane with the sacred, as well as evidence of pandering to the unrefined taste of the Elizabethan audiences who required comic diversion along with their profundity. A case can be made, however, that the ludicrousness of what Faustus makes of his damnable skills makes an effective thematic point underscoring Faustus's spiritual and aspirational decline after exchanging his soul. If the high drama of Faustus's quest is parodied by the low comedy characters in acts 1 and 2, Faustus joins in their horseplay in acts 3 and 4 with his acquired limitless power shown to be little more than silly trickery. The play makes clear that the cost far exceeds the worth of the prize, as the final reckoning that closes the drama powerfully demonstrates.

Faustus regains his dignity in Act 5 in the terrifying enactment of his final moments of life, and the play returns to the eloquent and intense poetry of the first two acts. Pity and terror are extracted in Faustus's climactic realization of the consequence of his bargain. Having first conjured the spirit of Helen of Troy for the delectation of his scholarly friends, Faustus recalls her for his own physical delight as his "paramour" with the most famous lines that Marlowe ever wrote:

Was this the face that launched a thousand ships, And burnt the topless towers of Ilium? Sweet Helen, make me immortal with a kiss. Her lips suck forth my soul. See where it flies.

Ironically, Faustus's mating with the shadowy succubus Helen ("Was this the face" not "Is this the face") does ensure his immortality, but as one of the damned, as the righteous Old Man who makes a final appeal for Faustus to "leave this damnèd art" makes clear:

Accursèd Faustus, miserable man, That from thy soul exclud'st the grace of heaven And fliest the throne of his tribunal seat!

The scene makes clear that even after signing his soul away, Faustus freely chooses his fate, that he is not simply a helpless victim of a poorly considered

legal contract. Faustus thereby retains his status as a tragic hero. In his final soliloquy he counts down his last hour on earth, reversing the conclusions of his opening soliloquy. To escape from an eternity of damnation in a “vast perpetual torture-house,” the existence of which he finally acknowledges, Faustus now craves extinction and denies the humanity that he had previously exalted: “O soul, be changed to little water-drops,/And fall into the ocean, ne’er be found!” His final words reach an intensity and sublimity equaled on the English stage only by Shakespeare, as Faustus mounts the ultimate existential battle to comprehend the limits and the nature of the human condition in the last grip of mortality and morality. The chorus, Marlowe’s borrowing from classical drama that helps to frame the play’s tragic dimension, is given the final word on Faustus’s fall and its lesson:

Cut is the branch that might have grown full straight, And burnèd is Apollo’s laurel bough That sometime grew within this learnèd man. Faustus is gone. Regard his hellish fall,

Whose fiendful fortune may exhort the wise Only to wonder at unlawful things, Whose deepness does entice such forward wits To practice more than heavenly power permits.

In language that combines both the Christian and classical cosmogony, Marlowe has synthesized the allegorical religious drama of salvation with the classical tragedy of the hubris of the exceptional hero who tests the limits of existence and humanity’s deepest aspirations and darkest fears. *Doctor Faustus* is the only great religious drama of the Elizabethan period and anticipates the staging of the most profound human questions to follow by the only playwright who could rival the grandeur and terror of Marlowe’s dramatic conceptions, William Shakespeare.

A MIDSUMMER NIGHT'S DREAM (c. 1594–95) *by William Shakespeare*

Nothing by Shakespeare before A Midsummer Night's Dream is its equal and in some respects nothing by him afterwards surpasses it. It is his first undoubted masterpiece, without flaws, and one of his dozen or so plays of overwhelming originality and power.

—Harold Bloom, *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human*

A Midsummer Night's Dream is William Shakespeare's first comic masterpiece and remains one his most beloved and performed plays. It seems reasonable to claim that on any fine night during the summer at an outdoor theater somewhere in the world an audience is being treated to the magic of the play. It is easy, however, to overlook through familiarity what a radically original and experimental play this is. *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is the triumph of Shakespeare's early playwriting career, a drama of such marked inventiveness and visionary reach that its first audiences must have only marveled at what could possibly come next from this extraordinary playwright. In it Shakespeare changed the paradigm of stage comedy that he had inherited from the Greeks and the Romans by dizzyingly multiplying his plot lines and by bringing the irrational and absurd illusions of romantic love center stage. He established human passion and gender relations as comedy's prime subject, transforming such fundamental concepts as love, courtship, and marriage that have persisted in our culture ever since. If that is not enough *A Midsummer Night's Dream* makes use of its romantic intrigue, supernatural setting, and rustic foolery to pose essential questions about the relationship between art and life, appearance and reality, truth and illusion, dreams and the waking world that anticipate the self-referential agenda of such avant-garde, metadramatists as Luigi Pirandello, Bertolt Brecht, and Tom Stoppard. *A Midsummer Night's Dream* represents a kind of declaration of liberation for the stage, in which, after its example, nothing seems either off limits or impossible. In the play Theseus, the duke of Athens, after hearing the lovers' strange story of what happened to them in the forest famously interprets their incredible account by linking the lovers with the lunatic and the poet:

One sees more devils than vast hell can hold,
That is the madman: the lover, all as

frantic, Sees Helen's beauty in a brow of Egypt: The poet's eye, in a fine frenzy rolling,

Doth glance from heaven to earth, from earth to heaven, And as imagination bodies forth The forms of things unknown, the poet's pen Turns them to shapes, and gives to airy nothing

A local habitation and a name. Such tricks hath strong imagination, That if it would but apprehend some joy, It comprehends some bringer of that joy: Or, in the night, imagining some fear, How easy is a bush suppos'd a bear!

A Midsummer Night's Dream similarly gives a "local habitation and a name" on stage for what madness, love, and the poet's imagination can conjure.

Shakespeare first made his theatrical reputation in the early 1590s with his *Henry VI* plays, with the historical chronicle genre that he pioneered. His early tragedies—*Titus Andronicus* and *ROMEO AND JULIET*—and comedies—*The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, *The Taming of the Shrew*, *The Comedy of Errors*, and *Love's Labour's Lost*—all show the playwright working within the dramatic conventions that he inherited from classical, medieval, and English folk sources. With *A Midsummer Night's Dream* Shakespeare goes beyond imitation to discover a distinctive voice and manner that would add a new dramatic species. After *A Midsummer Night's Dream* there was Old Comedy, New Comedy, and now Shakespearean comedy, a synthesis of both. To explain the origin and manner of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* scholars have long relied on a speculative story so apt and evocative that it must be believed, even though there is no hard evidence to support it. Thought to have been written in the winter of 1593–94 to be performed at an aristocratic wedding attended by Queen Elizabeth, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* therefore resembles the Renaissance masque, a fanciful mixture of allegorical and mythological enactments, music, dance, elegant costumes, and elaborate theatrical effects to entertain at banquets celebrating betrothals, weddings, and seasonal festivals such as May Day and Twelfth Night. In the words of Theseus at his own nuptial fete, the masque served "To wear away this long age of three hours / Between our after-supper and bed-time." We do know from the title page of its initial publication in the First Quarto of 1600 that the play "hath been sundry times publikely acted" by Shakespeare's company, but the notion that it had served as a wedding entertainment establishes the delightful fun-house mirroring of an actual wedding party first watching a play that included a wedding party watching a play. Such an appropriate scrambling of reality and illusion reflects the source of the humor and wonder of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

A Midsummer Night's Dream is one of just three plays out of Shakespeare's 39 (the other two are *Love's Labour's Lost* and *The Tempest*) for which the play-

wright did not rely on a central primary source. Instead Shakespeare assembled elements from classical sources, romantic narratives, and English folk materials, along with details of ordinary Elizabethan life to juggle and juxtapose four different imaginative realms, each with its own distinctive social and literary conventions and language. Each is linked by analogy to the theme of love and its obstacles. The first is the classically derived court world of Theseus, duke of Athens, who has first conquered Hippolyta, queen of the Amazons, then won her heart, and now eagerly (and impatiently) anticipates their wedding. Their impending nuptials prompt the arrival of emissaries from the natural world, the king and queen of the fairies—Oberon and Titania—to bless their union, as well as a collection of “rude mechanicals”—Bottom, Quince, Flute, Starveling, Snout, and Snug—to devise a theatrical performance as entertainment at the Duke’s wedding celebration. To the world of the Athenian court, the alternate supernatural court world of the fairies, and the realistic sphere of the Athenian artisans, Shakespeare overlaps a fourth center of interest in the young lovers Hermia, Helena, Lysander, and Demetrius. Shakespeare mixes the dignified blank verse of Theseus and Hippolyta with the rhymed iambic speeches of the lovers, the rhymed tetrameter of the fairies, and the wonderfully earthy prose of the rustics into a virtuoso’s performance of polyphonic verbal effects, the greatest Shakespeare, or any other dramatist, had yet supplied for the stage.

The complications commence when Hermia’s father, Egeus, objects to his daughter’s unsanctioned preference for Lysander over Demetrius, whom Egeus has selected for her. Egeus invokes Athenian law mandating death or celibacy for a maid’s refusal to abide by parental authority in the choice of a mate. Parental objection to the choice of young lovers was a standard plot device of Greek New Comedy and the Roman comedies of Plautus and Terence that Shakespeare inherited. To the obstacles placed in the lovers’ paths Shakespeare adds his own variation of the earlier Aristophanic Old Comedy’s break with the normalcy of everyday life by having his lovers escape into the forest. Critic Northrup Frye has called this symbolic setting of magical regeneration and vitality the “green world.” Here the lovers are tested and allowed the freedom and new possibilities to gain fulfillment and harmony denied them in the civilized world, in which duty dominates desire and obligation to parental authority and the law overrules self-interest and the heart’s promptings. Critic C. L. Barber has identified in such a departure from the norm a “Saturnalian Pattern” in Shakespearean comedy in which the lovers’ exile from the civilized to the primitive supplies the festive release that characterized the earliest forms of comic drama. Barber argues:

Once Shakespeare finds his own distinctive voice, he is more Aristophanic than any other great English dramatist, despite the fact that the accepted educated models and theories when he started to write were Terentian and Plautine. The Old Comedy cast of his work results from his participation in native saturnalian

traditions of the popular theater and the popular holidays. . . . He used the resources of a sophisticated theater to express, in his idyllic comedies and in his clowns' ironic mis- rule, the experience of moving to humorous understanding through sat- urnalian release.

Named for the summer solstice festival, when it was said that a maid could glimpse the man she would marry, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* celebrates access to the uncanny and the breakup of all normal rules and social barriers to display human nature in the grips of elemental passions and the subconscious. The lovers in their moonlit, natural setting, at the mercy of the fairies, act out their deepest desires and hostilities in a full display of the power and absurdity of love both to change reality and to redeem it.

Hermia elopes with Lysander, pursued by Demetrius, who in turn is followed by Helena, whom he spurns. They enter a supernatural realm also beset by marital discord, jealousy, and rivalry. Oberon commands his servant Puck to place the juice of a flower once hit by Cupid's dart in the eyes of the sleeping Titania to cause her to fall in love with the first creature she sees on awakening to help gain for Oberon the changeling boy Titania has refused to yield to him. Oberon, pitying Helena her rejection by Demetrius, also orders Puck to place some of the drops in Demetrius's eyes so that he will be charmed into love with the woman who dotes on him. Instead Puck comes upon Lysander and Hermia as they sleep, mistakes Lysander for Demetrius, and pours the charm into the wrong eyes so that Lysander falls in love with Helena when she wakes him. Meanwhile Bottom and his companions have retreated to the woods to rehearse a dramatization of the mythological story of Pyramus and Thisbe, another set of star-crossed lovers. Puck gives the exuberant Bottom the head of an ass, and he becomes the first thing the charmed Titania sees on waking. Through the agency of the change of location from court to forest and from daylight to moonlight, with its attendant capacity for magical transformation, the play mounts a witty and uproarious display of the irrationality of love and its victims who see the world through the distorting lens of desire, in which certainty of affection is fleeting and a lover with the head of an ass can cause a queen to forgo her senses and her dignity. As Bottom aptly observes, "reason and love keep little company together now-a-days." From the perspectives of the fairies the lovers' absolute claims and earnest rationalizations of such a will-of-the-wisp as love makes them absurd. The tangled mixture of passion, jealousy, rancor, and violence that beset the young lovers after Puck imperfectly corrects his mistake, causing both Lysander and Demetrius to pursue the once spurned Helena, more than justifies Puck's observation, "Lord, what fools these mortals be!"

By act 4 day returns, and the disorder of the night proves as fleeting and as insubstantial as a dream. After the four lovers are awakened by Theseus,

Hippolyta, and Egeus, who are hunting in the woods, Lysander again loves Hermia, and Demetrius, still under the power of the potion, gives up his claim to her in favor of Helena. Theseus overrules Egeus's objections and his own former strict adherence to Athenian law and gives both couples permission to marry that day, along with himself and Hippolyta. Having gained the changeling boy from Titania, Oberon releases her from her spell. Puck removes the donkey's head from Bottom, who awakes to wonder at his strange dream:

I have had a most rare vision. I have had a dream, past the wit of man to say what dream it was. Man is but an ass, if he go about to expound this dream. . . . I will get Peter Quince to write a ballad of this dream. It shall be call'd "Bottom's Dream," because it hath no bottom.

The only mortal allowed to see the fairies, Bottom is also the only character not threatened or diminished by the alternative fantasy realm he passes through. He freely accepts what he does not understand, considering it more suitable for the delight of art in a future ballad than to be analyzed or reduced by reason. Bottom coexists easily and honestly in the dual world of reality and illusion, maintaining his core identity and integrity even through his transformation, from man to ass, to fairy queen's paramour, to ordinary man again. Called by Harold Bloom "Shakespeare's most engaging character before Falstaff," Bottom is the play's human anchor and affirmation of the joyful acceptance of all the contradictions that the play has sent his way.

With the reconciliation of Oberon and Titania, Bottom's reunion with his colleagues, and three Athenian weddings, the plot complications are all happily resolved, and act 5 shifts the emphasis from the potentially destructive vagaries of love to a celebration of marriage to crown and contain human desire. Shakespeare's final sleight of hand and delightful invention, however, is the play within the play, the "tedious and brief" and "very tragical mirth" of the performance of *Pyramus and Thisbe* by Bottom and his players. In a drama fueled by the complications between appearance and reality this hilariously incompetent burlesque by the play's rustic clowns impersonating tragic lovers appropriately comments on the play that has preceded it. The drama of *Pyramus and Thisbe* involves another set of lovers who face parental objections and similarly seek relief in nature, but their adventure goes tragically awry. However, just as Hermia, Lysander, Helena, and Demetrius avoid through the stage-managing of the fairies a potentially tragic fate from their ordeal in the wood, so is the tragic fate of Pyramus and Thisbe transformed to comedy by the ineptitude of Bottom's company. The play within the play becomes a pointed microcosm for *A Midsummer Night's Dream* as a whole in its conversion of potential tragedy to curative comedy. The newlyweds, who mock the absurdity of *Pyramus and Thisbe*, fail to make the connection with their own absurd encounter with love and

their chance rescue from its anguish, but the actual audience should not. In Shakespeare's comprehensive comic vision we both laugh at the ridiculousness of others while recognizing ourselves in their dilemmas. Shakespeare's final point about the inseparability of reality and illusion is scored by having the fairy world coexist with the Athenian court at the play's conclusion, decreasing the gap between fact and fancy and invading actuality itself by giving the final words to Puck, who addresses the audience directly:

If we shadows have offended, Think but this, and all is mended, That you have but slumb' red here While these visions did appear. And this weak and idle theme, No more yielding but a dream.

Like the newlyweds who view a drama that calls attention to its illusion and its "tragical mirth," the audience is here reminded of the similar blending of reality and dream, the comic and the tragic in the world beyond the stage. Puck serves as Shakespeare's magician's assistant, demonstrating that substance and shadow on stage replicate both the illusion of the dramatist's art and the essence of human life in our own continual interplay of reality, dreams, and desire.

TWELFTH NIGHT

(c. 1600–02) by

William Shakespeare

*Twelfth Night is the climax of Shakespeare's early achievement in comedy. The effects and values of the earlier comedies are here subtly embodied in the most complex structure which Shakespeare had yet created. But the play also looks forward: the pressure to dissolve the comedy, to realize and finally abandon the burden of laughter, is an intrinsic part of its "perfection." Viola's clear-eyed and affirmative vision of her own and the world's rationality is a triumph and we desire it; yet we realize its vulnerability, and we come to realize that virtue in disguise is only totally triumphant when evil is not in disguise—is not truly present at all. Having solved magnificently the problems of this particular form of comedy, Shakespeare was evidently not tempted to repeat his triumph. After *Twelfth Night* the so-called comedies required for their happy resolutions more radical characters and devices—omniscient and omnipresent Dukes, magic, and resurrection. More obvious miracles are needed for comedy to exist in a world in which evil also exists, not merely incipiently but with power.*

—Joseph H. Summers, "The Masks of *Twelfth Night*"

William Shakespeare was in his mid-30s and at the height of his dramatic powers when he wrote *Twelfth Night*, his culminating masterpiece of romantic comedy. There is perhaps no more rousing, amusing, or lyrical celebration of the transforming wonderment of love nor a more knowing depiction of its follies or the forces allied against it. *Twelfth Night* is the ninth in a series of comedies Shakespeare wrote during the 1590s that includes *The Comedy of Errors*, *The Taming of the Shrew*, *A MIDSUMMER NIGHT'S DREAM*, *The Merchant of Venice*, and *As You Like It* and is a masterful synthesis of them all, unsurpassed in the artistry of its execution. In recognizing the barriers to love it also anticipates some of the preoccupations of the three dark comedies that followed—*Troilus and Cressida*, *All's Well That Ends Well*, and *Measure for Measure*—the great tragedies that would dominate the next decade of Shakespeare's work, as well as the tragicomic romances—*Pericles*, *Cymbeline*, *The Winter's Tale*, and *THE TEMPEST*—that conclude Shakespeare's dramatic career. Given the arc of that career, *Twelfth*

Night stands at the summit of his comic vision, the last and greatest of Shakespeare's pure romantic comedies, but with the clouds that would darken the subsequent plays already gathering. Shakespeare never again returned to the exultant, triumphant tone of sunny celebration that suffuses the play. Yet what makes *Twelfth Night* so satisfying and impressive, as well as entertaining, is its clear-eyed acknowledgment of the challenge to its merriment in the counterforces of grief, melancholy, and sterile self-enclosure that stand in the way of the play's joyous affirmation. The comedy of *Twelfth Night* is earned by demonstrating all that must be surmounted for desire to reach fulfillment.

Twelfth Night, or What You Will was written between 1600 and 1602. The earliest reference to a performance appears in the diary of barrister John Manningham who in February 1602 recorded that the play was acted in the Middle Temple "at our feast." He found it "much like the Commedy of Errores or Menechmi in Plautus, but most like an neere to that in Italian called *Inganni*." Manningham provides a useful summary of Shakespeare's sources and plot devices in which a story of identical twins and mistaken identities is derived both from his earlier comedy and its ancient Roman inspiration, Plautus's *The Twin Menaechmi*. This is joined with an intrigue plot of gender disguise borrowed from popular 16th-century Italian comedies, particularly *Gl'Ingannati (The Deceived Ones)*, in which a disguised young woman serves as a page to the man she loves. Shakespeare also employs elements of the new comedy of humours, popularized by Ben Jonson's *Every Man in His Humour* in 1598, for his own invention of the duping of the choleric Malvolio. Mistaken identities, comic misadventures in love, and the overthrow of repression, pretense, and selfishness are all united under the festive tone of the play's title, which suggests the exuberant saturnalian celebration of the twelfth day after Christmas, the Feast of the Epiphany. For the Elizabethans, *Twelfth Night* was the culminating holiday of the traditional Christmas revels in which gifts were exchanged, rigid proprieties suspended, and good fellowship affirmed. Scholars have speculated that *Twelfth Night* may have been first acted at court on January 6, 1601, as part of the entertainment provided for a Tuscan duke, Don Virginio Orsino, Queen Elizabeth's guest of honor. Whether it was actually performed on *Twelfth Night*, the play is, like *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, a "festive comedy," in C. L. Barber's phrase, that captures the spirit of a holiday in which social rules and conventions are subverted for a liberating spell of topsy-turviness and revelry.

As in all of Shakespeare's comedies, *Twelfth Night* treats the obstacles faced by lovers in fulfilling their desires. In an influential essay, "The Two Worlds of Shakespearean Comedy," Sherman Hawkins has detected two basic structural patterns in Shakespeare's comedies. One is marked by escape, in which young lovers, facing opposition in the form of parental or civil authority, depart the jurisdiction of both into a green world where they are freed from external

constraints and liberated to resolve all the impediments to their passions. This is the pattern of *Two Gentlemen of Verona*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *The Merchant of Venice*, *The Winter's Tale*, and *Cymbeline*. The other dominant pattern in Shakespeare's comedies, as employed in *The Comedy of Errors*, *Love's Labour's Lost*, *Much Ado About Nothing*, and *Twelfth Night*, is not escape but invasion. In these plays the arrival of outsiders serves as a catalyst to upset stalemated relationships and to revivify a stagnating community. "The obstacles to love in comedies of this alternate pattern," Hawkins argues, "are not external—social convention, favored rivals, disapproving parents. Resistance comes from the lovers themselves." The intrusion of new characters and the new relationships they stimulate serve to break the emotional deadlock and allow true love to flourish.

As *Twelfth Night* opens, Orsino, the duke of Illyria, is stalled in his desire for the countess Olivia, who, in mourning for her brother, has "abjured the company and sight of men" to live like a "cloistress" for seven years to protract an excessive, melancholy love of grief. As Orsino makes clear in the play's famous opening speech, lacking a focus for his affection due to Olivia's resistance, he indulges in the torment of unrequited love:

If music be the food of love, play on, Give me excess of it that, surfeiting, The appetite may sicken and so die. That strain again, it had a dying fall. O, it came o'er my ear like the sweet sound That breathes upon a bank of violets, Stealing and giving odour. Enough, no more, 'Tis not so sweet now as it was before.

Both have withdrawn into self-centered, sentimental melancholy, and the agents to break through the narcissistic impediments to true love and the stasis in Illyria are the shipwrecked twins Viola and Sebastian. Viola, believing her brother drowned, dresses as a man to seek protection as a page in the household of Orsino. As the young man Cesario, she is commissioned by Orsino, with whom she has fallen in love, as his envoy to Olivia. Viola, one of Shakespeare's greatest heroines in her wit, understanding, and resourcefulness, is, like Olivia, mourning a brother, but her grief neither isolates nor paralyzes her; neither is her love for Orsino an indulgence in an abstract, sentimental longing. It is precisely her superiority in affection and humanity that offers an implied lesson to both duke and countess in the proper working of the heart. Both Olivia and Orsino will be instructed through the agency of Viola's arrival that true love is not greedy and self-consuming but unselfish and generous. Initially Viola plays her part as persistent ambassador of love too well. In a scene that masterfully exploits Viola's gender-bending disguise (as performed in Shakespeare's time, a boy plays a young woman playing a boy) and her ambivalent mission to win a lady for the man she loves, Viola succeeds in penetrating Olivia's various physical and emotional defenses by her witty mockery of the established language and conventions of

courtship. Accused of being “the cruell’st she alive / If you will lead these graces to the grave / And leave the world no copy,” Olivia finally yields, but it is Cesario, not Orsino who captures her affection. In summarizing the romantic complications produced by her persuasiveness, Viola observes:

. . . As I am man, My state is desperate for my master’s love; As I am woman (now alas the day!), What thriftless sights shall poor Olivia breathe! O time, thou must untangle this, not I, It is too hard a knot for me t’untie.

Not too hard, however, for the playwright, as Shakespeare sets in motion some of his funniest and ingenious scenes leading up to the untangling.

The romantic comedy of Orsino, Olivia, and Viola/Cesario is balanced and contrasted by a second plot involving Olivia’s carousing cousin, Sir Toby Belch; his gull, the fatuous Sir Andrew Aguecheek, whom Toby encourages in a hopeless courtship of Olivia for the sake of extracting his money; the maid Maria; Olivia’s jester, Feste; and Olivia’s steward, Malvolio. Maria describes the dutiful, restrained, judgmental Malvolio as “a kind of puritan,” who condemns the late-night carousing of Sir Toby and his companions and urges his mistress to dismiss her jester. As the sour opponent of revelry, Malvolio prompts Sir Toby to utter one of the play’s most famous lines: “Dost thou think because thou art virtuous there shall be no more cakes and ale?” Virtues, Toby suggests, must acknowledge and accommodate the human necessity for the pleasures of life. All need a holiday. Malvolio as the adversary of the forces of festival that the play celebrates will be exposed as, in Olivia’s words, “sick of self-love” who tastes “with a distemper’d appetite.” Malvolio is, therefore, linked with both Orsino and Olivia in their self-centeredness. By connecting Malvolio’s particular brand of self-enclosure in opposition to the spirit of merriment represented by Sir Toby and his company of revelers, Shakespeare expands his critique of the impediments to love into a wider social context that recognizes the efficacy of misrule to break down the barriers isolating individuals. The carousers conspire to convince Malvolio that Olivia has fallen in love with him, revealing his ambition for power and dominance that stands behind his holier-than-thou veneer. Malvolio aspires to become Count Malvolio, gaining Olivia to command others and securing the deference his egotism considers his due. Convinced by a forged love letter from Olivia to be surly with the servants, to smile constantly in Olivia’s presence, and to wear yellow stockings cross-gartered (all of which Olivia abhors), the capering Malvolio prompts Olivia to conclude that he has lost his wits and orders his confinement in a dark cell. Symbolically, Malvolio’s punishment is fitted to his crime of self-obsession, of misappropriating love for self-gain.

With the play’s killjoy bated, chastened, and contained, the magic of love and reconciliation flourishes, and *Twelfth Night* builds to its triumphant, astounding

climax. First Sebastian surfaces in Illyria and, mistaken for Cesario, finds himself dueling with Sir Andrew and claimed by Olivia as her groom in a hastily arranged wedding. Next Viola, as Cesario, is mistaken for Sebastian by Antonio, her brother's rescuer, and is saluted by Olivia as her recently married husband, prompting Orsino's wrath at being betrayed by his envoy. Chaos and confusion give way to wonderment, reunion, and affection with the appearance of Sebastian on stage to the astonishment of Olivia and Orsino, who see Cesario's double, and to the joy of Viola who is reunited with her lost brother. Olivia's shock at having married a perfect stranger, that the man she had loved as Cesario is a woman, and Orsino's loss of Olivia are happily resolved in a crescendo of wish fulfillment and poetic justice. Olivia fell in love with a woman but gains her male replica; Orsino learns that the page he has grown so fond of was actually a woman. Viola gains the man she loves, and the formerly lovesick Orsino now has an object of his affection worthy of his passion.

The one discordant note in the festivities is Malvolio. He is released from his confinement, and Olivia learns of the "sportful malice" of his deception. Invited to share the joke and acknowledge its justification, Malvolio exits with a curse on the guilty and the innocent alike: "I'll be revenged on the whole pack of you." Shakespeare allows Malvolio's dissent to the comic climax of love and laughter to stand. Malvolio, as Olivia acknowledges, has "been most notoriously abused." Much of the laughter of *Twelfth Night* has come at his expense, and if the play breaks through the selfish privacy of Orsino and Olivia into love, companionship, and harmony, Malvolio remains implacable and unresolved. He is an embodiment of the dark counterforce of hatred and evil that will begin to dominate Shakespeare's imagination and claim mastery in the tragedies and the dark comedies. *Twelfth Night* ends in the joyful fulfillment of love's triumph, but the sense of this being the exception not the rule is sounded by Feste's concluding song in which rain, not sunshine, is the norm, and *Twelfth Night* comes only once a year:

When that I was and a little tiny boy, With hey, ho, the wind and the rain,

A foolish thing was but a toy, For the rain it raineth every day.

But when I came to man's estate, With hey, ho, the wind and the rain,

'Gainst knaves and thieves men shut their gate, For the rain it raineth every day.

But when I came, alas, to wive, With hey, ho, the wind and the rain,

By swaggering could I never thrive, For the rain it raineth every day.

But when I came unto my beds, With hey, ho, the wind and the rain, With

tospots still had drunken heads,

For the rain it raineth every day.

A great while ago the world begun, With hey, ho, the wind and the rain,

But that's all one, our play is done, And we'll strive to please you every day.

ANTONY AND CLEOPATRA

(c. 1607) *by William Shakespeare*

Antony and Cleopatra is the definitive tragedy of passion, and in it the ironic and heroic themes, the day world of history and the night world of passion, expand into natural forces of cosmological proportions.

—Northrup Frye, “The Tailors of the Earth: The Tragedy of Passion,” in *Fools of Time: Studies in Shakespearean Tragedy*

Among William Shakespeare’s great tragedies, *Antony and Cleopatra* is the anomaly. Written around 1607, following the completion of the sequence of tragedies that began with *HAMLET* and concluded with *MACBETH*, *Antony and Cleopatra* stands in marked contrast from them in tone, theme, and structure. For his last great tragedy, Shakespeare returned to his first, *ROMEO AND JULIET*. Like it, *Antony and Cleopatra* is a love story that ends in a double suicide; however, the lovers here are not teenagers, but the middle-aged Antony and Cleopatra whose battle between private desires and public responsibilities is played out with world domination in the balance. Having raised adolescent love to the level of tragic seriousness in *Romeo and Juliet*, Shakespeare here dramatizes a love story on a massive, global scale. If *Hamlet*, *OTHELLO*, *KING LEAR*, and *Macbeth* conclude with the prescribed pity and terror, *Anthony and Cleopatra* ends very differently with pity and triumph, as the title lovers, who have lost the world, enact a kind of triumphant marriage in death. Losing everything, they manage to win much more by choosing love over worldly power. *Antony and Cleopatra* is the last in a series of plays, beginning with *Romeo and Juliet* and including *Troilus and Cressida* and *Othello*, that explores the connection between love and tragedy. It also can be seen as the first of the playwright’s final series of romances, followed by *Cymbeline*, *The Winter’s Tale*, and *The Tempest* in which love eventually triumphs over every obstacle. *Antony and Cleopatra* is therefore a peculiar tragedy of affirmation, setting the dominant tone of Shakespeare’s final plays.

Structurally, as well, *Antony and Cleopatra* is exceptional. Ranging over the Mediterranean world from Egypt to Rome to Athens, Sicily, and Syria, the play has 44 scenes, more than twice the average number in Shakespeare’s plays. The effect is a dizzying rush of events, approximating the method of montage in film. Shakespeare’s previous tragedies were constructed around a few major scenes. Here there are so many entrances and exits, so many shifts of locations and incidents that Samuel Johnson condemned the play as a mere string of episodes “produced without any art of connection or care of disposition.” Later critics have

discovered the play's organizing principle in its thematic contrast between Rome and Egypt, supported by an elaborate pattern of images, contrasts, and juxtapositions. There is still, however, disagreement over issues of Shakespeare's methods and intentions in *Antony and Cleopatra*. Critic Howard Felperin has suggested that the play "creates an ambiguity of effect and response unprecedented even within Shakespeare's work." The critical debate turns on how to interpret Antony and Cleopatra, perhaps the most complex, contradictory, and fascinating characters Shakespeare ever created.

Antony and Cleopatra picks up where *Julius Caesar* left off. Four years after Caesar's murder, an alliance among Octavius, Julius Caesar's grandnephew; Mark Antony; and the patrician politician Lepidus has put down the conspiracy led by Brutus and Cassius and resulted in a division of the Roman world among them. Antony, given the eastern sphere of the empire to rule, is now in Alexandria, where he has fallen in love with the Egyptian queen Cleopatra. Enthralled, Antony has ignored repeated summonses to return to Rome to attend to his political responsibilities. By pursuing his desires instead, in the words of his men, Antony, "the triple pillar of the world," has been "transform'd into a strumpet's fool." The play immediately establishes a dominant thematic contrast between Rome and Egypt that represents two contrasting worldviews and value systems. Rome is duty, rationality, and the practical world of politics; Egypt, embodied by its queen, is private needs, sensual pleasure, and revelry. The play's tragedy stems from the irreconcilable division between the two, represented in the play's two major movements: Antony's abandoning Cleopatra and Egypt for Rome and his duties and his subsequent defection back to them. Antony's lieutenant Enobarbus functions in the play as Antony's conscience, whose sexual cynicism stands in contrast to the love-drenched Egyptian court.

Antony is forced to take action when he learns that his wife, Fulvia, who started a rebellion against Octavius, has died, and that Sextus Pompey, son of Pompey the Great, is claiming his right to power by harrying Octavius on the seas. His resolve to return to Rome to take up his duties there displeases Cleopatra, and they engage in a back-and-forth lover's exchange of insults, avowals of love, and jealous recriminations and, ultimately, a mutual awareness of Antony's dilemma in trying to reconcile his personal desires with his political responsibilities. Antony comforts Cleopatra by saying:

Our separation so abides and flies, That thou residing here, goes yet with me;
And I hence fleeting, here remain with thee.

The second act begins in the house of Sextus Pompey, who gauges the weakness of the three triumvirs, especially Antony, whom he hopes will continue to be distracted by Cleopatra: "Let witchcraft join with beauty, lust with both, / Tie up

the libertine in a field of feasts.” In the house of Lepidus, a quarrel between Antony and Octavius over Fulvia’s rebellion and Antony’s irresponsibility threatens to sever the bond between them. Agrippa, Octavius’s general, suggests a marriage between Antony and Octavius’s sister, Octavia. Antony agrees to the marriage as a political necessity, for the good of Rome and to patch up the quarrel. After Antony and Octavius leave to visit Octavia, Enobarbus tells Agrippa and Maecenas, another follower of Octavius, about the splendors of Egypt and Cleopatra’s remarkable allure. Maecenas remarks sadly that, because of the marriage, “Now Antony / Must leave her utterly.” Enobarbus, despite his cynicism, understands Cleopatra’s powerful attractiveness and disagrees:

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.

Enobarbus’s remarks make clear that the alliance between Antony and Octavius will be short lived, setting both on a collision course.

After his marriage Antony consults an Egyptian soothsayer, who predicts Octavius’s rise and counsels Antony to return to Egypt:

Nobel, courageous, high, unmatched,
Where Caesar’s is not. But near him thy
angel Becomes afraid, as being o’erpowered.
Therefore Make space enough
between you.

Angrily dismissing the soothsayer, Antony nevertheless agrees with his analysis, recognizing that “I’th’ East my pleasure lies.” Before Antony leaves for Egypt, however, the triumvirs and rebels meet on Pompey’s galley for a night of drinking and feasting following negotiations. Antony’s capacity for raucous merrymaking shows the self-indulgence that will lead to his downfall, while Octavius’s sobriety, if puritanical and passionless, nevertheless bespeaks an iron will and determination that eventually will insure his victory over his rivals.

As the third act begins, Ventidius, another of Antony’s commanders, has conquered the Parthians, a victory for which he diplomatically plans to let Antony take credit. Antony, now in Athens with Octavia, learns that Octavius has slandered him and is warring against Pompey. The alliance between the two triumvirs, as well as Antony’s control over his own forces, is further threatened when Antony discovers that Octavius has imprisoned Lepidus to solidify his position and that one of his officers has murdered Pompey. Octavia returns to Rome to try to repair the breach between husband and brother. There, Octavius tells her that Antony has returned to Egypt and convinces her that Antony is not only unfaithful but is preparing for war: “He hath given his empire / Up to a whore.” Octavius responds by preparing to engage Antony in battle at Actium. In Egypt Enobarbus fails to convince Cleopatra not to take part in the battle, and the

lovers also discount Enobarbus's logical reasons for fighting Octavius on land rather than sea. This decision is partly due to Octavius's challenge: He dares Antony to meet him in a naval engagement. Cleopatra claims, "I have sixty sails. Octavius none better," and Antony is unable to resist either Octavius's challenge or Cleopatra's bravado. At Actium a sickened Enobarbus watches as Cleopatra's ships turn tail and flee, and a despairing, shame-filled Antony follows her "like a doting mallard" with his ships. Cleopatra apologizes to Antony for the retreat, and he forgives her, but when Antony sees Octavius's ambassador kissing Cleopatra's hand and her cordial behavior toward him, he becomes enraged, berating Cleopatra and ordering the messenger Thidias to be whipped. Again the couple are reconciled, and Antony decides to stake all on another battle. Enobarbus, however, has had enough of Antony's clouded judgment and makes plans to desert him and join Octavius.

In the fourth act Octavius scoffs at Antony's challenge to meet him in a duel and prepares for war with confidence, knowing that many of his rival's men have defected to him. When Antony learns of Enobarbus's desertion he forgives his friend and generously sends his treasure to him. Enobarbus reacts to Antony's magnanimity with remorse and dies desiring Antony's forgiveness. Antony scores an initial victory over Octavius, but in a later sea battle and on land in the Egyptian desert, Antony's army is routed. Enraged, Antony blames Cleopatra and accuses her of betraying him. Terrified by his anger, Cleopatra seeks refuge in her monument and plots to regain Antony's affection by sending word to him that she has slain herself. Her plan disastrously misfires when the news shames Antony into taking his own life:

I will o'ertake thee, Cleopatra, and Weep for my pardon. So it must be, for now
All length is torture; since the torch is out, Lie down and stray no farther.

He orders his servant Eros to stab him, but Eros takes his own life instead to prevent carrying out the order. Antony then falls upon his sword and when he is told that Cleopatra is still alive, asks to be taken to her in a final acknowledgment that his life and happiness are inextricably bound to her. Just before he dies Antony offers his own eulogy at the end of his long struggle between desire and duty:

The miserable change now at my end Lament nor sorrow at; but please your
thoughts In feeding them with those my former fortunes Wherein I liv'd the
greatest prince o' th' world, The noblest; and do now not basely die, Not
cowardly put off my helmet to My countryman—a Roman by a Roman Valiantly
vanquish'd.

In the fifth act Octavius hears of Antony's death and mourns the passing of a great warrior before moving to procure his spoils: Cleopatra. He sends word that she has

nothing to fear from him, but Cleopatra tries to stab herself to prevent the Roman soldiers from taking her prisoner and is stopped. When Dolabella, one of Octavius's lieutenants, attempts to placate her, she accuses him of lying, and he admits that Octavius plans to display her as his conquest in Rome. Octavius arrives, promising to treat her well if she complies with his wishes while ominously threatening her destruction if she follows "Antony's course." Pretending compliance, Cleopatra says of Octavius to her attendants when he departs: "He words me, girls, he words me, that I should not / Be noble to myself." Sending for a basket of figs containing poisonous snakes, Cleopatra prepares herself for death:

Give me my robe, put on my crown, I have Immortal longings in me. Now no more The juice of Egypt's grace shall moist this lip.

Stage-managing her own end, Cleopatra anticipates joining Antony as his worthy wife:

. . . Methinks I hear Antony call. I see him rouse himself

To praise my noble act. I hear him mock The luck of Caesar, which the gods give men

To excuse their after wrath. Husband, I come. Now to that name my courage prove my title!

Placing one of the snakes at her breast, Cleopatra dies. When Octavius returns, he speaks admiringly of her:

Bravest at the last, She levell'd at our purposes, and being royal,

Took her own way.

Implying by his words an envy of Antony and Cleopatra's passion and eminence, Octavius commands:

She shall be buried by her Antony; No grave upon the earth shall clip in it A pair so famous. High events as these Strike those that make them; and their story is No less in pity than his glory which Brought them to be lamented.

In the contest with Rome, Egypt must lose. Desire is no match against cold calculation for worldly power. Human frailty cannot survive an iron will, and yet the play makes its case that despite all the contradictions and clear character imperfections in Antony and Cleopatra, with all their willful self-indulgence, their love trumps all. By the manner of their going and the human values they ultimately assert, Antony and Cleopatra leave an immense emptiness by their

death. Octavius wins, but the world loses by their passing. Shakespeare stages an argument on behalf of what makes us human, even at the cost of an empire. His lovers rise to the tragic occasion for a concluding triumph befitting a magnanimous warrior and a queen of “infinite variety.”

ROMEO AND JULIET

(c. 1595) by

William Shakespeare

Shakespeare, more than any other author, has instructed the West in the catastrophes of sexuality, and has invented the formula that the sexual becomes the erotic when crossed by the shadow of death. There had to be one high song of the erotic by Shakespeare, one lyrical and tragicomical paean celebrating an unmixed love and lamenting its inevitable destruction. Romeo and Juliet is unmatched, in Shakespeare and in the world's literature, as a vision of an uncompromising mutual love that perishes of its own idealism and intensity.

—Harold Bloom, *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human*

Romeo and Juliet, regarded by many as William Shakespeare's first great play, is generally thought to have been written around 1595. Shakespeare was then 31 years old, married for 12 years and the father of three children. He had been acting and writing in London for five years. His stage credits included mainly histories—the three parts of *Henry VI* and *Richard III*—and comedies—*The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, *The Taming of the Shrew*, *The Comedy of Errors*, and *Love's Labour's Lost*. Shakespeare's first tragedy, modeled on Seneca, *Titus Andronicus*, was written around 1592. From that year through 1595 Shakespeare had also composed 154 sonnets and two long narrative poems in the erotic tradition—*Venus and Adonis* and *The Rape of Lucrece*. Both his dramatic and nondramatic writing show Shakespeare mastering Elizabethan literary conventions. Then, around 1595, Shakespeare composed three extraordinary plays—*Richard II*, *A MIDSUMMER NIGHT'S DREAM*, and *Romeo and Juliet*—in three different genres— history, comedy, and tragedy—signaling a new mastery, originality, and excellence. With these three plays Shakespeare emerged from the shadows of his influences and initiated a period of unexcelled accomplishment. The two parts of *HENRY IV* and *Julius Caesar* would follow, along with the romantic comedies *The Merchant of Venice*, *As You Like It*, and *TWELFTH NIGHT* and the great tragedies *HAMLET*, *OTHELLO*, *KING LEAR*, *MACBETH*, and *ANTONY AND CLEOPATRA*. The three plays of 1595, therefore, serve as an important bridge between Shakespeare's apprenticeship and his mature achievements. *Romeo and Juliet*, in particular, is a crucial play in the evolution of Shakespeare's tragic vision, in his integration of poetry and drama, and in his initial exploration of the connection between love and tragedy that he would continue in *Troilus and Cressida*, *Othello*, and *Antony and Cleopatra*. *Romeo and Juliet* is not only one of the greatest love stories in all literature, considering its stage history and the musicals, opera, music, ballet, literary works, and films that it has inspired; it is quite possibly the most popular play of all time. There is simply no more famous pair of lovers than Romeo and Juliet, and their story has become

an inescapable central myth in our understanding of romantic love.

Despite the play's persistence, cultural saturation, and popular appeal, *Romeo and Juliet* has fared less well with scholars and critics, who have generally judged it inferior to the great tragedies that followed. Instead of the later tragedies of character *Romeo and Juliet* has been downgraded as a tragedy of chance, and, in the words of critic James Calderwood, the star-crossed lovers are "insufficiently endowed with complexity" to become tragic heroes. Instead "they become a study of victimage and sacrifice, not tragedy." What is too often missing in a consideration of the shortcomings of *Romeo and Juliet* by contrast with the later tragedies is the radical departure the play represented when compared to what preceded it. Having relied on Senecan horror for his first tragedy, *Titus Andronicus*, Shakespeare located his next in the world of comedy and romance. *Romeo and Juliet* is set not in antiquity, as Elizabethan convention dictated for a tragic subject, but in 16th-century Verona, Italy. His tragic protagonists are neither royal nor noble, as Aristotle advised, but two teenagers caught up in the petty disputes of their families. The plight of young lovers pitted against parental or societal opposition was the expected subject, since Roman times, of comedy, not tragedy. By showing not the eventual triumph but the death of the two young lovers Shakespeare violated comic conventions, while making a case that love and its consequences could be treated with an unprecedented tragic seriousness. As critic Harry Levin has observed, Shakespeare's contemporaries "would have been surprised, and possibly shocked at seeing lovers taken so seriously. Legend, it had been heretofore taken for granted, was the proper matter for serious drama; romance was the stuff of the comic stage."

Shakespeare's innovations are further evident in comparison to his source material. The plot was a well-known story in Italian, French, and English versions. Shakespeare's direct source was Arthur Brooke's poem *The Tragical Historye of Romeus and Juliet* (1562). This moralistic work was intended as a warning to youth against "dishonest desire" and disobeying parental authority. Shakespeare, by contrast, purifies and ennobles the lovers' passion, intensifies the pathos, and underscores the injustice of the lovers' destruction. Compressing the action from Brooke's many months into a five-day crescendo, Shakespeare also expands the roles of secondary characters such as Mercutio and Juliet's nurse into vivid portraits that contrast the lovers' elevated lyricism with a bawdy earthiness and worldly cynicism. Shakespeare transforms Brooke's plodding verse into a tour de force verbal display that is supremely witty, if at times over elaborate, and, at its best, movingly expressive. If the poet and the dramatist are not yet seamlessly joined in *Romeo and Juliet*, the play still displays a considerable advance in Shakespeare's orchestration of verse, image, and incident that would become the hallmark of his greatest achievements.

The play's theme and outcome are announced in the Prologue:

Two households, both alike in dignity, In fair Verona, where we lay our scene, From ancient grudge break to new mutiny, Where civil blood makes civil hands unclean. From forth the fatal loins of these two foes A pair of star-cross'd lovers take their life; Whose misadventur'd piteous overthrows Doth with their death bury their parents' strife.

Suspense over the lovers' fate is eliminated at the outset as Shakespeare emphasizes the forces that will destroy them. The initial scene makes this clear as a public brawl between servants of the feuding Montagues and Capulets escalates to involve kinsmen and the patriarchs on both sides, ended only when the Prince of Verona enforces a cease-fire under penalty of death for future offenders of the peace. Romeo, Montague's young son, does not participate in the scuffle since he is totally absorbed by a hopeless passion for a young, unresponsive beauty named Rosaline. Initially Romeo appears as a figure of mockery, the embodiment of the hypersensitive, melancholy adolescent lover, who is urged by his kinsman Benvolio to resist sinking "under love's heavy burden" and seek another more worthy of his affection. Another kinsman, Mercutio, for whom love is more a game of easy conquest, urges Romeo to "be rough with love" and master his circumstances. When by chance it is learned that Rosaline is to attend a party at the Capulets, Benvolio suggests that they should go as well for Romeo to compare Rosaline's charms with the other beauties at the party and thereby cure his infatuation. There Romeo sees Juliet, Capulet's not-yet 14-year-old daughter. Her parents are encouraging her to accept a match with Count Paris for the social benefit of the family. Love as affectation and love as advantage are transformed into love as all-consuming, mutual passion at first sight. Romeo claims that he "ne'er saw true beauty till this night," and by the force of that beauty, he casts off his former melancholic self-absorption. Juliet is no less smitten. Sending her nurse to learn the stranger's identity, she worries, "If he be married, / My grave is like to be my wedding bed." Both are shocked to learn that they are on either side of the family feud, and their risk is underscored when the Capulet kinsman, Tybalt, recognizes Romeo and, though prevented by Capulet from violence at the party, swears future vengeance. Tybalt's threat underscores that this is a play as much about hate as about love, in which Romeo and Juliet's passion is increasingly challenged by the public and family forces that deny love's authority.

The first of the couple's two great private moments in which love's redemptive and transformative power works its magic follows in possibly the most famous single scene in all of drama, set in the Capulets' orchard, overlooked by Juliet's bedroom window. In some of the most impassioned, lyrical, and famous verses Shakespeare ever wrote, the lovers' dialogue perfectly captures the ecstasy of love and love's capacity to remake the world. Seeing Juliet above at her window,

Romeo says:

But soft! What light through yonder window breaks? It is the East, and Juliet is the sun! Arise, fair sun, and kill the envious moon, Who is already sick and pale with grief

That thou her maid art far more fair than she.

He overhears Juliet's declaration of her love for him and the rejection of what is implied if a Capulet should love a Montague:

O Romeo, Romeo! wherefore art thou Romeo? Deny thy father and refuse thy name! Or, if thou wilt not, be but sworn my love, And I'll no longer be a Capulet. . . .

'Tis but thy name that is my enemy. Thou art thyself, though not a Montague. What's Montague? it is nor hand, nor foot, Nor arm, nor face, nor any other part Belonging to a man. O, be some other name! What's in a name? That which we call a rose By any other name would smell as sweet. So Romeo would, were he not Romeo call'd, Retain that dear perfection which he owes Without that title. Romeo, doff thy name; And for that name, which is no part of thee, Take all myself.

In a beautifully modulated scene the lovers freely admit their passion and exchange vows of love that become a marriage proposal. As Juliet continues to be called back to her room and all that is implied as Capulet's daughter, time and space become the barriers to love's transcendent power to unite.

With the assistance of Friar Lawrence, who regards the union of a Montague and a Capulet as an opportunity "To turn your households' rancour to pure love," Romeo and Juliet are secretly married. Before nightfall and the anticipated consummation of their union Romeo is set upon by Tybalt, who is by Romeo's marriage, his new kinsman. Romeo accordingly refuses his challenge, but it is answered by Mercutio. Romeo tries to separate the two, but in the process Mercutio is mortally wounded. This is the tragic turn of the play as Romeo, enraged, rejects the principle of love forged with Juliet for the claims of reputation, the demand for vengeance, and an identification of masculinity with violent retribution:

My very friend, hath got this mortal hurt In my behalf; my reputation stain'd With Tybalt's slander—Tybalt, that an hour Hath been my kinsman. O sweet Juliet, Thy beauty hath made me effeminate

And in my temper soft'ned valour's steel!

After killing Tybalt, Romeo declares, “O, I am fortune’s fool!” He may blame circumstances for his predicament, but he is clearly culpable in capitulating to the values of society he had challenged in his love for Juliet.

The lovers are given one final moment of privacy before the catastrophe. Juliet, awaiting Romeo’s return, gives one of the play’s most moving speeches, balancing sublimity with an intimation of mortality that increasingly accompanies the lovers:

Come, gentle night; come, loving, black-brow’d night;
Give me my Romeo; and, when he shall die,
Take him and cut him out in little stars,
And he will make the face of heaven so fine

That all the world will be in love with night
And pay no worship to the garish sun.

Learning the terrible news of Tybalt’s death and Romeo’s banishment, Juliet wins her own battle between hate and love and sends word to Romeo to keep their appointed night together before they are parted.

As Romeo is away in Mantua Juliet’s parents push ahead with her wedding to Paris. The solution to Juliet’s predicament is offered by Friar Lawrence who gives her a drug that will make it appear she has died. The Friar is to summon Romeo, who will rescue her when she awakes in the Capulet family tomb. The Friar’s message to Romeo fails to reach him, and Romeo learns of Juliet’s death. Reversing his earlier claim of being “fortune’s fool,” Romeo reacts by declaring, “Then I defy you, stars,” rushing to his wife and breaking society’s

rules by acquiring the poison to join her in death. Reaching the tomb Romeo is surprised to find Paris on hand, weeping for his lost bride. Outraged by the intrusion on his grief Paris confronts Romeo. They fight, and after killing Paris, Romeo finally recognizes him and mourns him as “Mercutio’s kinsman.” Inside the tomb Romeo sees Tybalt’s corpse and asks forgiveness before taking leave of Juliet with a kiss:

. . . O, here Will I set up my everlasting rest

And shake the yoke of inauspicious stars
From this world-wearied flesh.

Juliet awakes to see Romeo dead beside her. Realizing what has happened, she responds by taking his dagger and plunges it into her breast: “This is thy sheath; there rest, and let me die.”

Montagues, Capulets, and the Prince arrive, and the Friar explains what has happened and why. His account of Romeo and Juliet’s tender passion and devotion shames the two families into ending their feud. The Prince provides the

final eulogy:

A glooming peace this morning with it brings. The sun for sorrow will not show his head. Go hence, to have more talk of these sad things; Some shall be pardon'd, and some punished; For never was a story of more woe

Than this of Juliet and her Romeo.

The sense of loss Verona and the audience feels at the lovers' deaths is a direct result of Shakespeare's remarkable ability to conjure love in all its transcendent power, along with its lethal risks. Set on a collision course with the values bent on denying love's sway, Romeo and Juliet manage to create a dreamlike, alternative, private world that is so touching because it is so brief and perishable. Shakespeare's triumph here is to make us care that adolescent romance matters—emotionally, psychologically, and socially—and that the premature and unjust death of lovers rival in profundity and significance the fall of kings.

KING LEAR

Shakespeare

(c. 1605–06) *by William*

There is perhaps no play which keeps the attention so strongly fixed; which so much agitates our passions and interests our curiosity. The artful involutions of distinct interests, the striking opposition of contrary characters, the sudden changes of fortune, and the quick succession of events, fill the mind with a perpetual tumult of indignation, pity, and hope. There is no scene which does not contribute to the aggravation of the distress or conduct of the action, and scarce a line which does not conduce to the progress of the scene. So powerful is the current of the poet's imagination, that the mind, which once ventures within it, is hurried irresistibly along.

—Samuel Johnson, *The Plays of William Shakespeare*

For its unsurpassed combination of sheer terrifying force and its existential and cosmic reach, *King Lear* leads this ranking as drama's supreme achievement. The notion that *King Lear* is Shakespeare's (and by implication drama's) greatest play is certainly debatable, but consensus in its favor has gradually coalesced over the centuries since its first performance around 1606. During and immediately following William Shakespeare's lifetime, there is no evidence that *King Lear* was particularly valued over other of the playwright's dramas. It was later considered a play in need of an improving makeover. In 1681 poet and dramatist Nahum Tate, calling *King Lear* "a Heap of Jewels unstrung and unpolish'd," altered what many Restoration critics and audiences found unbecoming and unbearable in the drama. Tate eliminated the Fool, whose presence was considered too vulgar for a proper tragedy, and gave the play a happy ending, restoring Lear to his throne and arranging the marriage of Cordelia and Edgar, neatly tying together with poetic justice the double strands of Shakespeare's far bleaker drama. Tate's bowdlerization of *King Lear* continued to be presented throughout the 18th century, and the original play was not performed again until 1826. By then the Romantics had reclaimed Shakespeare's version, and an appreciation of the majesty and profundity of *King Lear* as Shakespeare's greatest achievement had begun. Samuel Taylor Coleridge declared the play "the most tremendous effort of Shakespeare as a poet"; while Percy Bysshe Shelley considered it "the most perfect specimen of the dramatic art existing in the world." John Keats, who described the play as "the fierce dispute / Betwixt damnation and impassion'd

clay,” offered *King Lear* as the best example of the intensity, with its “close relationship with Beauty & Truth,” that is the “Excellence of every Art.” Dissenting voices, however, challenged the supremacy of *King Lear*. Essayist Charles Lamb judged the play to have “nothing in it but what is painful and disgusting” and deemed it “essentially impossible to be represented on a stage.” The great Shakespearean scholar A. C. Bradley acknowledged *King Lear* as “Shakespeare’s greatest achievement” but “not his best play.” For Bradley, *King Lear*, with its immense scope and the variety and intensity of its scenes, is simply “too huge for the stage.” Perhaps the most notorious dissenter against the greatness of *King Lear* was Leo Tolstoy, who found its fablelike unreality reprehensible and ruled it a “very bad, carelessly composed production” that “cannot evoke amongst us anything but aversion and weariness.” Such qualifications and dismissals began to diminish in light of 20th-century history. The existential vision of *King Lear* has seemed even more pertinent and telling as a reflection of the human condition; while modern dramatic artistry with its contrapuntal structure and anti-realistic elements has caught up with Shakespeare’s play. Today *King Lear* is commonly judged unsurpassed in its dramatization of so many painful but inescapable human and cosmic truths.

King Lear is based on a well-known story from ancient Celtic and British mythology, first given literary form by Geoffrey of Monmouth in his *History of the Kings of Britain* (c. 1137). Raphael Holinshed later repeated the story of Lear and his daughters in his *Chronicles* (1587), and Edmund Spenser, the first to name the youngest daughter, presents the story in book 2 of *The Faerie Queene* (1589). A dramatic version—*The True Chronicle History of King Leir and his three daughters, Gonerill, Ragan, and Cordella*—appeared around 1594. All these versions record Lear dividing his kingdom, disinheriting his youngest daughter, and being driven out by his two eldest daughters before reuniting with his youngest, who helps restore him to the throne and bring her wicked sisters to justice. Shakespeare is the first to give the story an unhappy ending, to turn it from a sentimental, essentially comic tale in which the good are eventually rewarded and the evil punished into a cosmic tragedy. Other plot elements—Lear’s madness, Cordelia’s hanging, Lear’s death from a broken heart, as well as Kent’s devotion and the role of the Fool—are also Shakespeare’s inventions, as is the addition of the parallel plot of Gloucester and his sons, which Shakespeare adapted from a tale in Philip Sidney’s *Arcadia*. The play’s double plot in which the central situation of Lear’s suffering and self-knowledge is paralleled and counterpointed in Gloucester’s circumstances makes *King Lear* different from all the other great tragedies. The effect widens and deepens the play into a universal tragedy of symphonic proportions.

King Lear opens with the tragic turning point in its very first scene. Compared to the long delays in *HAMLET* and *OTHELLO* for the decisive tragic blow to fall, *King*

Lear, like *MACBETH*, shifts its emphasis from cause to consequence. The play foregoes nearly all exposition or character development and immediately presents a show trial with devastating consequences. The aging Lear has decided to divest himself of kingly responsibilities by dividing his kingdom among his three daughters. Although the maps of the divisions are already drawn, Lear stages a contest for his daughters to claim their portion by a public profession of their love. "Tell me, my daughters," Lear commands, ". . . Which of you shall we say doth love us most." Lear's self-indulgence— bargaining power for love—is both a disruption of the political and natural order and an essential human violation in his demanding an accounting of love that defies the means of measuring it. Goneril and Regan, however, vie to outdo the other in fulsome pledges of their love, while Cordelia, the favorite, responds to Lear's question "what can you say to draw / A third more opulent than your sisters" with the devastatingly honest truth: "Nothing," a word that will reverberate through the entire play. Cordelia forcefully and simply explains that she loves Lear "According to my bond, no more nor less." Lear is too blind and too needy to appreciate her fidelity or yet understand the nature of love, or the ingenuous flattery of his older daughters. He responds to the hurt he feels by exiling the one who loves him most authentically and deeply. The rest of the play will school Lear in his mistake, teaching him the lesson of humanity that he violates in the play's opening scene.

The devastating consequences of his decision follow. Lear learns that he cannot give away power and still command allegiance from Goneril or Regan. Their avowals of love quickly turn into disrespect for a now useless and demanding parent. From the opening scene in which Lear appears in all his regal splendor, he will be successively stripped of all that invests a king in majesty and insulates a human being from firsthand knowledge of suffering and core existential truths. Urged to give up 50 of his attending knights by Goneril, Lear claims more gratitude from Regan, who joins her sister in further whittling down Lear's retinue from 100 knights to 50, to 25, 10, 5, to none, ironically in the language of calculation of the first scene. Lear explodes:

O, reason not the need! Our basest beggars
Are in the poorest thing superfluous.
Allow not nature more than nature needs,
Man's life is cheap as beast's.

Lear is now readied to face reality as a "poorest thing." Lear's betrayal by his daughters is paralleled by the treachery of the earl

of Gloucester's bastard son, Edmund, who plots to supplant the legitimate son, Edgar, and eventually claim supremacy over his father. Edmund, one of the most calculating and cold-blooded of Shakespeare's villains, rejects all the bonds of family and morality early on in the play by affirming: "Thou, Nature, art my

goddess, to thy law / My services are bound.” Refusing to accept the values of a society that rejects him as a bastard, Edmund will operate only by the laws of survival of the fittest in a relentless drive for dominance. He convinces Edgar that Gloucester means to kill him, forcing his brother into exile, disguised as Tom o’ Bedlam, a mad beggar. In the play’s overwhelming third act—perhaps the most overpowering in all of drama—Edgar encounters Lear, his Fool, and his lone retainer, the disguised Kent, whom Lear had banished in the first scene for challenging Lear’s treatment of Cordelia. The scene is a deserted heath with a fierce storm raging, as Lear, maddened by the treatment of his daughters, rails at his fate in apocalyptic fury:

Blow, winds, and crack your cheeks! Rage, blow
You cataracts and hurricanoes,
spout Till you have drenched our steeples,
drowned the cocks! You sulphurous
and thought-executing fires,
Vaunt-couriers to oak-cleaving thunderbolts,
Singe my white head; and thou all-shaking thunder,
Strike flat the thick rotundity o’ th’
world, Crack nature’s mould,
all germens spill at once,
That makes ingrateful man.

The storm is a brilliant expressionistic projection of Lear’s inner fury, with his language universalizing his private experience in a combat with elemental forces. Beseeking divine justice, Lear is bereft and inconsolable, declaring “My wits begin to turn.” His descent into madness is completed when he meets the disguised Edgar who serves as Lear’s mirror and emblem of humanity as “unaccommodated man”—a “poor, bare, forked animal”:

Poor naked wretches, wheresoe’er you are,
That bid the pelting of this pitiless
storm, How shall your houseless heads
and unfed sides, Your looped and
windowed raggedness, defend you
From seasons such as these? O, I have ta’en

Too little care of this. Take physic, pomp,
Expose thyself to feel what wretches
feel, That thou mayst shake the superflux
to them And show the heavens more
just.

Lear’s suffering has led him to compassion and an understanding of the human needs he had formerly ignored. It is one of the rare moments of regenerative hope before the play plunges into further chaos and violence.

Act 3 concludes with what has been called the most horrifying scene in dramatic literature. Gloucester is condemned as a traitor for colluding with Cordelia and the French invasion force. Cornwall, Regan’s husband, orders Gloucester bound and rips out one of his eyes. Urged on by Regan (“One side will mock another; th’ other too”), Cornwall completes Gloucester’s blinding after a protesting servant stabs Cornwall and is slain by Regan. In agony, Gloucester calls out for Edmund as Regan supplies the crushing truth:

Out, treacherous villain! Thou call'st on him that hates thee. It was he That made the overture of thy treasons to us, Who is too good to pity thee.

Oedipus-like, Gloucester, though blind, now sees the truth of Edmund's villainy and Edgar's innocence. Thrown out of the castle, he is ordered to "smell / His way to Dover."

Act 4 arranges reunions and the expectation that the suffering of both Lear and Gloucester will be compensated and villainy purged. Edgar, still posing as Poor Tom, meets his father and agrees to guide him to Dover where the despairing Gloucester intends to kill himself by jumping from its cliffs. On arriving, Edgar convinces his father that he has fallen and survived, and Gloucester accepts his preservation as an act of the gods and vows "Henceforth I'll bear / Affliction till it do cry out itself / 'Enough, enough,' and die." The act concludes with Lear's being reunited with Cordelia. Awaking in her tent, convinced that he has died, Lear gradually recognizes his daughter and begs her forgiveness as a "very foolish, fond old man."

The stage is now set in act 5 for a restoration of order and Lear, having achieved the requisite self-knowledge through suffering, but Shakespeare pushes the play beyond the reach of consolation. Although Edmund is bested in combat by his brother, and Regan is poisoned by Goneril before she kills herself, neither poetic nor divine justice prevails. Lear and Cordelia are taken prisoner, but their rescue comes too late. As Shakespeare's stage directions state, "Enter Lear with Cordelia in his arms," and the play concludes with one of the most heart-wrenching scenes and the most overpowering lines in all of drama. Lear, although desperate to believe that his beloved daughter is alive, gradually accepts the awful truth:

Why should a dog, a horse, a rat, have life, And thou no breath at all. Thou'lt come no more, Never, never, never, never, never!

Lear dies with this realization of cosmic injustice and indifference, while holding onto the illusion that Cordelia might still survive ("Look on her, look, her lips / Look there, look there!"). The play ends not with the restoration of divine, political, or familial order but in a final nihilistic vision. Shakespeare pushes the usual tragic progression of action leading to suffering and then to self-knowledge to a view into the abyss of life's purposelessness and cruelty. The best Shakespeare manages to affirm in the face of intractable human evil and cosmic indifference is the heroism of endurance. Urging his despairing father on, Edgar states in the play's opposition to despair:

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

Ultimately, *King Lear*, more than any other drama, in my view, allows its audience to test the limits of endurance in the face of mortality and meaninglessness. It has been said that only the greatest art sustains without consoling. There is no better example of this than *King Lear*.

HAMLET

Shakespeare

(c. 1600–01) *by William*

With Shakespeare the dramatic resolution conveys us, beyond the man-made sphere of poetic justice, toward the ever-receding horizons of cosmic irony. This is peculiarly the case with Hamlet, for the same reasons that it excites such intensive empathy from actors and readers, critics and writers alike. There may be other Shakespearean characters who are just as memorable, and other plots which are no less impressive; but nowhere else has the outlook of the individual in a dilemma been so profoundly realized; and a dilemma, by definition, is an all but unresolvable choice between evils. Rather than with calculation or casuistry, it should be met with virtue or readiness; sooner or later it will have to be grasped by one or the other of its horns. These, in their broadest terms, have been—for Hamlet, as we interpret him—the problem of what to believe and the problem of how to act.

—Harry Levin, *The Question of Hamlet*

Hamlet is almost certainly the world's most famous play, featuring drama's and literature's most fascinating and complex character. The many-sided Hamlet—son, lover, intellectual, prince, warrior, and avenger—is the consummate test for each generation's leading actors, and to be an era's defining Hamlet is perhaps the greatest accolade one can earn in the theater. The play is no less a proving ground for the critic and scholar, as successive generations have refashioned *Hamlet* in their own image, while finding in it new resonances and entry points to plumb its depths, perplexities, and possibilities. No other play has been analyzed so extensively, nor has any play had a comparable impact on our culture. The brooding young man in black, skull in hand, has moved out of the theater and into our collective consciousness and cultural myths, joining only a handful of comparable literary archetypes—Oedipus, Faust, and Don Quixote—who embody core aspects of human nature and experience. "It is *we*," the romantic critic William Hazlitt observed, "who are Hamlet."

Hamlet also commands a crucial, central place in William Shakespeare's dramatic career. First performed around 1600, the play stands near the mid-point of the playwright's two-decade career as a culmination and new departure. As the first of his great tragedies, *Hamlet* signals a decisive shift from the comedies and history plays that launched Shakespeare's career to the tragedies of his maturity. Although unquestionably linked both to the plays that came before and followed, *Hamlet* is

also markedly exceptional. At nearly 4,000 lines, almost twice the length of *MACBETH*, *Hamlet* is Shakespeare's longest and, arguably, his most ambitious play with an enormous range of characters— from royals to gravediggers—and incidents, including court, bedroom, and graveyard scenes and a play within a play. *Hamlet* also bristles with a seemingly inexhaustible array of ideas and themes, as well as a radically new strategy for presenting them, most notably, in transforming soliloquies from expositional and motivational asides to the audience into the verbalization of consciousness itself. As Shakespearean scholar Stephen Greenblatt has asserted, "In its moral complexity, psychological depth, and philosophical power, *Hamlet* seems to mark an epochal shift not only in Shakespeare's own career but in Western drama; it is as if the play were giving birth to a whole new kind of literary subjectivity." *Hamlet*, more than any other play that preceded it, turns its action inward to dramatize an isolated, conflicted psyche struggling to cope with a world that has lost all certainty and consolation. Struggling to reconcile two contradictory identities—the heroic man of action and duty and the Christian man of conscience—Prince Hamlet becomes the modern archetype of the self-divided, alienated individual, desperately searching for self-understanding and meaning. Hamlet must contend with crushing doubt without the support of traditional beliefs that dictate and justify his actions. In describing the arrival of the fragmentation and chaos of the modern world, Victorian poet and critic Matthew Arnold declared that "the calm, cheerfulness, the disinterested objectivity have disappeared, the dialogue of the mind with itself has commenced." *Hamlet* anticipates that dialogue by more than two centuries.

Like all of Shakespeare's plays, *Hamlet* makes strikingly original uses of borrowed material. The Scandinavian folk tale of Amleth, a prince called upon to avenge his father's murder by his uncle, was first given literary form by the Danish writer Saxo the Grammarian in his late-12th-century *Danish History* and later adapted in French in François de Belleforest's *Histoires tragiques* (1570). This early version of the Hamlet story provided Shakespeare with the basic characters and relationships but without the ghost or the revenger's uncertainty. In the story of Amleth there is neither doubt about the usurper's guilt nor any moral qualms in the fulfillment of the avenger's mission. In pre-Christian Denmark blood vengeance was a sanctioned filial obligation, not a potentially damnable moral or religious violation, and Amleth successfully accomplishes his duty by setting fire to the royal hall, killing his uncle, and proclaiming himself king of Denmark. Shakespeare's more immediate source may have been a now-lost English play (c. 1589) that scholars call the *Ur-Hamlet*. All that has survived concerning this play are a printed reference to a ghost who cried "Hamlet, revenge!" and criticism of the play's stale bombast. Scholars have attributed the *Ur-Hamlet* to playwright Thomas Kyd, whose greatest success was *The Spanish Tragedy* (1592), one of the earliest extant English tragedies. *The Spanish Tragedy* popularized the genre of the revenge tragedy, derived from Aeschylus's

ORESTEIA and the Latin plays of Seneca, to which *Hamlet* belongs. Kyd's play also features elements that Shakespeare echoes in *Hamlet*, including a secret crime, an impatient ghost demanding revenge, a protagonist tormented by uncertainty who feigns madness, a woman who actually goes mad, a play within a play, and a final bloodbath that includes the death of the avenger himself. An even more immediate possible source for *Hamlet* is John Marston's *Antonio's Revenge* (1599), another story of vengeance on a usurper by a sensitive protagonist.

Whether comparing *Hamlet* to its earliest source or the handling of the revenge plot by Kyd, Marston, or other Elizabethan or Jacobean playwrights, what stands out is the originality and complexity of Shakespeare's treatment, in his making radically new and profound uses of established stage conventions. *Hamlet* converts its sensational material—a vengeful ghost, a murder mystery, madness, a heartbroken maiden, a fistfight at her burial, and a climactic duel that results in four deaths—into a daring exploration of mortality, morality, perception, and core existential truths. Shakespeare put mystery, intrigue, and sensation to the service of a complex, profound epistemological drama. The critic Maynard Mack in an influential essay, “The World of *Hamlet*,” has usefully identified the play's “interrogative mode.” From the play's opening words—“Who's there?”—to “What is this quintessence of dust?” through drama's most famous soliloquy—“To be, or not to be, that is the question.”—*Hamlet* “reverberates with questions, anguished, meditative, alarmed.” The problematic nature of reality and the gap between truth and appearance stand behind the play's conflicts, complicating Hamlet's search for answers and his fulfillment of his role as avenger.

Hamlet opens with startling evidence that “something is rotten in the state of Denmark.” The ghost of Hamlet's father, King Hamlet, has been seen in Elsinore, now ruled by his brother, Claudius, who has quickly married his widowed queen, Gertrude. When first seen, Hamlet is aloof and skeptical of Claudius's justifications for his actions on behalf of restoring order in the state. Hamlet is morbidly and suicidally disillusioned by the realization of mortality and the baseness of human nature prompted by the sudden death of his father and his mother's hasty, and in Hamlet's view, incestuous remarriage to her brother-in-law:

O that this too too solid flesh would melt,
Thaw, and resolve itself into a dew!
Or that the Everlasting had not fix'd
His canon 'gainst self-slaughter!
O God! God!

How weary, stale, flat, and unprofitable
Seem to me all the uses of this
world!
Fie on't! ah, fie!
'Tis an unweeded garden
That grows to seed;
things rank and gross in nature
Possess it merely.
That it should come to this!

A recent student at the University of Wittenberg, whose alumni included Martin Luther and the fictional Doctor Faustus, Hamlet is an intellectual of the Protestant Reformation, who, like Luther and Faustus, tests orthodoxy while struggling to

formulate a core philosophy. Brought to encounter the apparent ghost of his father, Hamlet alone hears the ghost's words that he was murdered by Claudius and is compelled out of his suicidal despair by his pledge of revenge. However, despite the riveting presence of the ghost, Hamlet is tormented by doubts. Is the ghost truly his father's spirit or a devilish apparition tempting Hamlet to his damnation? Is Claudius truly his father's murderer? By taking revenge does Hamlet do right or wrong? Despite swearing vengeance, Hamlet delays for two months before taking any action, feigning madness better to learn for himself the truth about Claudius's guilt. Hamlet's strange behavior causes Claudius's counterinvestigation to assess Hamlet's mental state. School friends—Rosencrantz and Guildenstern—are summoned to learn what they can; Polonius, convinced that Hamlet's is a madness of love for his daughter Ophelia, stages an encounter between the lovers that can be observed by Claudius. The court world at Elsinore, is, therefore, ruled by trickery, deception, role playing, and disguise, and the so-called problem of Hamlet, of his delay in acting, is directly related to his uncertainty in knowing the truth. Moreover, the suspicion of his father's murder and his mother's sexual betrayal shatter Hamlet's conception of the world and his responsibility in it. Pushed back to the suicidal despair of the play's opening, Hamlet is paralyzed by indecision and ambiguity in which even death is problematic, as he explains in the famous "To be or not to be" soliloquy in the third act:

For who would bear the whips and scorns of time,
Th' oppressor's wrong, the proud man's contumely,
The pangs of despis'd love, the law's delay,
The insolence of office, and the spurns

That patient merit of th' unworthy takes,
When he himself might his quietus
make With a bare bodkin? Who would these fardels bear,
To grunt and sweat under a weary life,
But that the dread of something after death—
The undiscover'd country, from whose bourn
No traveller returns—puzzles the will,
And makes us rather bear those ills we have
Than fly to others that we know not of?
Thus conscience does make cowards of us all,
And thus the native hue of resolution
Is sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought,
And enterprises of great pith and moment
With this regard their currents turn awry
And lose the name of action.

The arrival of a traveling theatrical group provides Hamlet with the empirical means to resolve his doubts about the authenticity of the ghost and Claudius's guilt. By having the troupe perform the *Mousetrap* play that duplicates Claudius's crime, Hamlet hopes "to catch the conscience of the King" by observing Claudius's reaction. The king's breakdown during the performance seems to confirm the ghost's accusation, but again Hamlet delays taking action when he accidentally comes upon the guilt-ridden Claudius alone at his prayers.

Rationalizing that killing the apparently penitent Claudius will send him to heaven and not to hell, Hamlet decides to await an opportunity “That has no relish of salvation in’t.” He goes instead to his mother’s room where Polonius is hidden in another attempt to learn Hamlet’s mind and intentions. This scene between mother and son, one of the most powerful and intense in all of Shakespeare, has supported the Freudian interpretation of Hamlet’s dilemma in which he is stricken not by moral qualms but by Oedipal guilt. Gertrude’s cries of protest over her son’s accusations cause Polonius to stir, and Hamlet finally, instinctively strikes the figure he assumes is Claudius. In killing the wrong man Hamlet sets in motion the play’s catastrophes, including the madness and suicide of Ophelia, overwhelmed by the realization that her lover has killed her father, and the fatal encounter with Laertes who is now similarly driven to avenge a murdered father. Convinced of her son’s madness, Gertrude informs Claudius of Polonius’s murder, prompting Claudius to alter his order for Hamlet’s exile to England to his execution there.

Hamlet’s mental shift from reluctant to willing avenger takes place offstage during his voyage to England in which he accidentally discovers the execution order and then after a pirate attack on his ship makes his way back to Denmark. He returns to confront the inescapable human condition of mortality in the graveyard scene of act 5 in which he realizes that even Alexander the Great must return to earth that might be used to “stop a beer-barrel” and Julius Caesar’s clay to “stop a hole to keep the wind away.” This sobering realization that levels all earthly distinctions of nobility and acclaim is compounded by the shock of Ophelia’s funeral procession. Hamlet sustains his balance and purpose by confessing to Horatio his acceptance of a providential will revealed to him in the series of accidents on his voyage to England: “There’s a divinity that shapes our ends, / Rough-hew them how we will.” Finally accepting his inability to control his life, Hamlet resigns himself to accept whatever comes.

Agreeing to a duel with Laertes that Claudius has devised to eliminate his nephew, Hamlet asserts that “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.”

In the carnage of the play’s final scene, Hamlet ironically manages to achieve his revenge while still preserving his nobility and moral stature. It is the murderer Claudius who is directly or indirectly responsible for all the deaths. Armed with a poisoned-tip sword, Laertes strikes Hamlet who in turn manages to slay Laertes with the lethal weapon. Meanwhile, Gertrude drinks from the poisoned cup Claudius intended to insure Hamlet’s death, and, after the remorseful Laertes blames Claudius for the plot, Hamlet, hesitating no longer, fatally stabs the king. Dying in the arms of Horatio, Hamlet orders his friend to “report me and my cause aright / To the unsatisfied” and transfers the reign of Denmark to the last royal left

standing, the Norwegian prince Fortinbras. King Hamlet's death has been avenged but at a cost of eight lives: Polonius, Ophelia, Rosencranz, Guildenstern, Laertes, Gertrude, Claudius, and Prince Hamlet. Order is reestablished but only by Denmark's sworn enemy. Shakespeare's point seems unmistakable: Honor and duty that command revenge consume the guilty and the innocent alike. Heroism must face the reality of the graveyard.

Fortinbras closes the play by ordering that Hamlet be carried off "like a soldier" to be given a military funeral underscoring the point that Hamlet has fallen as a warrior on a battlefield of both the duplicitous court at Elsinore and his own mind. The greatness of *Hamlet* rests in the extraordinary perplexities Shakespeare has discovered both in his title character and in the events of the play. Few other dramas have posed so many or such knotty problems of human existence. Is there a special providence in the fall of a sparrow? What is this quintessence of dust? To be or not to be?

MACBETH

Shakespeare

(c. 1606) *by William*

Macbeth . . . is done upon a stronger and more systematic principle of contrast than any other of Shakespeare's plays. It moves upon the verge of an abyss, and is a constant struggle between life and death. The action is desperate and the reaction is dreadful. It is a huddling together of fierce extremes, a war of opposite natures which of them shall destroy the other. There is nothing but what has a violent end or violent beginnings. The lights and shades are laid on with a determined hand; the transitions from triumph to despair, from the height of terror to the repose of death, are sudden and startling; every passion brings in its fellow-contrary, and the thoughts pitch and jostle against each other as in the dark. The whole play is an unruly chaos of strange and forbidden things, where the ground rocks under our feet. Shakespeare's genius here took its full swing, and trod upon the farthest bounds of nature and passion.

—William Hazlitt, *Characters of Shakespeare's Plays*

Macbeth completes William Shakespeare's great tragic quartet while expanding, echoing, and altering key elements of *HAMLET*, *OTHELLO*, and *KING LEAR* into one of the most terrifying stage experiences. Like *Hamlet*, *Macbeth* treats the consequences of regicide, but from the perspective of the usurpers, not the dispossessed. Like *Othello*, *Macbeth* centers its intrigue on the intimate relations of husband and wife. Like *Lear*, *Macbeth* explores female villainy, creating in Lady Macbeth one of Shakespeare's most complex, powerful, and frightening woman characters. Different from *Hamlet* and *Othello*, in which the tragic action is reserved for their climaxes and an emphasis on cause over effect, *Macbeth*, like *Lear*, locates the tragic tipping point at the play's outset to concentrate on inexorable consequences. Like *Othello*, *Macbeth*, Shakespeare's shortest tragedy, achieves an almost unbearable intensity by eliminating subplots, inessential characters, and tonal shifts to focus almost exclusively on the crime's devastating impact on husband and wife.

What is singular about *Macbeth*, compared to the other three great Shakespearean tragedies, is its villain-hero. If Hamlet mainly executes rather than murders, if Othello is "more sinned against than sinning," and if Lear is "a very foolish fond old man" buffeted by surrounding evil, Macbeth knowingly chooses evil and becomes the bloodiest and most dehumanized of Shakespeare's tragic protagonists. *Macbeth* treats cold-blooded, premeditated murder from the killer's

perspective, anticipating the psychological dissection and guilt-ridden expressionism that Feodor Dostoevsky will employ in *Crime and Punishment*. Critic Harold Bloom groups the protagonist as “the culminating figure in the sequence of what might be called Shakespeare’s Grand Negations: Richard III, Iago, Edmund, Macbeth.” With Macbeth, however, Shakespeare takes us further inside a villain’s mind and imagination, while daringly engaging our sympathy and identification with a murderer. “The problem Shakespeare gave himself in *Macbeth* was a tremendous one,” Critic Wayne C. Booth has stated.

Take a good man, a noble man, a man admired by all who know him— and destroy him, not only physically and emotionally, as the Greeks destroyed their heroes, but also morally and intellectually. As if this were not difficult enough as a dramatic hurdle, while transforming him into one of the most despicable mortals conceivable, maintain him as a tragic hero—that is, keep him so sympathetic that, when he comes to his death, the audience will pity rather than detest him and will be relieved to see him out of his misery rather than pleased to see him destroyed.

Unlike Richard III, Iago, or Edmund, Macbeth is less a virtuoso of villainy or an amoral nihilist than a man with a conscience who succumbs to evil and obliterates the humanity that he is compelled to suppress. *Macbeth* is Shakespeare’s greatest psychological portrait of self-destruction and the human capacity for evil seen from inside with an intimacy that horrifies because of our forced identification with Macbeth.

Although there is no certainty in dating the composition or the first performance of *Macbeth*, allusions in the play to contemporary events fix the likely date of both as 1606, shortly after the completion and debut of *King Lear*. Scholars have suggested that *Macbeth* was acted before James I at Hampton Court on August 7, 1606, during the royal visit of King Christian IV of Denmark and that it may have been especially written for a royal performance. Its subject, as well as its version of Scottish history, suggest an effort both to flatter and to avoid offending the Scottish king James. *Macbeth* is a chronicle play in which Shakespeare took his major plot elements from Raphael Holinshed’s *Chronicles of England, Scotland and Ireland* (1587), but with significant modifications. The usurping Macbeth’s decade-long (and largely successful) reign is abbreviated with an emphasis on the internal and external destruction caused by Macbeth’s seizing the throne and trying to hold onto it. For the details of King Duncan’s death, Shakespeare used Holinshed’s account of the murder of an earlier king Duff by Donwald, who cast suspicion on drunken servants and whose ambitious wife played a significant role in the crime. Shakespeare also eliminated Banquo as the historical Macbeth’s co-conspirator in the murder to promote Banquo’s innocence and nobility in originating a kingly line from which James traced his legitimacy. Additional prominence is also given to the Weird Sisters, whom

Holinshed only mentions in their initial meeting of Macbeth on the heath. The prophetic warning “beware Macduff” is attributed to “certain wizards in whose words Macbeth put great confidence.” The importance of the witches and the occult in *Macbeth* must have been meant to appeal to a king who produced a treatise, *Daemonologie* (1597), on witchcraft.

The uncanny sets the tone of moral ambiguity from the play’s outset as the three witches gather to encounter Macbeth “When the battle’s lost and won” in an inverted world in which “Fair is foul, and foul is fair.” Nothing in the play will be what it seems, and the tragedy results from the confusion and conflict between the fair—honor, nobility, duty—and the foul—rank ambition and bloody murder. Throughout the play nature reflects the dis- order and violence of the action. Opening with thunder and lightning, the drama is set in a Scotland contending with the rebellion of the thane (feu- dal lord) of Cawdor, whom the fearless and courageous Macbeth has van- quished on the battlefield. The play, therefore, initially establishes Macbeth as a dutiful and trusted vassal of the king, Duncan of Scotland, deserving to be rewarded with the rebel’s title for restoring peace and order in the realm. “What he hath lost,” Duncan declares, “noble Macbeth hath won.” News of this honor reaches Macbeth through the witches, who greet him both as the thane of Cawdor and “king hereafter” and his comrade-in-arms Banquo as one who “shalt get kings, though thou be none.” Like the ghost in *Hamlet*, the Weird Sisters are left purposefully ambiguous and problematic. Are they agents of fate that determine Macbeth’s doom, predicting and even dictating the inevitable, or do they merely signal a latency in Macbeth’s ambitious character?

When he is greeted by the king’s emissaries as thane of Cawdor, Macbeth begins to wonder if the first predictions of the witches came true and what will come of the second of “king hereafter”:

This supernatural soliciting
Cannot be ill, cannot be good. If ill, Why hath it
given me earnest of success Commencing in a truth? I am Thane of Cawdor. If
good, why do I yield to that suggestion Whose horrid image doth unfix my
hair And make my seated heart knock at my ribs, Against the use of nature?
Present fears Are less than horrible imaginings: My thought, whose murder yet is
but fantastical, Shakes so my single state of man that function Is smother’d in
surmise, and nothing is But what is not.

Macbeth will be defined by his “horrible imaginings,” by his considerable intellectual and imaginative capacity both to understand what he knows to be true and right and his opposed desires and their frightful consequences. Only Hamlet has as fully a developed interior life and dramatized mental processes as Macbeth in Shakespeare’s plays. Macbeth’s ambition is initially checked by his conscience and by his fear of the unforeseen consequence of violating moral laws.

Shakespeare brilliantly dramatizes Macbeth's mental conflict in near stream-of-consciousness, associational fashion:

If it were done when 'tis done, then 'twere well It were done quickly. If
th'assassination Could trammel up the consequence, and catch With his surcease,
success: that but this blow Might be the be-all and the end-all, here,

But here, upon this bank and shoal of time, We'd jump the life to come. But in
these cases We still have judgement here, that we but teach Bloody instructions
which, being taught, return To plague th'inventor. This even-handed justice
Commends th'ingredients of our poison'd chalice To our own lips. He's here in
double trust: First, as I am his kinsman and his subject, Strong both against the
deed; then, as his host, Who should against his murderer shut the door, Not bear
the knife myself. Besides, this Duncan Hath borne his faculties so meek, hath
been So clear in his great office, that his virtues Will plead like angels trumpet-
tongued against The deep damnation of his taking-off, And pity, like a naked
new-born babe, Striding the blast, or heaven's cherubin, horsed Upon the
sightless couriers of the air, Shall blow the horrid deed in every eye That tears
shall drown the wind. I have no spur To prick the sides of my intent, but
only Vaulting ambition which o'erleaps itself And falls on the other.

Macbeth's "spur" comes in the form of Lady Macbeth, who plays on her husband's self-image of courage and virility to commit to the murder. She also reveals her own shocking cancellation of gender imperatives in shaming her husband into action, in one of the most shocking passages of the play:

. . . I have given suck, and know How tender 'tis to love the babe that milks
me. I would, while it was smiling in my face, Have plucked my nipple from his
boneless gums And dashed the brains out, had I so sworn As you have done to
this.

Horrified at his wife's resolve and cold-blooded calculation in devising the plot, Macbeth urges his wife to "Bring forth men-children only, / For thy undaunted mettle should compose / Nothing but males," but commits "Each corporal agent to this terrible feat."

With the decision to kill the king taken, the play accelerates unrelentingly through a succession of powerful scenes: Duncan's and Banquo's murders, the banquet scene in which Banquo's ghost appears, Lady Macbeth's sleepwalking, and Macbeth's final battle with Macduff, Thane of Fife. Duncan's offstage murder contrasts Macbeth's "horrible imaginings" concerning the implications and Lady Macbeth's chilling practicality. Macbeth's question, "Will all great Neptune's ocean wash this blood / Clean from my hand?" is answered by his wife: "A little water clears us of this deed; / How easy is it then!" The knocking at the door of the

castle, ominously signaling the revelation of the crime, prompts the play's one comic respite in the Porter's drunken foolery that he is at the door of "Hell's Gate" controlling the entrance of the damned. With the flight of Duncan's sons, who fear for their lives, causing them to be suspected as murderers, Macbeth is named king, and the play's focus shifts to Macbeth's keeping and consolidating the power he has seized. Having gained what the witches prophesied, Macbeth next tries to prevent their prediction that Banquo's descendants will reign by setting assassins to kill Banquo and his son, Fleance. The plan goes awry, and Fleance escapes, leaving Macbeth again at the mercy of the witches' prophecy. His psychic breakdown is dramatized by his seeing Banquo's ghost occupying Macbeth's place at the banquet. Pushed to the edge of mental collapse, Macbeth steels himself to meet the witches again to learn what is in store for him: "I am in blood," he declares, "Stepp'd in so far that, should I wade no more, / Returning were as tedious as go o'er."

The witches reassure him that "none of woman born / Shall harm Macbeth" and that he will never be vanquished until "Great Birnam wood to high Dunsinane hill / Shall come against him." Confident that he is invulnerable, Macbeth responds to the rebellion mounted by Duncan's son Malcolm and Macduff, who has joined him in England, by ordering the slaughter of Lady

Macduff and her children. Macbeth has progressed from a murderer in fulfillment of the witches predictions to a murderer (of Banquo) in order to subvert their predictions and then to pointless butchery that serves no other purpose than as an exercise in willful destruction. Ironically, Macbeth, whom his wife feared was "too full o' the milk of human kindness / To catch the nearest way" to serve his ambition, displays the same cold calculation that frightened him about his wife, while Lady Macbeth succumbs psychically to her own "horrible imaginings." Lady Macbeth relives the murder as she sleepwalks, Shakespeare's version of the workings of the unconscious. The blood in her tormented conscience that formerly could be removed with a little water is now a permanent noxious stain in which "All the perfumes of Arabia will not sweeten." Women's cries announcing her offstage death are greeted by Macbeth with detached indifference:

I have almost forgot the taste of fears: The time has been, my senses would have cool'd To hear a night-shriek, and my fell of hair Would at a dismal treatise rouse and stir As life were in't. I have supp'd full with horrors; Direness, familiar to my slaughterous thoughts, Cannot once start me.

Macbeth reveals himself here as an emotional and moral void. Confirmation that "The Queen, my lord, is dead" prompts only the bitter comment, "She should have died hereafter." For Macbeth, life has lost all meaning, reflected in the bleakest lines Shakespeare ever composed:

Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow Creeps in this petty pace from day to day To the last syllable of recorded time; And all our yesterdays have lighted fools The way to dusty death. Out, out, brief candle! Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player That struts and frets his hour upon the stage And then is heard no more. It is a tale

Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, Signifying nothing.

Time and the world that Macbeth had sought to rule are revealed to him as empty and futile, embodied in a metaphor from the theater with life as a his- trionic, talentless actor in a tedious, pointless play.

Macbeth's final testing comes when Malcolm orders his troops to camouflage their movement by carrying boughs from Birnam Woods in their march toward Dunsinane and from Macduff, whom he faces in combat and reveals that he was "from his mother's womb / Untimely ripp'd," that is, born by cesarean section and therefore not "of woman born." This revelation, the final fulfillment of the witches' prophecies, causes Macbeth to flee, but he is prompted by Macduff's taunt of cowardice and order to surrender to meet Macduff's challenge, despite knowing the deadly outcome:

Yet I will try the last. Before my body I throw my warlike shield. Lay on, Macduff, And damn'd be him that first cries, "Hold, enough!"

Macbeth returns to the world of combat where his initial distinctions were honorably earned and tragically lost.

The play concludes with order restored to Scotland, as Macduff presents Macbeth's severed head to Malcolm, who is hailed as king. Malcolm may assert his control and diminish Macbeth and Lady Macbeth as "this dead butcher and his fiend-like queen," but the audience knows more than that. We know what Malcolm does not, that it will not be his royal line but Banquo's that will eventually rule Scotland, and inevitably another round of rebellion and murder is to come. We also know in horrifying human terms the making of a butcher and a fiend who refuse to be so easily dismissed as aberrations.

OTHELLO (1604) *by William Shakespeare*

Of all Shakespeare's tragedies . . . Othello is the most painfully exciting and the most terrible. From the moment when the temptation of the hero begins, the reader's heart and mind are held in a vice, experiencing the extremes of pity and fear, sympathy and repulsion, sickening hope and dreadful expectation. Evil is displayed before him, not indeed with the profusion found in King Lear, but forming, as it were, the soul of a single character, and united with an intellectual superiority so great that he watches its advance fascinated and appalled. He sees it, in itself almost irresistible, aided at every step by fortunate accidents and the innocent mistakes of its victims. He seems to breathe an atmosphere as fateful as that of King Lear, but more confined and oppressive, the darkness not of night but of a close-shut murderous room. His imagination is excited to intense activity, but it is the activity of concentration rather than dilation.

—A. C. Bradley, *Shakespearean Tragedy*

Between William Shakespeare's most expansive and philosophical tragedies—*HAMLET* and *KING LEAR*—is *Othello*, his most constricted and heartbreaking play. *Othello* is a train wreck that the audience horrifyingly witnesses, helpless to prevent or look away. If *Hamlet* is a tragedy about youth, and *Lear* concerns old age, *Othello* is a family or domestic tragedy of a middle-aged man in which the fate of kingdoms and the cosmos that hangs in the balance in *Hamlet* and *Lear* contracts to the private world of a marriage's destruction. Following his anatomizing of the painfully introspective intellectual Hamlet, Shakespeare, at the height of his ability to probe human nature and to dramatize it in action and language, treats Hamlet's temperamental opposite—the man of action. Othello is decisive, confident, and secure in his identity, duty, and place in the world. By the end of the play, he has brought down his world around him with the relentless force that made him a great general turned inward, destroying both what he loved best in another and in himself. That such a man should fall so far and so fast gives the play an almost unbearable momentum. That such a man should unravel so completely, ushered by jealousy and hatred into a bestial worldview that cancels any claims of human virtue and self-less devotion, shocks and horrifies. *Othello* is generally regarded as Shakespeare's greatest stage play, the closest he would ever come to conforming to the constrained rules of Aristotelian tragedy. The intensity and focus of *Othello*

is unalleviated by subplots, comic relief, or any mitigation or consolation for the deterioration of the “noble Moor” and his collapse into murder and suicide. At the center of the play’s intrigue is Shakespeare’s most sinister and formidable conceptions of evil in Iago, whose motives and the wellspring of his villainy continue to haunt audiences and critics alike. Indeed, the psychological resonances of the drama, along with its provocative racial and gender themes, have caused *Othello*, perhaps more than any other of Shakespeare’s plays, to reverberate the loudest with current audiences and commentators. As scholar Edward Pechter has argued, “During the past twenty-five years or so, *Othello* has become the Shakespearean tragedy of choice, replacing *King Lear* in the way *Lear* had earlier replaced *Hamlet* as the play that speaks most directly and powerfully to current interests.”

Shakespeare derived his plot from Giraldi Cinthio’s “Tale of the Moor,” in the story collection *Hecatommithi* (1565), reshaping Cinthio’s sensational tale of jealousy, intrigue, and murder in several key ways. In Cinthio’s story, Alfiero, the scheming ensign, lusts after the Moor’s wife, named Disdemona, and after she spurns his advances, Alfiero seeks vengeance by accusing her of adultery with Cassio, the Moor’s lieutenant. Alfiero, like Iago, similarly arouses the Moor’s suspicions by stealing Disdemona’s handkerchief and planting it in Cassio’s bedroom. However, the Moor and Alfiero join forces to kill Disdemona, beating her to death with a stocking filled with sand before pulling down the ceiling on her dead body to conceal the crime as an accident. The Moor is eventually captured, tortured, and slain by Disdemona’s relatives, while the ensign dies during torture for another crime. What is striking about Shakespeare’s alteration of Cinthio’s grisly tale of murder and villainy is the shift of emphasis to the provocation for the murder, the ennobling of Othello as a figure of great stature and dignity to underscore his self-destruction, and the complication of motive for the ensign’s actions. Cinthio’s version of Iago is conventionally driven by jealousy of a superior and lust for his wife. Iago’s motivation is anything but explainable in conventional terms. Dramatically, Shakespeare turns the focus of the play from the shocking crime to its causes and psychic significance, transforming Cinthio’s intrigue story of vile murder into one of the greatest dramatic meditations on the nature of love and its destruction.

What makes *Othello* so unique structurally (and painful to witness) is that it is a tragedy built on a comic foundation. The first two acts of the play enact the standard pattern of Shakespeare’s romantic comedies. The young Venetian noblewoman, Desdemona, has eloped with the middle-aged Othello, the military commander of the armed forces of Venice. Their union is opposed by Desdemona’s father, Brabantio, and by a rival for Desdemona, Roderigo, who in the play’s opening scenes are both provoked against Othello by Iago. Desdemona and Othello, therefore, face the usual challenges of the lovers in a Shakespearean

comedy who must contend with the forces of authority, custom, and circumstances allied against their union. The romantic climax comes in the trial scene of act 1, in which Othello successfully defends himself before the Venetian senate against Brabantio's charge that Othello has beguiled his daughter, "stol'n from me, and corrupted / By spells and medicines bought of mountebanks." Calmly and courteously Othello recounts how, despite the differences of age, race, and background, he won Desdemona's heart by recounting the stories of his exotic life and adventures: "She loved me for the dangers I had passed, / And I loved her that she did pity them." Wonder at Othello's heroic adventures and compassion for her sympathy have brought the two opposites together—the young, inexperienced Venetian woman and the brave, experienced outsider. Desdemona finally, dramatically appears before the senate to support Othello's account of their courtship and to balance her obligation to her father and now to her husband based on the claims of love:

My noble father, I do perceive here a divided duty: To you I am bound for life and education; My life and education both do learn me How to respect you; you are the lord of duty; I am hitherto your daughter. But here's my husband; And so much duty as my mother show'd To you, preferring you before her father, So much I challenge that I may profess Due to the Moor, my lord.

Both Desdemona and Othello defy by their words and gestures the calumnies heaped upon them by Roderigo and Brabantio and vindicate the imperatives of the heart over parental authority and custom. As in a typical Shakespearean comedy, love, tested, triumphs over all opposition.

Vindicated by the duke of Venice and the senate, Othello, accompanied by Desdemona, takes up his military duties in the face of a threatened Turkish invasion, and the lovers are given a triumphal weddinglike procession and marriage ceremony when they disembark on Cyprus. The storm that divides the Venetian fleet also disperses the Turkish threat and clears the way for the lovers' happy reunion and peaceful enjoyment of their married state. First Cassio lands to deliver the news of Othello's marriage and, like the best man, supplies glowing praise for the groom and his bride; next Desdemona, accompanied by Iago and his wife, Emilia, enters but must await news of the fate of Othello's ship. Finally, Othello arrives giving him the opportunity to renew his marriage vows to Desdemona:

It gives me wonder great as my content To see you here before me. O my soul's joy, If after every tempest come such calms, May the wind blow till they have wakened death, And let the labouring barque climb hills of seas Olympus-high, and duck again as low As hell's from heaven. If it were now to die 'Twere now to be most happy, for I fear My soul hath content so absolute That not another

comfort like to this Succeeds in unknown fate.

The scene crowns love triumphant. The formerly self-sufficient Othello has now staked his life to his faith in Desdemona and their union, and she has done the same. The fulfillment of the wedding night that should come at the climax of the comedy is relocated to act 2, with the aftermath of the courtship and the wedding now taking center stage. Having triumphantly bested the social and natural forces aligned against them, having staked all to the devotion of the other, Desdemona and Othello will not be left to live happily ever after, and the tragedy will grow out of the conditions that made the comedy. *Othello*, unlike the other Shakespearean comedies, adds three more acts to the romantic drama, shifting from comic affirmation to tragic negation.

Iago reviews Othello's performance as a lover by stating, "O, you are well tuned now, / But I'll set down the pegs that make this music." Iago will now orchestrate discord and disharmony based on a life philosophy totally opposed to the ennobling and selfless concept of love demonstrated by the newlyweds. As Iago asserts to Roderigo, "Virtue? A fig!" Self-interest is all that matters, and love is "merely a lust of the blood and a permission of the will." Othello and Desdemona cannot possibly remain devoted to each other, and, as Iago concludes, "If sanctimony and a frail vow betwixt an erring barbarian and a super-subtle Venetian be not too hard for my wits, and all the tribe of hell, thou shalt enjoy her." The problem of Iago's motivation to destroy Othello and Desdemona is not that he has too few motives but too many. He offers throughout the play multiple justifications for his intrigue: He has been passed over in favor of Cassio; he suspects the Moor and Cassio with his wife, Emilia; he is envious of Cassio's open nature; and he is desirous of Desdemona himself. No single motive is relied on for long, and the gap between cause and effect, between the pettiness of Iago's grudges and the monstrousness of his behavior, prompted Samuel Taylor Coleridge in a memorable phrase to characterize Iago's "motiveless malignity." There is in Iago a zest for villainy and a delight in destruction, driven more by his hatred and contempt for any who oppose his conception of jungle law than by a conventional naturalistic explanation based on jealousy or envy. Moreover,

Shakespeare, by deliberately clouding the issue of Iago's motive, finds ever more sinister threats in such a character's apparently bottomless and unmerited hatred and capacity for evil.

Iago will direct the remainder of the play, constructing Othello's downfall out of the flimsiest evidence and playing on the strengths and weaknesses of Othello's nature and the doubts that erode Othello's faith in Desdemona. Act 3, one of the wonders of the stage, anatomizes Othello's psychic descent from perfect contentment in his new wife to complete loathing, from a worldview in which

everything is as it appears to one in which nothing is as it seems. Iago leads Othello to suspect that love and devotion are shams disguising the basest of animalistic instincts. Misled by the handkerchief, his love token to Desdemona, that Iago has planted in Cassio's room and by a partially overheard conversation between Iago and Cassio, Othello, by the end of act 3, forsakes his wife and engages himself in a perverse version of the marriage ceremony of act 2 to Iago. As the pair kneels together, they exchange vows:

iago 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 wronged Othello's service. Let him command, And to obey shall be in me remorse, What bloody business ever.

othello I greet thy love, Not with vain thanks, but with acceptance bounteous, And will upon the instant put thee to't. Within these three days let me hear thee say That Cassio's not alive.

iago My friend is dead. 'Tis done at your request; but let her live.

othello Damn her, lewd minx! O, damn her, damn her! Come, go with me apart. I will withdraw To furnish me with some swift means of death For the fair devil. Now art thou my lieutenant.

iago I am your own for ever.

This scene has suggested to some critics that Iago's true motivation for destroying the marriage of Desdemona and Othello is a repressed homosexual love for Othello. An equal case can be made that Iago here completes his role as Vice, borrowed from the medieval morality plays, sealing the Faustian bargain for Othello's soul in this mock or black marriage scene.

The play moves relentlessly from here to catastrophe as Othello delivers justice to those he is convinced have wronged him. As he attempts to carry out his execution of Desdemona, she for the first time realizes his charges against her and his utter delusion. Ignoring her appeals for mercy and avowals of innocence, Othello smothers her moments before Emilia arrives with the proof of Desdemona's innocence and Iago's villainy. Othello must now face the realization of what he has done. He turns to Iago, who has been brought before him to know the reason for his actions. Iago replies: "Demand me nothing; what you know, you know: / From this time forth I never will speak word." By Iago's exiting the stage, closing access to his motives, the focus remains firmly on Othello, not as Iago's victim, but as his own. His final speech mixes together the acknowledgment of what he was and what he has become, who he is and how he would like to be remembered:

I have done the state some service, and they know't. No more of that. I pray you,
in your letters, When you shall these unlucky deeds relate, Speak of me as I am.
Nothing extenuate,

Nor set down aught in malice. Then must you speak Of one that loved not wisely
but too well, Of one not easily jealous but, being wrought, Perplexed in the
extreme; of one whose hand,

Like the base Indian, threw a pearl away Richer than all his tribe.

Consistent with his role as guardian of order in the state, Othello carries out his
own execution, by analogy judging his act as a violation reflected by Venice's
savage enemy:

And say besides, that in Aleppo once, Where a malignant and a turban'd Turk
Beat a Venetian and tradu'd the state, I took by th' throat the circumcisèd dog,
And smote him—thus.

Othello, likewise, has “tradu'd the state” and has changed from noble and val-
iant Othello to a beast, with the passion that ennobled him shown as corrosive and
demeaning. He carries out his own execution for a violation that threatens social
and psychic order. For the onlookers on stage, the final tableau of the dead
Desdemona and Othello “poisons sight” and provokes the command to “Let it be
hid.” The witnesses on stage cannot compute rationally what has occurred nor
why, but the audience has been given a privileged view of the battle between good
and evil worked out in the private recesses of a bedroom and a human soul.

VOLPONE, OR THE FOX

(1606) *by*

Ben Jonson

Volpone brilliantly exemplifies Jonson's unique jungle vision, with its self-contained world composed entirely of predators and prey. His contempt for mercenary motivation and capitalistic enterprise is blistering; the commanding indictment of the vicious habits of the new acquisitive society shows Jonson's forward leap in terms of intellectual and analytical maturity. The play demonstrates throughout Jonson's new-found ability to use the grim stuff of human wickedness and weakness, material not of a comic nature in itself, as the basis of satiric comedy. Obsessional greed, lust, the savage disregard of all other human beings and even eventually of personal survival—these are hardly funny, but Jonson makes them so. Yet never does he diminish the power of his portrayal of these ruthless materialists who embody "Appetite, the universal wolf."

—Rosalind Miles, *Ben Jonson: His Craft and Art*

With *Volpone*, William Shakespeare had, for the first time since the death of Christopher Marlowe, a serious dramatic rival, and Elizabethan drama had an important alternative method and material. The master of the urban satirical comedy of manners, Ben Jonson brought raw and unflattering contemporary life within dramatic range and harnessed disparate, rowdy Elizabethan life to the classically derived rules of dramatic construction that would shape neoclassical theatrical ideals for the next two centuries. Jonson has been fated to be forever overshadowed by Shakespeare's greater genius, to be, in John Dryden's estimation, compared to the Bard, admired rather than loved. But in the history of English drama only Shakespeare and George Bernard Shaw have contributed more plays to the permanent national repertory than Jonson did. It was Jonson who insisted that drama was a form of poetry, the noblest and profoundest human expression. It was Jonson, more than any other English dramatist, who helped to establish plays as literature, capable of the most serious inquiry into human nature and social life. Shakespeare is inimitable; however, it can be argued, more

playwrights claim their descent as a “son of Ben.”

A comparison between Jonson and Shakespeare, though irresistible and often misleading, is still instructive in underscoring their different relationships to the theater and dramatic practice. Born in 1572 or 1573, almost a decade after Shakespeare, Jonson was part of the next generation of Elizabethan and Jacobean dramatists who had Shakespeare’s works and the drama that he pioneered to imitate, modify, and transform. Both Shakespeare and Jonson came from similar lower-middle-class backgrounds, but Shakespeare was a countryman, who drew extensively on his love and familiarity with rural life, while Jonson was a Londoner, whose arena and references were predominantly urban. Jonson was the son of a minister who died a month before his birth. His widowed mother married a bricklayer, and Jonson was raised near Westminster where he enrolled at the prestigious Westminster School located in the precinct of the abbey. He studied under the age’s greatest classicist and antiquarian, William Camden, whom Jonson would later credit for “All that I am in arts, all that I know.” Camden would spark Jonson’s lifelong devotion to classical literature, his love of scholarship, and his self-consciously academic approach to his writing and aspirations. Jonson, in contrast to Shakespeare’s purported “little Latin and less Greek,” would proudly assert that “he was better Versed & knew more in Greek and Latin, than all the Poets in England.” It was at Westminster that Jonson was introduced to drama in annual performances mounted by its scholars. When he left Westminster, he did not, as might have been expected, matriculate at Oxford or Cambridge. (He would later express his gratitude that *Volpone* was favorably regarded at “The Two Famous Universities” and dedicated the published play to them.) Instead he apprenticed as a bricklayer, becoming a journeyman by 1598. The premature end of Jonson’s formal education and his working-class background no doubt made him excessively proud and protective of his scholarly attainments and anxious that his writing should be measured against the revered classical standards. Jonson married unhappily, losing both his children to early illness, fought as a volunteer foot soldier against the Spanish in the Netherlands, and began his career as a playwright, like Shakespeare, after first acting in one of London’s professional theater companies. He would never, however, like Shakespeare, become a full partner of any playing company as a resident actor or writer. He took instead an independent line to protect his scholarly and poetic aspirations and to become more than a dramatic professional. Jonson would complain about “the lothed stage” that catered to popular tastes that were “not meant for thee, less, thou for them.”

Jonson’s debut as a playwright was inauspicious. In 1597 he completed a topical satire by Thomas Nashe, *The Isle of Dogs*, and was imprisoned for several weeks for sedition for acting in and having coauthored it. After his release Jonson continued to collaborate on a number of plays (now lost) and produced his first

solo effort, *The Case Is Altered* (1598), a comedy derived from Plautus. It was followed by *Everyman in His Humour* (1598) and *Everyman out of His Humour* (1599), performed by Shakespeare's company, the Lord Chamberlain's Men, which established Jonson as a coming playwright. Around the time of the debut of *Everyman in His Humour* Jonson killed a young actor in a duel and was again imprisoned, avoiding execution by pleading the ancient benefit of clergy because he could read. When James I came to the throne in 1603, Jonson won favor and patronage as the chief author of court masques and entertainments, despite being imprisoned for supposed slights to the king and the Scots in 1605 for the comedy *Eastward Ho!* Following Jonson's failure with the tragedy *Sejanus*, which was hissed off the Globe Theatre stage in 1603, Jonson returned to stage comedy with *Volpone*, his first undisputed masterpiece, which was performed to great acclaim at the Globe in 1606. *Volpone* signaled a new kind of moral comedy and demonstrated Jonson's mature style and construction that joined his admired classical models to the popular traditions of English drama. *Volpone* initiated a string of comic masterworks, including *Epicoene* (1609), *THE ALCHEMIST* (1610), *Bartholomew Fair* (1614), and *The Devil Is an Ass* (1616).

Jonson articulated his break with the theater of his day in his prologue to the revised version of *Everyman in His Humour*, declaring his allegiance as a comic writer to "deedes, and language, such as men doe use," and to the presentation of an "Image of the times," embodied in ordinary characters and everyday circumstances—"with humane follies, not with crimes." He criticized contemporary dramatists for "all license of offence to God and man" for their improbable plots that relied on accidents, coincidences, and the stale contrivances of mistaken and concealed identities, for their indecorous mixture of comedy, pathos, and tragedy and violations of the unities of time, place, and action in language inappropriate to the speaker and marred by artificial sentiment and bombast. *Volpone, or The Fox* clearly shows Jonson's response. Instead of the conventional romantic intrigue that Shakespeare had relied on in his comedies, Jonson submits to comic ridicule the "ragged follies of the time." Blending the fortune-hunting plot and character types of Roman comedies with native allegorical elements of the morality play and the beast fable, Jonson ingeniously arranges variations on the theme of human greed. At the center of the play is Volpone, the fox, a Renaissance Venetian schemer, and Mosca (the fly), his servant, who extort riches from those courting Volpone's favor as Volpone pretends to be a dying man in need of an heir. As the play opens Volpone delivers an invocation to gold that sets the play's theme of avarice:

Good morning to the day; and next, my gold! Open the shrine, that I may see my saint. Hail the world's soul, and mine! More glad than is The teeming earth to see the longed-for sun

. . . O thou son of Sol,

But brighter than thy father, let me kiss, With adoration, thee, and every relic Of sacred treasure in this blessed room . . . Riches, the dumb god, that gives all men tongues, That canst do nought, and yet mak'st men do all things; The price of souls; even hell, with thee to boot,

Is made worth heaven. Thou art virtue, fame, Honor and all things else. Who can get thee, He shall be noble, valiant, honest, wise—

Volpone's morning devotional—his sacrilegious worshipping at a golden shrine from which all blessings are derived—sets the tone for the gulling of three birds of prey, snared by their own cupidity. The lawyer Voltore (vulture), the aging gentleman Corbaccio (crow), and the merchant Corvino (raven). The allegorical arrangement recalls the medieval beast fable in which a fox feigns death to catch and eat the carrion birds but with the appetite for food here replaced by a craving for gold. Each arrives with presents and is assured in turn that he is to be Volpone's choice to inherit his fortune if their gifts continue to find favor with him. Corbaccio is advised to disinherit his son and leave his fortune to Volpone; while Corvino, whose beautiful and virtuous young wife Volpone lusts after, is to deliver Celia to the supposed decrepit and impotent Volpone's bed for medicinal purposes. Compared to the slow-witted, unimagi- native prey, Volpone and Mosca tower above them as ingenious, consummate actors, totally adaptable to their audience, totally consumed by their parts, with a zest for deception and intrigue that will be their eventual undoing. To relieve and expand the play's satirical attack on greed, Jonson introduces the foolish Sir Politic Would-Be and his wife, English travelers whose inflated self- regard shows how easily fools can be manipulated by self-centered delusions. What is striking about Jonson's arrangement here is his centering the play on a comic villain and his parasite. While Elizabethan tragedies featuring mon- strous characters had been common since Marlowe's *Tamburlaine*, few Eliza- bethan comedies had ever dared such a complete capitulation to the villainous hero and his sidekick. *Volpone* presents a world inhabited exclusively by knaves, gulls, and the innocent victims of both. Jonson mounts his satiric argument here indirectly, not by opposing the vices and moral failings of his characters by the counter forces of good and virtue, but by multiplying and exaggerating through caricature greed, hypocrisy, and self-deception and thereby shaming his audience into rejecting these false values by ridicule. Central to Jonson's strategy is the notion that the characters' greed will ensure their own downfall. As Volpone observes, "What a rare punishment / Is avarice to itself."

The undoing begins as Volpone's scheming overreaches the deserved entrapment of Voltore, Corbaccio, and Corvino to severing the natural bonds between father

and son and husband and wife to serve his ends. Bonario, Corbaccio's disinherited son, is on hand to witness Volpone's reinvigoration as an ardent lover of Celia and prevents Volpone's rape. What should be the triumph of the innocents, however, quickly turns into an even more sinister victory of the rapacious self-servers. In the trial scene that follows, truth is suborned by lawyer Voltore who casts Celia and Bonario as foul schemers, lewd adulterers, and heartless victimizers of the innocent Volpone. The four Avocatori who judge the case are incapable of overcoming their own prejudices, self-satisfaction, and obsequiousness to wealth and rank. Justice is not just blind, it is insensible, and the witty inversion of all under the rubric of appetite appears complete and total.

Volpone celebrates his expected legal triumph by a final display of his power over the gulls who have perjured themselves on his behalf. He pretends to be dead and to have left his fortune to Mosca for the sheer enjoyment of seeing how his victims will respond when they learn that they have been deceived. It is finally not greed but pride that brings Volpone down, as Mosca, who shows himself loyal only to money, decides to retain the fortune. To recover it Volpone must reveal the plot and his own deceptions. Voltore withdraws his false testimony as the court reconvenes, and, as it appears he has been bested by Mosca, Volpone throws off his disguise and exposes all, including himself. Truth is finally revealed and order reasserted not by any powerful force of good but by the confession of the play's chief villain who sacrifices his safety for vengeance. The appropriate punishment is suited to the crimes of each, with the worst reserved for Mosca, who is condemned for life as a galley slave, and Volpone, who is to be imprisoned in chains until he becomes in fact the helpless invalid he pretended to be. One of the Avocatori sanctimoniously intones:

Let all that see these vices thus rewarded,
Take heart, and love study 'em!
Mischiefs feed Like beasts, till they be fat,
and then they bleed.

But there is precious little moral reassurance here in the wisdom of authority, in justice, or in the moral force of virtue over the appetites for self-supremacy. Jonson's bracing and daring comedy, grotesquely and ludicrously magnifying our worst capacities, is turned into a mirror by which we are forced to recognize unflattering and disturbing resemblances. By shifting the focus of comedy from dreamy and delightful wish fulfillment to actuality, Jonson helps establish drama as an instrument for both truth and moral instruction, even as he delights with the skill of his construction and the daringness of his conception.

HENRY IV (c. 1596–97) by William Shakespeare

None of Shakespeare's plays are more read than the first and second parts of Henry IV. Perhaps no authour has ever in two plays afforded so much delight. The great events are interesting, for the fate of kingdoms depends upon them; the slighter occurrences are diverting, and, except one or two, sufficiently probable; the incidents are multiplied with wonderful fertility of invention, and the characters diversified with the utmost nicety of discernment, and the profoundest skill in the nature of man.

—Samuel Johnson, *The Plays of William Shakespeare*

The two parts of *Henry IV* represent William Shakespeare's greatest achievement as a historical dramatist. Even though the enactment of history on stage is as old as Aeschylus's *The Persians*, Shakespeare made the dramatized historical chronicle one of his singular contributions to the stage and literature. Two centuries before Sir Walter Scott was credited with opening up the historical past as a subject for the novelist, Shakespeare had in his interweaving of historical fact and invention set the standard by which history could be animated into literature. Gaining his initial stage success with his *Henry VI* plays in the early 1590s, Shakespeare would eventually dramatize a turbulent century of English dynastic history from the fall of Richard II in 1399, through the War of the Roses it precipitated, to the death of Richard III in 1485 and the triumphant ascendancy of the Tudors. Coming between Shakespeare's poetic exploration of the private limitations and illusions of a weak king in *Richard II* and his grandest celebration of an English national hero's public triumph in *Henry V*, *Henry IV* draws on both the private and public aspects of kingship to present one of the most remarkable dramatizations of political power and the formation and consequence of leadership ever brought to the stage. The two plays are breathtaking in their abundance and panoramic in their sweep in capturing a wide range of English life during the so-called unquiet times of Henry IV. Shakespeare brilliantly modulates perspectives from the heroic to the comic and counterpoints multiple centers of interests: the palace at Westminster where Henry IV struggles to hang onto his throne following his deposition of Richard II; the meeting places of members of the opposition, led by the chivalric

Hotspur, who want to claim the crown for themselves; the tavern world of Eastcheap; and the country house of Justice Shallow in rural Gloucestershire. Linking all are the development stages and challenges faced by the heir apparent, Prince Hal, Shakespeare's portrait of a self-conscious youth caught in a web of circumstances that anticipates Prince Hamlet. Literally anchoring the plays is Sir John Falstaff, the greatest comic character Shakespeare ever devised, arguably his greatest invention, and one of drama and literature's incomparable creations. The plays, therefore, offer a seemingly inexhaustible supply of riches. They are vital chronicles of a crucial period of English history and a timeless and masterful exploration of human nature and the human condition, containing some of the funniest and most moving and profound scenes Shakespeare ever wrote.

Shakespeare created the *Henry IV* plays as he approached the midpoint of his career, between 1596 and 1597, when he had reached complete maturity as a dramatist, having learned how to embody in language and action an enormous range of characters and experience. Shakespeare's dramatic career had begun with his helping his audiences to participate in the imagined unfolding of past events and achievements that shaped present realities. Although the medieval England of Shakespeare's chronicle plays was as distant to his contemporaries as the Revolutionary War is to modern Americans, the issues of his historical plays were strikingly relevant. The toppling of a king and the chaos of civil war represented current anxiety and dangers for the Elizabethans. The deposition of the king was censored out of the first printed texts of *Richard II* as too explosive, while supporters of the ambitious Robert Devereux, earl of Essex, saw clear parallels in the drama with current circumstances. In fact, in 1601 they would arrange a special performance to rally followers to his cause before his failed coup d'état. Essex's rebellion underscored the possibilities of a bloody, uncertain future that would follow the death of the heirless Elizabeth. The impending succession battle presaged the return of a violent and destructive scramble for power and the social chaos that Shakespeare's plays brought to life on stage.

Shakespeare's eight-play cycle of English history begins with the fall of Richard II, a monarch who squandered and misused his power, bankrupted the kingdom, and allowed Henry Bolingbroke to maneuver him off the throne. Although Bolingbroke is shown to be the better man for the job—decisive, shrewd, and utterly committed to the responsibilities of ruling—Richard makes clear the potentially catastrophic step Bolingbroke is taking by circumventing the divine right of kingship:

Not all the water in the rough, rude sea
Can wash the balm from an anointed king.

The breath of worldly men cannot depose
The deputy elected by the Lord.

Deposing a rightful king overturns both the cosmic order as understood by the

Elizabethans and the fundamental principles of English government and social order. It subverted essential concepts of inheritance and deference required in a hierarchical society and undermined fixed principle with the mutability of political fortune, the rule of law with expediency and brute force. Henry's act of rebellion unleashes the bloodletting and disorder that Richard forecasts.

Henry IV opens with Bolingbroke being forced to deal with the actualities of Richard's prophecy that "The blood of English shall manure the ground, / And future ages groan for this final act." His rebellion has not restored order to the kingdom but rather has emboldened England's border enemies and has legitimized the conviction of his ambitious subjects that they have as much right to raise their hands against him as he did against Richard, inspiring a seemingly endless cycle of revolt and disorder. *Henry IV* is Shakespeare's exploration of a world in which stability, law, and authority are under threat and radical new conceptions of political power and leadership fill the vacuum left by Bolingbroke's usurpation. As Henry IV he is a savvy politician who must cannily negotiate the shifting allegiances and loyalties of those he commands, not based on divine rights but on his practical skills and manipulation of popular support. Against a backdrop of warfare and rebellion the plays struggle with two central questions: How can the past sins of history be atoned? And What makes an effective leader in these fallen, imperfect times? To answer these questions Shakespeare centers the interest not on Henry IV but on his heir, Prince Hal, in his development as an effective leader, from prodigal son to great national hero who is able to heal the kingdom's wounds inflicted by his father. These are plays about the tests, temptations, and trials of leadership: its unavoidable burdens, the cruel necessities to which it is subject, the treachery by which it is surrounded, and, especially, the inevitable inadequacies of the men in high office who must be both human and exemplary, self-willed and selfless, able to subordinate the personal in pursuit of the greater good of the commonwealth.

Henry IV serves as a sequel to *Richard II* but with a markedly different, groundbreaking method. Deriving historical episodes from Raphael Holinshed's *Chronicles* and stories of Henry V's wastrel youth from various popular sources, Shakespeare divides his plays between the factual and the fictional, alternating between historically derived scenes at court and on the battlefield involving the nobles and invented comic scenes involving the unheroic world of ordinary citizens. None of Shakespeare's history plays before *Henry IV* had given such a prominent role to commoners and the details of ordinary life. The result is a wider sweep of English society, in which Shakespeare adapts and supplements historical fact with invention into a symphonic composition of contrasted but analogous movements. In *1 Henry IV* Hal is examined in relationship to three alternative settings and their corresponding values. The first is his father's palace at Westminster; the second is the camps of the rebels, led by Hotspur, whose

historical age is adjusted to that of Hal's to underscore their comparison; the third is the tavern world ruled by Falstaff. All three are related in several ways, most notably by motive: Each is in some way defined by theft. Henry has stolen the throne; Hotspur wants to steal it; Falstaff finances his revels with thievery and involves Hal in an actual highway robbery. Each also is contrasted by their values. For Henry IV political survival at all cost determines every consideration. His world is defined by necessities and contingencies that must be continually calculated. For Hotspur circumstances are opportunities for personal glory and honor. For Falstaff neither political control nor personal ideals have any relevance. Responsibilities are to be avoided in favor of appetites indulged, and as he famously defines on the battlefield,

What is honor? A word. What is in that word honor? What is that honor? Air. A trim reckoning! Who hath it? He that died o' Wednesday. Doth he feel it? No. Doth he hear it? No. 'Tis insensible, then? Yea, to the dead. But will it not live with the living? No. Why? Detraction will not suffer it. Therefore I'll none of it. Honor is a mere scutcheon. And so ends my catechism.

The political shrewdness of the king, the courageousness of Hotspur, and the common-sense materialism of Falstaff provide necessary ingredients in Hal's makeup. Forced to consider the claims of each, Hal eventually manages to achieve their proper balance, thereby defining the ideal qualities of a monarch who can restore order and legitimacy to the realm.

While the king is forced to deal with the threatened rebellion and disloyalty of the Percys and their Scottish and Welsh allies, Hal is diverting himself with the tavern company of Sir John Falstaff and his low-life associates, indulging in the revelry that Falstaff as a saturnalian lord of misrule represents. Like the figure of Vice in the morality plays, Falstaff is a tempter, delightful as a carousing companion, brilliant in his witty evasions of the truth and responsibility, but his philosophy of self-interest and the rejection of any claim beyond self-indulgence are disastrous to an heir to the throne. Hal reveals this in his initial soliloquy. As a self-aware prodigal he intends to confound expectations when his time comes to prove himself, comparing himself to the sun:

Who doth permit the base contagious clouds
To smother up his beauty from the world,
That when he please again to be himself,
Being wanted he may be more wondered at

By breaking through the foul and ugly mists
Of vapours that did seem to strangle him.

Hal reveals that his revelries are strategic and temporary:

If all the year were playing holidays, To sport would be as tedious as to work; But when they seldom come, they wished-for come, And nothing pleaseth but rare accidents. So when this loose behaviour I throw off And pay the debt I never promisèd, By how much better than my word I am, By so much shall I falsify men's hope.

This soliloquy has long divided critics, directors, and actors in their interpretations of the play and its speaker. Some see Hal here as reassuringly self-aware, others as self-rationalizing, still others as Machiavellian, like his father, a calculating user of men for his own gain. Each position can be effectively argued, and all form at least a part of Shakespeare's complex portrait of an individual fashioning a strategy and identity to "pay the debt I never promisèd," that is, his reluctant but unavoidable royal inheritance that has come by accident through his father's usurpation. Whether by design or in self-deception, Hal is schooled by Falstaff to test his wits against a master and experience the world of contingencies outside the bounds of pomp and privilege that will ultimately help to fashion him into a superior monarch.

By act 5, at the battle of Shrewsbury, Hal has completed his practicum and must assume his role as heir apparent and protector of the realm, having correctly negotiated through the conflicting claims represented by his father, his rival Hotspur, and his surrogate father Falstaff. In his effective behavior on the battlefield Hal proves himself superior to the self-serving politics of his father through his treatment of the vanquished, superior to Hotspur's chivalric code of honor that is wasteful and destructive when not harnessed to a service greater than self-aggrandizement, and finally superior to Falstaff's survivalist pleasure principle that denies the validity of any end greater than self-fulfillment.

In *2 Henry IV* factional warfare breaks out anew, and Hal must face additional challenges before succeeding to the throne. If *1 Henry IV* shows the battle to save the kingdom from rebellion, *2 Henry IV* shows how the kingdom, once secure, must be governed. Falstaff, as the medieval Vice figure, is here contrasted with the Lord Chief Justice, as Virtue, who both contend for Hal's ultimate allegiance. Ordered to recruit troops for the king, Falstaff uses his royal commission to avoid imprisonment from debt, while flagrantly accepting bribes and letting the able-bodied men buy their way out of service.

Meanwhile, the king's health is in decline, forcing Hal to pay the debt he never promised. The king's demands of his son and the heir's realization of the responsibilities of kingship are enacted in one of the greatest father-son scenes ever staged that includes one of the most succinctly profound statements ever uttered about the cost of command: "Uneasy lies the head that wears a crown."

As *Henry IV* fades, Falstaff grows in bulk and perfidy, threatening to expand his

regime of misrule under the presumption of his close relationship with the future king. Falstaff's friendship with Hal, however, can exist only as long as Hal has no serious responsibilities. Falstaff fails to recognize the changes that come when Henry IV dies, and Hal is forced to choose between his friendship and his duty. His first challenge comes after his father's death, when Hal defends the conduct of the Lord Chief Justice (despite his having once jailed the prince during his wild youth) on behalf of "the majesty and power of law and justice" and pledges that the Chief Justice "shall be as a father to my youth." At the coronation Henry V confronts his former surrogate father, Falstaff himself. Hal must now choose between his past and his future. Falstaff should have known that Hal will not hesitate. To Falstaff's all-too-familiar greeting, "God save thy Grace, King Hal, my royal Hal! . . . God save thee, my sweet boy!" Henry V delivers the coup de grâce: "I know thee not old man. . . . Presume not that I am the thing I was." The new king orders his former companion to keep 10 miles away from him but with a promise of reinstatement if Falstaff reforms, and the fat knight exits convinced that the royal reprimand has all been for public show and that his old friend will certainly call for him privately.

The banishment of Falstaff is the climactic rhetorical confrontation of *2 Henry IV*, preceded by Hal's similarly decisive moments with his father and the Chief Justice. It is painful to watch a great favorite so treated, regrettable but inevitable, given the kingship theme that dominates the plays. Falstaff as a principle of misrule and selfish appetite must be banished as the new king assumes his responsibilities. The loss of Falstaff more than anything else makes us feel the grave consequence of Hal's accepting the crown and all that it entails. The power of both parts of *Henry IV*, and the genius of Shakespeare, is that there is a fair fight between rule and misrule, revelry and responsibility. Each has its claims and costs, and to recognize only one is to undervalue important aspects of human nature itself. A lesser playwright would have made Hal's decision easier. Hal as king must banish Falstaff, but the audience is allowed to retain him, encouraged to comprehend both sides in the debate and made aware not of the divinity that "doth hedge a king" but the humanity.

THE WAY OF THE WORLD

(1700) *by William Congreve*

The one play that generations of readers, actors, audiences, and even critics have singled out as the triumphant quintessence of Restoration comedy is Congreve's The Way of the World. Lytton Strachey is guilty of no exaggeration when he ranks it "among the most wonderful and glorious creations of the human mind." . . . What strikes us most is the language. If Shakespeare's diction, as one of Keats's sonnets suggest is "the voice of waters," then surely Congreve's is the sound of champagne, with all the virtues and limitations of that singular beverage.

—Norman N. Holland, *The First Modern Comedies*

Secure today as his masterpiece and as one of drama's supreme comedies, William Congreve's *The Way of the World* was so slightly received when it was first performed that its 30-year-old author resolved to write no more comedies. Congreve kept his word for nearly 30 years, to his death in 1729, offering for the stage only two opera libretti and a translation of a play by Molière. If Congreve's first audiences found *The Way of the World* plotless, labored, and opaque ("There is as much bullion in it," Alexander Pope observed, "as would serve to lace fifty modern comedies."), it has been subsequently acclaimed by later critics and audiences as the greatest of all Restoration comedies, and in the words of the poet Algernon Swinburne, as "the unequalled and unapproached masterpiece of English comedy." Voltaire, recognizing in the play the dazzling display of wit and ironic scrutiny of social manners and human nature that brought English drama to the level of Molière's achievement, asserted that "Congreve raised the glory of comedy to a greater height than any English writer before or since." For the essayist William Hazlitt, Congreve's greatness was his consummate artistry. "His style is inimitable, nay perfect," Hazlitt observed, and *The Way of the World* provides "the highest model of comic dialogue. Every sentence is replete with sense and satire, conveyed in the most brilliant and polished terms. . . . there is a peculiar flavour in the very words, which is to be found in hardly any other writer." Congreve, who has been called the English theater's wittiest playwright, unquestionably brought a new intellectual power and artistic polish to the English stage. With *The Way of the World* he produced one of the most challenging and intriguing of all English comedies.

Although born in England in 1670, Congreve was raised and educated in Ireland and can be grouped along with the other great Irish playwrights—to be followed by Oliver Goldsmith, Richard Sheridan, Oscar Wilde, George Bernard Shaw, and Samuel Beckett—who would significantly transform English drama. Congreve's father was a younger son of a Yorkshire gentry family, who, when Congreve was four years old, received an army commission and relocated his family to Ireland to serve in garrisons there. The young Congreve in 1681 entered Kilkenny College where he was briefly a classmate of Jonathan Swift. In 1686 Congreve followed Swift to Trinity College, Dublin, where they shared a common tutor. It is believed that Congreve saw his first plays in Dublin's Smock Alley Theatre. In 1688, in the wake of the violence in Ireland brought on by the clash between the Catholic forces loyal to James II and Protestant supporters of William of Orange, the family moved back to England, where Congreve enrolled in London's Middle Temple in 1691 to study law. However, as Congreve's early biographer Giles Jacob observed, "Mr. Congreve was too delicate a Taste, had Wit too fine a turn to be long pleas'd with a crabbed unpalatable Study. . . . his natural Inclination to Poetry, diverted him from the Bar to the declining Stage, which then stood in need of such a Support." Associating with the wits who met at Will's Coffee House, Congreve came to the attention of the age's greatest literary figure, John Dryden, who invited the younger man to collaborate with him in translating the Roman satirists. Congreve published translations of Juvenal and Horace as well as a novella, *Incognita*, which is noteworthy for its preface that distinguishes between the aims and methods of the earlier romances and the realism of the new novel and has been called the earliest important criticism of fiction.

Congreve's first play, *The Old Bachelor*, appeared in 1693 to great acclaim. The play borrowed heavily from earlier 17th-century playwrights, including Aphra Behn, William Wycherley, and George Etherege, presenting conventional Restoration comic situations and character types with a skillful freshness that established Congreve's literary reputation. Congreve followed it with four more plays between 1693 and 1700: *The Double Dealer* (1693), *Love for Love* (1695), *The Mourning Bride* (1697), and *The Way of the World* (1700). After the disappointing reception of *The Way of the World* Congreve remained involved with the stage as manager of the Lincoln Inn Fields Theatre and as a shareholder in the Haymarket Theatre. As a distinguished man of letters he was rewarded with government sinecures, given a post in 1714 in the Customs Office, and made secretary of Jamaica, which provided him with a comfortable living for the rest of his life. Congreve never married but had a close friendship with the actress Anne Bracegirdle, who played leading roles in all of his plays, including the part of Millamant in *The Way of the World*. He was also the lover of the second duchess of Marlborough and fathered her younger daughter who became duchess of Leeds. Congreve's final years were spent in retirement, enjoying the company of literary friends, such as Swift, Pope, and Richard Steele.

Congreve became the master of the Restoration comic conventions derived from the more realistic comedy of manners of Ben Jonson and influenced by the social satire of Molière. Confined to the milieu of the fashionable, Restoration comedy critiqued the affectations and contradictions of its age through a preoccupation with the battle between the sexes and the comic discrepancy between appearance and reality, principles and desires, virtues and appetites. Congreve's genius is expressed less in skillfully devising elaborate plots than in the witty repartee of his plays' dialogue. A delight in verbal pyrotechnics at the expense of accepted morality, as well as the often ribald sexual frankness of Restoration comedy, revived the attacks on drama that closed the theaters in 1642. The period's most famous attack on the theater came in 1698 from clergyman Jeremy Collier (1650–1726), whose pamphlet *Short View of Immorality and Profaneness of the English Stage*, took direct aim at the moral failings of Congreve's plays and the other Restoration comedies of the period. "The business of *Plays* is to recommend Virtue, and discountenance Vice," Collier asserted, "to shew the Uncertainty of Humane Greatness, the sudden Turns of Fate, and the Unhappy Conclusions of Violence and Injustice. 'Tis to expose the Singularities of Pride and Fancy, to make Folly and Falsehood contemptible, and to bring every Thing that is Ill under Infamy, and Neglect." Collier objected that too often in Restoration comedy vice is unchecked by sufficient reprimands, and the comic playwright is morally tarnished by his own brush. Congreve replied with *Amendments of Mr. Collier's False and Imperfect Citations* in which he defended drama's moral purpose and the playwright's service in depicting "vicious and foolish characters." The playwright should no more be held responsible for these characters' sentiments, Congreve argued, as "a Painter should be believ'd to resemble all the ugly Faces that he draws." "The business of Comedy is mainly to delight," Congreve asserted, "though it should instruct as well; And as vicious People are made asham'd of their follies or faults, but seeing them expos'd in a ridiculous manner, so are good People at once both warn'd and diverted at their Expense." Congreve insisted that the stage should reflect human nature as it is, with the failures to live up to how humans should be subject to the curative power of laughter. His most effective answer to Collier's attack, however, was reserved for *The Way of the World*, and its application of his conception of comedy in the service of truth.

As the play opens it is not hard to discover why Congreve's first audiences struggled mightily with their enjoyment or why the playwright wrote in a preface that success of the play on stage "was almost beyond my Expectation." Beginning with a card game at a fashionable London chocolate house between two gentlemen of fashion—Mirabell and Fainall—the significance of what is said (and not said) only gradually emerges as the pair verbally fence with each other. The audience is thrust into the middle of a complex network of relations, innuendoes, and disguised motives. At the dramatic core of the play is a contest for the control of a family fortune in the hands of Lady Wishfort, Fainall's mother-in-law, and the

guardian of her niece, Mrs. Millamant, whom Mirabell loves. It is only gradually revealed that Fainall and Mirabell are more than just competitors for Lady Wishfort's fortune, however. Mrs. Fainall has been Mirabell's mistress, and Fainall's current mistress, Mrs. Marwood, has betrayed Mirabell's motive of courting Lady Wishfort to conceal his true designs on Millamant out of jealousy. This dizzying web of intrigue, conflicting loyalties, and disguise establishes Congreve's central thematic point that nothing is as simple as it seems and that the polite mask of manners conceals a far different reality. As Mirabell and Fainall thrust and parry, Congreve proceeds by indirection, forcing the audience to detect his characters' motivations and the underlying currents of emotions as much by what they avoid saying as by explicit statement. Critic Maximillian E. Novak has observed: "The way Congreve moves the action forward while, at the same time, giving information about the characters and the situation is probably unmatched in English comedy."

In the second act the hints and innuendoes are clarified. The loveless marriage between Mr. and Mrs. Fainall and the divided motives of Mrs. Marwood as Fainall's mistress and Millamant's rival for Mirabell are made explicit. However, much still remains hidden, and first impressions are misleading. Millamant, in her first appearance, seems to be the archetypal, shallow young flirt, who takes the stage in "full Sail, with her Fan spread and Streamers out, andaShoalofFoolsforTenders."TheensuingverbalsparringbetweenMilla- mant and Mirabell, one of the high points of English drama, shows her to be far from the superficial ingénue of first impression and leaves Mirabell in a "whirlwind" trying to adjust conventional gender assumptions in Millamant's complex blend of the conventional and the iconoclastic:

A fellow that lives in a windmill has not a more whimsical dwelling than the heart of a man that is lodged in a woman. There is no point of the compass to which they cannot turn, and by which they are not turned; and by one as well as another. For motion, not method, is their occupation. To know this, and yet continue to be in love, is to be mad, wise from the dictates of reason, and yet persevere to play the fool by the force of instinct.

Mirabell's scheme to overcome Lady Wishfort's objection to his pursuit of Millamant is to disguise his servant, Waitwell, as a nobleman to court and marry Lady Wishfort. Mirabell then intends to reveal the deception and threaten to expose her to public ridicule unless she withdraws her objections to his suit of her niece. The audience's expectations in watching this intrigue unfold are disappointed as the plot quickly fizzles when Mrs. Marwood in the third act discovers the scheme and warns Lady Wishfort. Mrs. Marwood also reveals to Fainall Mirabell's past affair with his wife, and Fainall uses this intelligence to threaten disclosure of her daughter's past unless Lady Wishfort signs over his

wife's and Millamant's fortune to him. This counterplot, like Mirabell's, collapses as Mirabell produces a deed, made by Mrs. Fainall before her marriage, conveying all her estate to him as her trustee. Fainall is thereby rendered powerless, and all that has been hidden is now finally revealed. Lady Wishfort, enlightened by the truth of Fainall's villainy and the double-dealing of Mrs. Marwood, finally sets aside her objections and clears the way for Mirabell to marry Millamant.

Such a bald summary of the unwinding of Congreve's intrigue plot misses the point of the drama. Existing more as an ironic parody of the typical Restoration comic plot, the drama's tortuous and fortuitous turns of events serve mainly a thematic point about the complexity of relationships and the deceptiveness of taking character and relationships at face value. Moving from deception to truth, from disguise to revelation, *The Way of the World* suggests that the truth about individuals is complex and that authentic interactions are supremely difficult. These points are made explicit in the deepening relationship between Mirabell and Millamant whose process toward genuine love in a corrosive atmosphere of falsity and deception is one of the wonders of the stage. Finally shedding the elaborate social facade that has marked their sexual antagonism, Mirabell and Millamant negotiate the basis for a mutually satisfying relationship in one of the most brilliant exchanges in all Restoration comedies:

millamant . . . And d'ye hear, I won't be call'd Names after I'm Marry'd; positively I won't be call'd Names.

mirabell Names!

millamant Ay, as Wife, Spouse, my Dear, Joy, Jewel, Love, Sweet-heart, and the rest of that nauseous Cant, in which Men and their Wives are so fulsomely familiar,—I shall never bear that—Good *Mirabell* don't let us be familiar or fond, nor kiss before Folks, like my Lady *Fadler* and *Sir Francis*: Nor go to *Hide-Park* together the first *Sunday* in a new Chariot, to provoke Eyes and Whispers; And then never be seen there together again; as if we were proud of one another the first Week, and asham'd of one another ever after. Let us never Visit together, not go to a Play together, but let us be very strange and well bred: Let us be as strange as if we had been marry'd a great while; and as well bred as if we were not marry'd at all.

To Millamant's iconoclastic conditions, Mirabell adds some of his own:

mirabell . . . That you continue to like your own Face, as long as I shall: And while it passes currant with me, that you endeavour not to new Coin it. To which end, together with all Vizards for the Day, I prohibit all Masks for the Night, made of Oil'd-skins, and I know not what—Hog's Bones, Hare's Gall, Pig Water, and the Marrow of a roasted Cat. In short I forbid all Commerce with the Gentlewoman in

what-d'ye-call-it Court. . . . Lastly to the Dominion of the *Tea-Table* I submit— But with *proviso*, that you exceed not in your Province; but restrain yourself to native and simple *Tea-Table Drinks*, as *Tea*, *Chocolate*, and *Coffee*. As likewise to Genuine and Authoriz'd *Tea-Table Talk*—Such as mending of Fashions, spoiling of Reputations, railing at absent Friends, and so forth—But that on no Account you encroach upon the Mens Prerogative, and presume to drink Healths, or toast Fellows; for prevention of which I banish all *Foreign Forces*, all Auxilliarities to the *Tea-Table*, as *Orange-Brandy*, all *Anniseed*, *Cinamon*, *Citron* and *Barbado's-Waters*, together with *Ratafia*, and all *Dormitives*, those I allow.—These *Proviso's* admitted, in other things I may prove a tractable and complying Husband.

millamant O horrid *Proviso's!* filthy Strong waters! I toast Fellows, Odious Men! I hate your odious *Proviso's!*

mirabell Then we're agreed. Shall I kiss your Hand upon the Contract?

Millamant asserts her independence and refusal to be unduly dominated or possessed by her husband, while Mirabell rejects the vain fashions of the time. She finally agrees to “dwindle into a Wife,” while he concedes to be “enlarg'd to a husband,” but not before both have tested their hearts and wits against the ways of the world. The audience as well has been tested in being forced to enlarge a capacity to see that world in all its delightful and sobering contradictions and complexities.

THE ALCHEMIST (1610) by Ben Jonson

*Even as alchemy makes use of the most revolting ingredients . . . in order to produce gold, so Jonson in this play has employed the most sordid, the most meticulously realistic material, and defiantly extracted from it a kind of gold of the imagination. Language has not only turned a whore temporarily into the Fairy Queen, a household drudge into an officer, a beggar into a pious and frugal philosopher, and given their victims a new view of themselves; it has contracted the whole world, as it seems, and made it live fully for a few hours within the walls of a stripped and deserted house—or a theatre. There is nothing restrained, ordered or balanced about life in *The Alchemist*, and no suggestions are put forward as to how any reforms in that direction might be effected. The play stares hard at chaos, with fascination far more than censure or disgust.*

—Anne Barton, *Ben Jonson, Dramatist*

One of literature's greatest comedies, *The Alchemist* is among Ben Jonson's funniest and most masterful plays. Samuel Taylor Coleridge considered it, along with *OEDIPUS* and *Tom Jones*, "the three most perfect plots ever planned," while the poet Algernon Charles Swinburne enthused that in *The Alchemist* "All the distinctive qualities which the alchemic cunning of the poet has fused together in the crucible of dramatic satire for the production of a flawless work of art, have given us the most perfect model of imaginative realism and satirical comedy that the world has ever seen." *The Alchemist*, as its title indicates, is a play about transformation. It is Jonson's *A MIDSUMMER NIGHT'S DREAM* in which the confusion between appearance and actuality, desire and reality is enacted, not in a fantastical forest outside Athens but in a townhouse in London's Blackfriars. In *The Alchemist* the agents of the play's many magical transformations are not fairies scrambling the affections of confused lovers but a trio of con artists fleecing the gullible and self-deluded. In its contemporary London setting Jonson assembles a cross-section of Elizabethan society— clerk, shopkeeper, country squire, rich widow, parson, nobleman, gamester, servant, charlatan, and prostitute. They are all frauds, either pretending to be what they are not or aspiring to become someone else. The play's gulls are shown susceptible to the promise of the cozeners that they can in fact possess all their desires largely because they are victims of their own delusions, and the play offers an unrelentingly unflattering but undeniable

examination of human nature in the grips of greed, vanity, and our preference for illusion over reality. *The Alchemist*, with Jonson's broadest social canvas and its universally relevant theme of humankind's capacity for self-delusion, is arguably, the playwright's most ambitious and profound play that, along with *VOLPONE*, helped establish a new standard of dramatic construction and a realistic method and subject for the theater.

Written at the height of Jonson's dramatic powers, following two of his best comedies, *Volpone* (1606) and *Epicoene* (1609), *The Alchemist* was first performed by Shakespeare's company, the King's Men, in 1610 and stands out in marked contrast to other Elizabethan dramas. It shows Jonson turning the focus of comedy from romantic intrigue in fanciful settings that Shakespeare had patented as the standard of Elizabethan comedy to contemporary life and an "Image of the time." The play's prologue announces:

Our scene is London, 'cause we would make known
No country's mirth is better than our own:
No clime breeds better matter for your whore,
Bawd, squire, imposter, many persons more,
Whose manners, now called humors, feed the stage;
And which have still been subject for the rage

Or spleen of comic writers.

Contemporary London life and "the vices that she breeds" are Jonson's subjects, and for the first time in English drama to such a degree the teeming diversity of contemporary urban life, a city's various denizens, their accents and obsessions take center stage. Countering what Jonson saw in his contemporaries' plays as violations of probabilities in characters and action, *The Alchemist* offers a new dramatic realism based on Jonson's intimate, firsthand experience of middle- and lower-class London life. Characters easily recognized on the streets inside and outside the theater, not the high-born or idealized paragons expected on stage, are shown behaving with psychological consistency in a series of motivated, plausible actions. Additionally Jonson harnesses the play's robust vitality with the disciplined structure, concentrated focus, and serious moral purpose derived from classical comedy. Set during an outbreak of the plague that has caused a London property owner, Lovewit, to escape contagion to the country, *The Alchemist* is confined to the single setting of Lovewit's abandoned house, now taken over as a base of swindling operations by a trio of cozeners: Jeremy, Lovewit's butler, known as Face; Subtle, a charlatan posing as an alchemist and necromancer; and the prostitute Doll Common. There they lure the gullible with promises of wealth, power, and success through their mastery and demonstration of the arcane. To the play's unity of place Jonson adds a unity of action in a series of variations on the same circumstance: the cozening of the trio's succession of marks, along with a unity of time in which the play's action transpires in close to "real time," the dura-

tion of the play's performance. The result is a concentrated, intense dramatic vehicle that accelerates to a breakneck speed before its inevitable collision and catastrophe. In a sense *The Alchemist* is the prototypical modern well-made play, an artfully crafted, smoothly running dramatic machine so contrary to the often discursive multiplicity and improvisations of other Elizabethan dramas. *The Alchemist* shows what can be done on stage when, as Jonson advised, "parts are so joined, and knit together, as nothing in the structure can be chang'd, or taken away, without impairing, or troubling the whole."

The Alchemist opens with a quarrel among the play's three tricksters. Lovewit, the play's principle of law and order, has departed, and chaos, confusion, and misrule reign in his house. The servant, Jeremy, is now, as Face, the presumptive master of men, the chameleon actor of many roles, who revels in his manipulative powers. He has established the pseudo-scholarly Subtle, an expert in the jargon and processes of alchemy, palmistry, astrology, demonology, and theology in Lovewit's house, and the pair of swindlers have been so successful that they begin to believe their own con. If Subtle is unable to transmute base metal into gold as he claims, he is adept at transforming men by causing them to act out their desires and ignore or misperceive the reality of their situations and motives. Face counters Subtle's claim of priority in the scams by arguing that he has worked the greater magic by transforming Subtle from a penniless nonentity, "pinned up in the several rags / You had raked and picked from dunghills" to his present position. "I gave you countenance," Face asserts, ". . . Built you a furnace, drew you customers / Advanced all your black arts." Face and Subtle's quarrel establishes the play's central theme of self-delusion in which the characters readily ignore the reality of who they are for the far more pleasing illusion of who they would like to be. Doll Common plays peacemaker—flattering both and playing on each man's inflated self-conception, calling Subtle "Sovereign" and Face "General"—and manages to negotiate a temporary truce between the pair in the interest of their present scheming. Despite her common sense, Doll is not immune from self-deception herself and will eventually begin to believe that she can become in fact the great lady she pretends to be.

With an uneasy alliance established among the trio that could collapse at any moment due to their enmity and hubris, the play begins its parade of gulls, each arriving to profit from the illusions that the three con artists inventively supply, based on their insights into the nature of human folly and greed. Each gull, in Face's diagnosis, is afflicted with an "itch of the mind," a dissatisfaction with his or her identity and circumstance, that the trio will scratch with various promises of transformation. Jonson avoids repetition by masterfully differentiating the gulls with varying social stations, motives, and degrees of intelligence and sophistication. The first to arrive is Dapper, a young law clerk who, stifled by his dull routine, wants help in becoming a successful gambler. Exploiting Dapper's

romantic sensibility as one who “consorts with the small poets of the time,” Subtle claims to recognize him as a favorite nephew of the Fairy Queen who, if he will endure “a world of ceremonies,” will gain an audience with his aunt and a guarantee of gambling luck. Dapper reveals himself as a victim of his own stupidity and greed and is complemented by Abel Drugger, a slow-witted young man setting up a new tobacco shop who desires to know “by necromancy” how best to arrange his shop and advertise. Drugger is easily satisfied by Subtle’s nonsensical revelations from astrology and palmistry of the route to certain success in business.

Ascending the social ladder, the trio is introduced by Drugger to a country squire, Kastril, and his sister, the 19-year-old beautiful, but empty-headed wealthy widow Dame Pliant. Kastril has come up to London “to learn to quarrel, and to live by his wits,” and Subtle is to provide him with the “grammar and logic / And rhetoric of quarreling.” Kastril’s aspirations to master city vices are revealed as springing from malice and a desire to lord over his country tenants and neighbors. Dame Pliant has come to town “to learn the fashion” and “to know her fortune.” Subtle uses his crystal ball to predict “some great honor” for her, namely, his own marriage to her, and Dame Pliant becomes a contentious object of desire for more than one of the conspirators and their victims. These four somewhat simple victims of their own lack of sophistication and craven motives are contrasted with two other, more clever and distinguished gulls—the pastor of an exiled congregation of English Anabaptists, Tribulation Wholesome, and the voluptuarian Sir Epicure Mammon. For these two no simple conjuring tricks are sufficient. They require nothing less than the holy grail of transmutation, the philosopher’s stone, the ultimate means to allow man to control reality. Tribulation Wholesome desires the stone as a tool for “the glorious cause,” to restore “the silenced Saints” of his congregation to the pulpits of England. However, Wholesome’s spiritual zeal and altruism are exposed as shams, disguising his lust for secular power. Wholesome’s hypocrisy is evident as he eventually accepts Subtle’s offer of the more immediate temptation of success as a counterfeiter while awaiting possession of the all-powerful philosopher’s stone.

Sir Epicure Mammon, one of Jonson’s greatest creations, is the most distinguished of the gulls and the most imaginative and complex in his motives. Blind to his own egotism and self-indulgence, Mammon convinces Face, Subtle, and himself that he intends to use the philosopher’s stone for good, to “turn the age to gold,” by eliminating all disease, restoring youth and vigor to the aged, and enriching the poor. His philanthropic rationalizations, however, do not disguise his ruling passion: to live a life of unsurpassable luxury and extravagance. In some of the most audaciously entertaining lines of the play, Mammon charts the apparently boundless nature of his desires, including possessing “a list of wives and concubines / Equal with Solomon” and a back as tough as Hercules’ “to enjoy fifty

a night.” To Doll, whom he is introduced as a noble lady driven mad by biblical studies, he promises “a perpetuity / Of life and lust!” Mammon’s magnanimity masks selfishness and a fantasy life so all encompassing that he casts Doll as the ideal noble consort for his wish fulfillment, underscoring his total lack of self-knowledge about his true motives and his preference for his outlandish desires over reality. Mammon is the one gull who has little need of the encouragement offered by the cozeners.

Both Wholesome and Mammon come accompanied by skeptical companions—Ananias, a zealous Puritan deacon, and Pertinax Surly, a gambler and man about town who prides himself on being too astute to be tricked by the likes of Face, Subtle, and Doll. Both are skeptical about the philosopher’s stone, feel smugly superior to their gullible companions, and try to dissuade them from succumbing to the lures of the con artists. Both also confuse the role they assume as preservers of truth and righteousness with their reality. Ananias is far from the holier-than-thou paragon he sees himself to be and self-servingly rationalizes a justification for the counterfeiting scheme, while Surly, taking on the role of exposé of the trio’s scheme, returns disguised as a Spanish grandee and shows that his “foolish vice of honesty” is just a sham to gain Dame Pliant for himself.

With seven separate gulling plots operating concurrently and requiring that no one set of characters should be aware of the others, *The Alchemist* generates a crescendo of hilarious comic situations in the best farcical manner. The play’s structure has been aptly described by critic Anne Barton as driven forward “by a succession of knocks on the door,” as the cozeners must juggle more and more arrivals and departures. The play becomes a tour de force of Jonson’s stage-managing that pushes Face, Subtle, and Doll to the limits of their ingenious, manipulative resources. The result is some of the funniest complications ever staged, including the blindfolded Dapper being pinched and prodded by Face and Subtle speaking in fairy falsetto, Doll Common’s performance as the Fairy Queen, and Surly trapped in his Spanish disguise and forced to pretend he does not understand the insults heaped upon him.

Eventually the deus ex machina arrives in the form of the unexpectedly returned Lovewit, who restores order in his house while standing in marked contrast to all the others by being immune to Face’s deceptions or his own self-delusions. “No more of your tricks, good Jeremy / The truth,” Lovewit commands, “the shortest way.” Lovewit becomes the play’s reality principle who metes out the appropriate justice on the violators. Compared to the punishment Jonson arranges for Volpone and Mosca, who have preyed on innocents, Subtle and Doll escape their fate since their prey are at best co-conspirators and victims of their own illusions. Instead they are allowed to escape direct punishment for a more sobering sentence: the man who would be sovereign over others and the woman who would

be a great lady must face the reality of who they truly are: a petty cheat and a whore. Face, the protean master of men, is sentenced to subservience again as the dutiful Jeremy who helps Lovewit gain the prize of Dame Pliant. The various gulls are similarly forced to accept the reality of their circumstances and the identities that they have attempted to deny but with a final ironic suggestion that new illusions are not far away. To Lovewit's offer to return his swindled property to Sir Epicure if he "can bring certificate that you were gulled of 'em, / Or any formal writ out of a court / That you did cozen yourself, I will not hold them," Mammon replies that "I'll rather lose 'em"; that is, he prefers his illusions over facing the facts, whatever the cost.

The Alchemist, like all of Jonson's comedies, instructs through ridicule, establishing serious moral lessons behind its humor. The play makes clear that the best way to avoid succumbing to con men and self-delusion is through self-knowledge, through facing the facts about human nature and human existence. Jonson's play about transformation uses the theatrical conventions of acting and pretending to reach a serious moral truth. In the bracing wisdom of Jonson's vision the audience gains the true philosopher's stone in the form of a mirror to master our world by understanding ourselves.

THE TEMPEST

Shakespeare

(1611) *by William*

Many commentators agree in the belief that The Tempest is the last creation of Shakespeare. I will readily believe it. There is in The Tempest the solemn tone of a testament. It might be said that, before his death, the poet, in this epopee of the ideal, had designed a codicil for the Future. . . . The Tempest is the supreme denouement, dreamed by Shakespeare, for the bloody drama of Genesis. It is the expiation of the primordial crime. The region whither it transports us is the enchanted land where the sentence of damnation is absolved by clemency, and where reconciliation is ensured by amnesty to the fratricide. And, at the close of the piece, when the poet, touched by emotion, throws Antonio into the arms of Prospero, he has made Cain pardoned by Abel.

—Victor Hugo, *Oeuvres complètes de Shakespeare*

It is inevitable, given the position of *The Tempest* as William Shakespeare's final solo dramatic work, to hear in Prospero's epilogue to the play, Shakespeare's farewell to his audience:

Now my charms are all o'erthrown, And what strength I have's mine own, Which is most faint. . .

. . . Now I want Spirits to enforce, art to enchant;

And my ending is despair Unless I be relieved by prayer, Which pierces so, that it assaults Mercy itself, and frees all faults. As you from crimes would pardoned be, Let your indulgence set me free.

Prospero bows out on a note of forgiveness, the tone that finally rules the play along with an affirmation in the essential goodness of humanity. It has been tempting, therefore, to view Prospero's sentiment and his play as Shakespeare's last word, his summation of a career and a philosophy, what critic Gary Taylor has called "the valedictory culmination of Shakespeare's life work." First performed at court on November 1, 1611, before the playwright's exit to Stratford, *The Tempest*, however, is technically neither Shakespeare's finale nor requiem. Two years later Shakespeare was back in London, collaborating with John Fletcher on *The Two Noble Kinsmen*, *Henry VIII*, and the lost play *Cardenio*. As intriguing as the biographical reading is, it is only one of *The Tempest's* multiple layers of meaning and significance. Called by critic T. M. Parrot, "perhaps the best loved of all Shakespeare's plays," and by William Hazlitt as among the "most original and

perfect of Shakespeare's productions," *The Tempest* continues to be one of the most performed and interpreted plays in the canon, generating (and withstanding) autobiographical, allegorical, religious, metaphysical, and more recently postcolonial readings. The play's central figure has likewise shifted from Prospero, who fascinated the romantics, to Miranda, who has claimed the attention of feminists, to Caliban, who is exhibit A in the reading of the play as "a veritable document of early Anglo-American history," according to writer Sydney Lee, containing "the whole history of imperialist America," as stated by critic Leslie Fiedler. *The Tempest* has served as a poetic treasure trove and springboard for other writers, with allusions detectable in John Milton's *Comus*, T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*, W. H. Auden's *The Sea and the Mirror*, and countless other works. Based on its popularity, persistence, and universality, *The Tempest* remains one of the richest and most fascinating of Shakespeare's plays.

The Tempest is a composite work with elements derived from multiple sources. Montaigne's essay "On Cannibals," whose romantic primitivism is satirized in Gonzalo's plan for organizing society on Prospero's island in the second act, is a possible source. So, too, are a German play, *Comedy of the Beautiful Sidea*, by Jacob Ayrer, about a magician prince whose only daughter falls in love with the son of his enemy, and several Italian commedia dell'arte pastoral tragicomedies set on remote islands and featuring benevolent magicians. Accounts of the *Sea-Venture*, the ship sent to Virginia to bolster John Smith's colony that was wrecked on the coast of Bermuda in 1609, may have furnished Shakespeare with some of the details for the play's opening storm. However, the most substantial borrowing for the plot of *The Tempest* comes from Shakespeare's own previous plays, so much so, that scholar Stephen Greenblatt has described *The Tempest* as "a kind of echo chamber of Shakespearean motifs." The complications following a shipwreck revisits *Twelfth Night*; the relocation of court society to the wilderness is featured in *As You Like It* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, which also employs spirits and the supernatural to teach lessons and settle scores. The backstory of *The Tempest*—Prospero, the former duke of Milan, usurped by his brother—recalls *HAMLET* and *KING LEAR*. Miranda's being raised in ignorance of her past and status as well as the debate between nature and nurture echo *Pericles* and *The Winter's Tale*. Like both, *The Tempest* mixes light and dark, tragic and comic elements, yet compared to their baroque complexity, the shortest of Shakespeare's plays after *Macbeth* obeys the Aristotelian unities of place and time (the only other Shakespearean play to do so is *The Comedy of Errors*), with its action confined to Prospero's island, taking place over a period roughly corresponding to its performance time.

The Tempest begins with one of the most spectacular scenes in all of Shakespeare: the storm at sea that threatens the vessel whose passengers include King Alonso of Naples, his son Ferdinand, and Prospero's hated brother Antonio, the

usurping duke of Milan. Their life-and-death struggle enacted on stage is subjected to a double focus as Prospero reassures his daughter, Miranda, distraught over the fate of the passengers and crew, that he controls the tempest and that their danger is an illusion. The disaster, which he calls a “spectacle,” is artifice, and the play establishes an analogy between Prospero’s magic and the theatrical sleight of hand that initially seemed so realistic and thrilling. Prospero stands in for the artist here: Both magician and playwrights are conjurers, able to manipulate nature and make others believe in a reality without substance. The contrast between illusion and reality will be sounded throughout the play, suggesting that *The Tempest* is a metadrama: a play about playwriting and the power and limitations of the imagination. Prospero finally tells his daughter how they arrived on the island; how his brother, Antonio, joined in a conspiracy with Alonso to usurp his place as duke of Milan; how 12 years before Prospero and Miranda were set adrift at sea, provisioned only by a compassionate Neapolitan, Gonzalo. Friend and foes, aboard the vessel Prospero has seemed to wreck, are now under his control on the island where Prospero intends to exact his vengeance. Prospero, therefore, will use his long- studied magical arts to stage a reckoning for past offenses. The play proceeds under Prospero’s direction with a cast that either cooperates or complicates his intentions. Serving him are the ethereal Ariel, whom Prospero promises to free after completing his bidding, and the contrasting earthly and brutish Caliban, a witch’s son, whom Prospero says he has “us’d thee / (Filth as thou art) with human care, and lodg’d thee / In mine own cell, till thou didst seek to violate / The honor of my child.” Prospero, therefore, controls symbols of both sides of human nature: aspects of the imagination and fancy and baser instincts that come in conflict on the island as the play progresses.

As playwright Prospero must juggle three subplots: Miranda’s relationship with Ferdinand, the son of Alonso, who mourns his loss at sea; the plotting of Prospero’s brother, Antonio, and the king’s brother, Sebastian, to murder Alonso and seize his throne; and Caliban’s alliance with the jester Trinculo and butler Stefano to kill Prospero and reign in his stead. The first goes so well—Miranda and Ferdinand fall in love at first sight—that Prospero tests Ferdinand’s fidelity by appearing to punish him by making him his servant. Ferdinand, however, proves his devotion by gladly accepting his humiliation to be near Miranda. Prospero ends Ferdinand’s penance and testing in the first scene of act 4, declaring: “All thy vexations / Were but my trials of thy love, and thou / Hast strangely stood the test.” To seal the nuptial vows a ritual masque is performed by various mythological goddesses and pastoral figures. In the midst of the dance Prospero stops the performance to deliver one of the most celebrated speeches in all of Shakespeare’s plays:

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.

Jaques in *As You Like It* asserted “All the world’s a stage,” and Macbeth described life as “a poor player that struts and frets his hour upon the stage.” Prospero’s speech suggests the transience of both human life and art, with its reference to “the great globe,” the name of Shakespeare’s theater, that, along with towers, palaces, and temples, “shall dissolve . . . like this insubstantial pageant.”

Made aware by Ariel of Caliban’s conspiracy with Trinculo and Stefano, Prospero distracts them from their purpose of murder by rich attire, which Trinculo and Stefano put on before being set upon by spirits. Their comic rebellion is matched by the more serious plot of Antonio and Sebastian to kill Alonso. An assassination attempt is halted by the appearance of spirits providing a banquet for the hungry men. Just as they try to satisfy their hunger the food disappears, replaced by Ariel, “like a harpy,” who accuses Alonso, Sebastian, and Antonio of their crimes against Prospero and delivers their sentences:

. . . But remember, For that’s my business to you, that you three

From Milan did supplant good Prospero; Exposed unto the sea, which hath requit it, Him, and his innocent child; for which foul deed The powers, delaying not forgetting, have Incensed the seas and shores, yea, all the creatures, Against your peace. Thee of thy son, Alonso,

They have bereft; and do pronounce by me Ling’ring perdition, worse than any death Can be at once, shall step by step attend You and your ways; whose wraths to guard you from— Which here, in this most desolate isle, else falls

Upon your heads—is nothing but heart’s sorrow, And a clear life ensuing.

Prospero, approving of Ariel’s performance, declares, “They now are in my pow’r,” and the play turns on how he will decide to use that power.

At the start of the fifth act Prospero announces the climax of his plan: “Now does my project gather to a head,” with his victims now imprisoned to confront their guilt and fate. It is Ariel who shifts Prospero from vengeance to forgiveness by saying, “Your charm so strongly works ’em / That if you now beheld them your affections / Would become tender.” Ariel’s suggestion of what should be the reaction to human suffering shames Prospero into compassion:

Hast thou, which art but air, a touch, a feeling Of their afflictions, and shall not myself, One of their kind, that relish all as sharply, Passion as they, be kindlier moved than thou art? Though with their high wrongs I am struck to th' quick, Yet with my nobler reason 'gainst my fury

Do I take part. The rarer action is In virtue than in vengeance. They being penitent, The sole drift of my purpose doth extend Not a frown further. Go release them, Ariel; My charms I'll break, their senses I'll restore, And they shall be themselves.

Prospero turns away from revenge and the pursuit of power that had formerly ruled the destinies of so many Shakespearean heroes, including Hamlet, Macbeth, and many more. Prospero changes the plot of his play at its climax and then turns away from his art to reenter the human community:

. . . But this rough magic I here abjure. And, when I have required

Some heavenly music—which even now I do— To work mine end upon their senses that This airy charm is for, I'll break my staff, Bury it certain fathoms in the earth,

And deeper than did ever plummet sound I'll drown my book.

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The end of Prospero's plot, his art, and the play conjoin. Ariel returns with the prisoners, and Prospero pardons all, including his brother, before reclaiming his dukedom and reuniting father and son. Miranda, overcome by so many nobles on their formerly deserted island, declares:

O wonder! How many goodly creatures are there here! How beauteous mankind is! O brave new world That has such people in't!

Prospero, more soberly and less optimistically, responds to her words: "'Tis new to thee." Finally, Caliban, Stephano, and Trinculo are brought in. The lowly status and ridiculousness of the latter two are exposed, prompting Caliban to assert:

I'll be wise hereafter, And seek for grace. What a thrice-double ass Was I to take this drunkard for a god, And worship this dull fool!

Having reestablished order and a harmonious future in the marriage of Miranda and Ferdinand, Prospero delivers on his promise to free Ariel before turning to the audience to ask for the same compassion and forgiveness he has shown. As Prospero has released the spirit Ariel, we are asked to do the same for Prospero. We now hold the power and the art to use it as we will:

. . . Now 'tis true I must be here confined by you Or sent to Naples. Let me not,

Since I have my dukedom got, And pardoned the deceiver, dwell In this bare island by your spell; But release me from my bands With the help of your good hands.

If the play is not Shakespeare's last will and testament, there scarcely can be a better: a play that affirms essential human goodness while acknowledging the presence of human evil, written in the full powers of the imagination, while conscious of its limitations and responsibilities.