Measure for Measure
The articles in this study guide are not meant to mirror or interpret any productions at the Utah Shakespeare Festival. They are meant, instead, to be an educational jumping-off point to understanding and enjoying the plays (in any production at any theatre) a bit more thoroughly. Therefore the stories of the plays and the interpretative articles (and even characters, at times) may differ dramatically from what is ultimately produced on the Festival’s stages.

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Cover photo: Elisabeth Adwin (left) and Scott Coopwood in Measure for Measure, 2003.
Measure for Measure

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Shakespeare: Words, Words, Words
By S. S. Moorty

“No household in the English-speaking world is properly furnished unless it contains copies of the Holy Bible and of The Works of William Shakespeare. It is not always thought that these books should be read in maturer years, but they must be present as symbols of Religion and Culture” (G.B. Harrison, Introducing Shakespeare. Rev. & Exp. [New York: Penguin Books, 1991], 11).

We, the Shakespeare-theater goers and lovers, devotedly and ritualistically watch and read the Bard’s plays not for exciting stories and complex plots. Rather, Shakespeare’s language is a vital source of our supreme pleasure in his plays. Contrary to ill-conceived notions, Shakespeare’s language is not an obstacle to appreciation, though it may prove to be difficult to understand. Instead, it is the communicative and evocative power of Shakespeare’s language that is astonishingly rich in vocabulary—about 29,000 words—strikingly presented through unforgettable characters such as Hamlet, Macbeth, Lear, Othello, Rosalind, Viola, Iago, Shylock, etc.

In the high school classroom, students perceive Shakespeare’s language as “Old English.” Actually Shakespeare’s linguistic environment, experience, and exposure was, believe it or not, closer to our own times than to Chaucer’s, two hundred years earlier. Indeed, the history and development of the English language unfolds as follows: Old English, 449-1100; Middle English 1100-1500; and Modern English 1500-present. Shakespeare was firmly in the Modern English period.

At the time Shakespeare wrote, most of the grammatical changes from Old and Middle English had taken place; yet rigid notions about “correctness” had not yet been standardized in grammars. The past five centuries have advanced the cause of standardized positions for words; yet the flexible idiom of Elizabethan English offered abundant opportunities for Shakespeare’s linguistic inventiveness. Ideally it is rewarding to study several facets of Shakespeare’s English: pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary, wordplay, and imagery. The present overview will, however, be restricted to “vocabulary.”

To Polonius’s inquisitive question “What do you read, my lord?” (Hamlet, 2.2.191) Hamlet nonchalantly and intriguingly aptly replies: “Words, words, words” (2.2.192). This many-splendored creation of Shakespeare’s epitomizes the playwright’s own fascination with the dynamic aspect of English language, however troubling it may be to modern audiences and readers. Shakespeare added several thousand words to the language, apart from imparting new meanings to known words. At times Shakespeare could teasingly employ the same word for different shades of thought. Barowne’s single line, “Light, seeking light, doth light of light beguile” (Love’s Labour’s Lost, 1.1.77), as Harry Levin in his General Introduction to The Riverside Shakespeare (9) explains, “uses ‘light’ in four significations: intellect, seeking wisdom, cheats eyesight out of daylight.”

Another instance: Othello as he enters his bedroom with a light before he smothers his dear, innocent Desdemona soliloquizes: “Put out the light, and then put out the light” (Othello, 5.2.7) Here ‘light’ compares the light of Othello’s lamp or torch to Desdemona’s ‘light’ of life.

In both instances, the repeated simple ordinary word carries extraordinary shades of meaning. “Usually such a tendency in a Shakespeare play indicates a more or less conscious thematic intent.” (Paul A. Jorgensen, Redeeming Shakespeare’s Words [Berkeley and Los Angeles; University of California Press, 1962], 100).
Living in an age of the “grandiose humanistic confidence in the power of the word” (Levin 9), Shakespeare evidently felt exuberant that he had the license to experiment with the language, further blessed by the fact that “there were no English grammars to lay down rules or dictionaries to restrict word-formation. This was an immeasurable boon for writers” (Levin 10). Surely Shakespeare took full advantage of the unparalleled linguistic freedom to invent, to experiment with, and to indulge in lavishly.

However intriguing, captivating, mind-teasing, beguiling, and euphonious, Shakespeare’s vocabulary can be a stumbling block, especially for readers. “In the theater the speaking actor frequently relies on tone, semantic drive, narrative context, and body language to communicate the sense of utterly unfamiliar terms and phrases, but on the page such words become more noticeable and confusing” (Russ McDonald, The Bedford Companion to Shakespeare: An Introduction with Documents [Boston: Bedford Books of St. Martin’s Press, 1996], 184).

Unlocking the meaning of Shakespeare’s vocabulary can prove to be an interesting challenge. Such words include those which “have dropped from common use like ‘bisson’ (blind) or those that the playwright seems to have created from Latin roots . . . but that did not catch on, such as conspectuities’ (eyesight or vision) or ‘unplausible’ (doubtful or disapproving). Especially confusing are those words that have shifted meaning over the intervening centuries, such as ‘proper’ (handsome), ‘nice’ (squeamish or delicate), ‘silly’ (innocent), or ‘cousin’ (kinsman, that is, not necessarily the child of an aunt or uncle” (McDonald 184). Because of semantic change, when Shakespeare uses ‘conceit,’ he does not mean ‘vanity,’ as we might understand it to be. Strictly following etymology, Shakespeare means a ‘conception’ or ‘notion,’ or possibly the ‘imagination’ itself.

Perhaps several Shakespeare words “would have been strange to Shakespeare’s audience because they were the products of his invention or unique usage. Some words that probably originated with him include: ‘auspicious,’ ‘assassination,’ ‘disgraceful,’ ‘dwindle,’ ‘savagery.’” Certainly a brave soul, he was “a most audacious inventor of words.” To appreciate and understand Shakespeare’s English in contrast to ours, we ought to suspend our judgment and disbelief and allow respect for the “process of semantic change, which has been continually eroding or encrusting his original meaning” (Levin 8).

Shakespeare’s vocabulary has received greater attention that any other aspect of his language. Perhaps this is because it is the most accessible with no burdensome complications. Whatever the cause, Shakespeare’s language will forever be challenging and captivating.
Not of an Age, but for All Mankind
By Douglas A. Burger

After an enormous expenditure of money and effort, Shakespeare's Globe Theater has risen again, four centuries later, on London's south bank of the Thames. Designed as a faithful reconstruction of the original, it uses the building methods of the time and traditional materials (oak timbers, plaster walls, wooden pegs, water-reeds for thatching the roof). From above, the shape seems circular (actually, it is twenty-six sided) with three covered tiers of seats surrounding a central area which is open to the sky. There the “groundlings” may stand to see the action taking place on the stage, which occupies almost half of the inner space. There are no artificial lights, no conventional sets, no fancy rigging.

Seeing a Shakespeare play in the afternoon sunlight at the new Globe must come very close to the experience of those early-day Londoners, except, of course, that we in the twentieth-century behave better. We don't yell insults at the actors, spit, or toss orange peels on the ground. We also smell better: the seventeenth-century playwright, Thomas Dekker, calls the original audience “Stinkards . . . gushed together in crowds with the Steames of strong breath” (Shakespeare's Globe: The Guide Book [London: International Globe Center, 1996], 42). And we are safer. The first Globe burned to the ground. The new theater has more exits, fire-retardant insulation concealed in the walls, and water-sprinklers that poke through the thatch of the roof.

That hard-headed capitalists and officials would be willing, even eager, to invest in the project shows that Shakespeare is good business. The new Globe is just one example. Cedar City's own Utah Shakespeare Festival makes a significant contribution to the economy of southern Utah. A sizable percentage of all the tourist dollars spent in England goes to Shakespeare's birthplace, Stratford-on-Avon, which would be a sleepy little agricultural town without its favorite son. The situation seems incredible. In our whole history, what other playwright could be called a major economic force? Who else—what single individual—could be listed along with agriculture, mining, and the like as an industry of a region? Why Shakespeare?

The explanation, of course, goes further than an attempt to preserve our cultural traditions. In an almost uncanny way, Shakespeare's perceptions remain valuable for our own understandings of life, and probably no other writer remains so insightful, despite the constantly changing preoccupations of audiences over time.

The people of past centuries, for example, looked to the plays for nuggets of wisdom and quotable quotes, and many of Shakespeare's lines have passed into common parlance. There is an old anecdote about the woman, who on first seeing Hamlet, was asked how she liked the play. She replied, “Oh, very nice, my dear, but so full of quotations.” She has it backwards of course. Only the King James Bible has lent more “quotations” to English than Shakespeare.

Citizens of the late nineteenth century sought in the plays for an understanding of human nature, valuing Shakespeare’s character for traits that they recognized in themselves and in others. The fascination continues to the present day as some of our best-known movie stars attempt to find new dimensions in the great characters: Mel Gibson and Kenneth Branagh in Hamlet, Lawrence Fishburn in Othello, Leonardo de Caprio in Romeo + Juliet, to name just a few.

Matters of gender, class, and race have preoccupied more recent audiences. Beatrice sounds a rather feminist note in Much Ado about Nothing in her advice to her cousin about
choosing a husband: Curtsy to your father, but say “Father, as it please me.” Coriolanus presents a recurring dilemma about class relations in its explorations of the rights and wrongs involved in a great man’s attempt to control the masses. Racial attitudes are illuminated in Othello, where the European characters always mark the hero by his race, always identify him first as the “Moor,” are always aware of his difference. London’s new/old Globe is thus a potent symbol of the plays’ continuing worth to us. The very building demonstrates the utter accuracy of the lines written so long ago that Shakespeare is not “of an age” but “for all time.”
Elizabeth’s England

In his entire career, William Shakespeare never once set a play in Elizabethan England. His characters lived in medieval England (Richard II), France (As You Like It), Vienna (Measure for Measure), fifteenth-century Italy (Romeo and Juliet), the England ruled by Elizabeth’s father (Henry VIII) and elsewhere—anywhere and everywhere, in fact, except Shakespeare’s own time and place. But all Shakespeare’s plays—even when they were set in ancient Rome—reflected the life of Elizabeth’s England (and, after her death in 1603, that of her successor, James I). Thus, certain things about these extraordinary plays will be easier to understand if we know a little more about Elizabethan England.

Elizabeth’s reign was an age of exploration—exploration of the world, exploration of man’s nature, and exploration of the far reaches of the English language. This renaissance of the arts and sudden flowering of the spoken and written word gave us two great monuments—the King James Bible and the plays of Shakespeare—and many other treasures as well.

Shakespeare made full use of the adventurous Elizabethan attitude toward language. He employed more words than any other writer in history—more than 21,000 different words appear in the plays—and he never hesitated to try a new word, revive an old one, or make one up. Among the words which first appeared in print in his works are such everyday terms as “critic,” “assassinate,” “bump,” “gloomy,” “suspicious,” and “hurry;” and he invented literally dozens of phrases which we use today: such un-Shakespeare expressions as “catching a cold,” “the mind’s eye,” “elbow room,” and even “pomp and circumstance.”

Elizabethan England was a time for heroes. The ideal man was a courtier, an adventurer, a fencer with the skill of Tybalt, a poet no doubt better than Orlando, a conversationalist with the wit of Rosalind and the eloquence of Richard II, and a gentleman. In addition to all this, he was expected to take the time, like Brutus, to examine his own nature and the cause of his actions and (perhaps unlike Brutus) to make the right choices. The real heroes of the age did all these things and more.

Despite the greatness of some Elizabethan ideals, others seem small and undignified, to us; marriage, for example, was often arranged to bring wealth or prestige to the family, with little regard for the feelings of the bride. In fact, women were still relatively powerless under the law.

The idea that women were “lower” than men was one small part of a vast concern with order which was extremely important to many Elizabethans. Most people believed that everything, from the lowest grain of sand to the highest angel, had its proper position in the scheme of things. This concept was called “the great chain of being.” When things were in their proper place, harmony was the result; when order was violated, the entire structure was shaken.

This idea turns up again and again in Shakespeare. The rebellion against Richard II brings bloodshed to England for generations; Romeo and Juliet’s rebellion against their parents contributes to their tragedy; and the assassination in Julius Caesar throws Rome into civil war.

Many Elizabethans also perceived duplications in the chain of order. They believed, for example, that what the sun is to the heavens, the king is to the state. When something went wrong in the heavens, rulers worried: before Julius Caesar and Richard II were overthrown, comets and meteors appeared, the moon turned the color of blood, and other bizarre astronomical phenomena were reported. Richard himself compares his fall to a premature setting of the sun; when he descends from the top of Flint Castle to meet the conquering
Bolingbroke, he likens himself to the driver of the sun’s chariot in Greek mythology: “Down, down I come, like glist’ring Phaeton” (3.3.178).

All these ideas find expression in Shakespeare’s plays, along with hundreds of others—most of them not as strange to our way of thinking. As dramatized by the greatest playwright in the history of the world, the plays offer us a fascinating glimpse of the thoughts and passions of a brilliant age. Elizabethan England was a brief skyrocket of art, adventure, and ideas which quickly burned out; but Shakespeare’s plays keep the best parts of that time alight forever.

(Adapted from “The Shakespeare Plays,” educational materials made possible by Exxon, Metropolitan Life, Morgan Guaranty, and CPB.)
History Is Written by the Victors
From Insights, 1994

William Shakespeare wrote ten history plays chronicling English kings from the time of the Magna Carta (King John) to the beginning of England's first great civil war, the Wars of the Roses (Richard II) to the conclusion of the war and the reuniting of the two factions (Richard III), to the reign of Queen Elizabeth's father (Henry VIII). Between these plays, even though they were not written in chronological order, is much of the intervening history of England, in the six Henry IV, Henry V, and Henry VI plays.

In writing these plays, Shakespeare had nothing to help him except the standard history books of his day. The art of the historian was not very advanced in this period, and no serious attempt was made to get at the exact truth about a king and his reign. Instead, the general idea was that any nation that opposed England was wrong, and that any Englishman who opposed the winning side in a civil war was wrong also.

Since Shakespeare had no other sources, the slant that appears in the history books of his time also appears in his plays. Joan of Arc opposed the English and was not admired in Shakespeare's day, so she is portrayed as a comic character who wins her victories through witchcraft. Richard III fought against the first Tudor monarchs and was therefore labeled in the Tudor histories as a vicious usurper, and he duly appears in Shakespeare's plays as a murdering monster.

Shakespeare wrote nine of his history plays under Queen Elizabeth. She did not encourage historical truthfulness, but rather a patriotism, an exultant, intense conviction that England was the best of all possible countries and the home of the most favored of mortals. And this patriotism breathes through all the history plays and binds them together. England's enemy is not so much any individual king as the threat of civil war, and the history plays come to a triumphant conclusion when the threat of civil war is finally averted, and the great queen, Elizabeth, is born.

Shakespeare was a playwright, not a historian, and, even when his sources were correct, he would sometimes juggle his information for the sake of effective stagecraft. He was not interested in historical accuracy; he was interested in swiftly moving action and in people. Shakespeare's bloody and superb king seems more convincing than the real Richard III, merely because Shakespeare wrote so effectively about him. Shakespeare moved in a different world from that of the historical, a world of creation rather than of recorded fact, and it is in this world that he is so supreme a master.
Could the plays known as Shakespeare’s have been written by a rural, semi-literate, uneducated, wife-deserting, two-bit actor who spelled him name differently each of the six times he wrote it down? Could such a man know enough about Roman history, Italian geography, French grammar, and English court habits to create Antony and Cleopatra, The Comedy of Errors, and Henry V? Could he know enough about nobility and its tenuous relationship to royalty to create King Lear and Macbeth?

Are these questions even worth asking? Some very intelligent people think so. On the other hand, some very intelligent people think not. Never mind quibbles about how a line should be interpreted, or how many plays Shakespeare wrote and which ones, or which of the great tragedies reflected personal tragedies. The question of authorship is “The Shakespeare Controversy.”

Since Mr. Cowell, quoting the deceased Dr. Wilmot, cast the first doubt about William of Stratford in an 1805 speech before the Ipswich Philological Society, nominees for the “real author” have included philosopher Sir Francis Bacon, playwright Christopher Marlowe, Queen Elizabeth I, Sir Walter Raleigh, and the earls of Derby, Rutland, Essex, and Oxford—among others.

The arguments evoke two premises: first, that the proven facts about the William Shakespeare who was christened at Holy Trinity Church in Stratford-upon-Avon on April 26, 1564 do not configure a man of sufficient nobility of thought and language to have written the plays; and, second, that the man from Stratford is nowhere concretely identified as the author of the plays. The name “Shakespeare”—in one of its spellings—appears on early quartos, but the man represented by the name may not be the one from Stratford.

One group of objections to the Stratford man follows from the absence of any record that he ever attended school—in Stratford or anywhere else. If he were uneducated, the arguments go, how could his vocabulary be twice as large as the learned Milton’s? How could he know so much history, law, or philosophy? If he were a country bumpkin, how could he know so much of hawking, hounding, courtly manners, and daily habits of the nobility? How could he have traveled so much, learning about other nations of Europe in enough detail to make them the settings for his plays?

The assumptions of these arguments are that such rich and noble works as those attributed to a playwright using the name “Shakespeare” could have been written only by someone with certain characteristics, and that those characteristics could be distilled from the “facts” of his life. He would have to be noble; he would have to be well-educated; and so forth. On these grounds the strongest candidate to date is Edward de Vere, seventeenth earl of Oxford.

A debate that has endured its peaks and valleys, the controversy catapulted to center stage in 1984 with the publication of Charlton Ogburn’s The Mysterious William Shakespeare. Ogburn, a former army intelligence officer, builds a strong case for Oxford—if one can hurdle the notions that the author wasn’t Will Shakespeare, that literary works should be read autobiographically, and that literary creation is nothing more than reporting the facts of one’s own life. “The Controversy” was laid to rest—temporarily, at least—by justices Blackmun, Brennan, and Stevens of the United States Supreme Court who, after hearing evidence from both sides in a mock trial conducted September 25, 1987 at American University in Washington, D.C., found in favor of the Bard of Avon. Hooray for our side!
Musical development was part of the intellectual and social movement that influenced all England during the Tudor Age. The same forces that produced writers like Sir Philip Sidney, Edmund Spenser, William Shakespeare, Ben Jonson, John Donne, and Francis Bacon also produced musicians of corresponding caliber. So numerous and prolific were these talented and imaginative men—men whose reputations were even in their own day firmly established and well founded—that they have been frequently and aptly referred to as a nest of singing birds.

One such figure was Thomas Tallis, whose music has officially accompanied the Anglican service since the days of Elizabeth I; another was his student, William Boyd, whose variety of religious and secular compositions won him international reputation.

Queen Elizabeth I, of course, provided an inspiration for the best efforts of Englishmen, whatever their aims and activities. For music, she was the ideal patroness. She was an accomplished performer on the virginal (forerunner to the piano), and she aided her favorite art immensely in every way possible, bestowing her favors on the singers in chapel and court and on the musicians in public and private theatrical performances. To the great composers of her time, she was particularly gracious and helpful.

Singing has been an integral part of English life for as long as we have any knowledge. Long before the music was written down, the timeless folk songs were a part of our Anglo-Saxon heritage. The madrigals and airs that are enjoyed each summer at the Utah Shakespeare Festival evolved from these traditions.

It was noted by Bishop Jewel in 1560 that sometimes at Paul’s Cross there would be 6,000 people singing together, and before the sermon, the whole congregation always sang a psalm, together with the choir and organ. When that thundering unity of congregational chorus came in, “I was so transported there was no room left in my whole body, mind, or spirit for anything below divine and heavenly raptures.”

Religious expression was likely the dominant musical motif of the Elizabethan period; however, the period also saw development of English stage music, with Morley, John Wilson, and Robert Johnson setting much of their music to the plays of Shakespeare. The masque, a semi-musical entertainment, reached a high degree of perfection at the court of James I, where the courtiers themselves were sometimes participants. An educated person of the time was expected to perform music more than just fairly well, and an inability in this area might elicit whispered comments regarding lack of genteel upbringing, not only in the ability to take one’s part in a madrigal, but also in knowing the niceties of musical theory. Henry Peacham wrote in The Compleat Gentleman in 1662 that one of the fundamental qualities of a gentleman was to be able to “sing your part sure, and...to play the same upon your viol.”

Outside the walls of court could be heard street songs, lighthearted catches, and ballads, all of which indicates that music was not confined to the cathedrals or court. We still have extant literally hundreds of ballads, street songs, and vendors’ cries that were sung or hummed on the street and played with all their complicated variations on all levels of Elizabethan society.

Instruments of the period were as varied as the music and peoples, and the instrument and songbooks which remain in existence today are indicative of the high level of excellence enjoyed by the Elizabethans. Songbooks, mainly of part-songs for three, four, five, and six...
voices exist today, as do books of dance music: corrantos, pavans, and galliards. Records from one wealthy family indicate the family owned forty musical instruments, including twelve viols, seven recorders, four lutes, five virginals, various brasses and woodwinds, and two “great organs.” To have use for such a great number of instruments implies a fairly large group of players resident with the family or staying with them as invited guests, and the players of the most popular instruments (lutes, virginals, and viols) would be playing from long tradition, at least back to King Henry VIII. In short, music was as necessary to the public and private existence of a Renaissance Englishman as any of the basic elements of life.

The Utah Shakespeare Festival musicians perform each summer on authentic replicas of many of these Renaissance instruments. The music they perform is authentic from the Elizabethan period, and the instruments are made available for audience inspection and learning.
The status of the actor in society has never been entirely stable but has fluctuated from the beginnings of the theatre to the present day. The ancient Greeks often considered actors as servants of Dionysus, and their performances were a sort of religious rite. Roman actors, often slaves, were seen as the scraps of society, only one step above gladiators. In medieval Europe, both the theatre and the actor, suppressed by the Catholic Church, were almost non-existent but gradually re-emerged in the form of the liturgy and, later, the Mystery plays. The actors of Shakespeare’s age also saw fluctuations in reputation; actors were alternately classified as “vagabonds and sturdy beggars,” as an act of Parliament in 1572 defined them, and as servants of noblemen.

As early as 1482, noblemen such as Richard, duke of Gloucester (later Richard III), the earl of Essex, and Lord Arundel kept acting companies among their retainers. But other than these select groups protected by nobles, actors lived lives of danger and instability because when they abandoned their respectable trades, they also left behind the comfort and protection of the trade guilds.

However, life soon became much more difficult for both of these classes of actors. In 1572, Parliament passed two acts which damaged thespians’ social status. In the first one, the Queen forbade “the unlawful retaining of multitudes of unordinary servants by liveryes, badges, and other signs and tokens (contrary to the good and ancient statutes and laws of this realm)” in order to “curb the power of local grandees” (Dennis Kay, Shakespeare: His Life, Work, and Era [New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1992], 88). One result of this was that some of the actors, now considered superfluous, were turned away.

To make matters even worse, these actors faced yet another impediment: the “Acte for the punishment of Vacabondes” (Kay, 88), in which actors were declared “vagabonds and masterless men and hence were subject to arrest and imprisonment” (Thomas Marc Parrott and Robert Hamilton Ball, A Short View of Elizabethan Drama [New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1943], 46).

However, there were still nobles, such as the earl of Leicester and the earl of Sussex, who endorsed players; the protector would usually seek royal permission for these actors to perform in London or, less frequently, some other less prestigious town. Thus the actors were able to venture forth without fear of arrest. It is through these circumstances that Shakespeare ends up an actor in London.

There are many theories—guesses really—of how Shakespeare got into the theatre. He may have joined a group of strolling players, performed around the countryside, and eventually made it to London, the theatrical hub of Britain. Another theory suggests that he began as a schoolmaster, wrote a play (possibly The Comedy of Errors) and then decided to take it to London; or, alternately, he could have simply gone directly to that great city, with or without a play in hand, to try his luck.

An interesting speculation is that while he was young, Shakespeare might have participated in one of the cycles of Mystery plays in Stratford: “On one occasion the Stratford corporation laid out money for an entertainment at Pentecost. In 1583 they paid 13s 4d ‘to Davi Jones and his company for his pastime at Whitsuntide.’ Davi Jones had been married to Elizabeth, the daughter of Adrian Quiney, and after her death in 1579 he took as his wife a Hathaway, Frances. Was Shakespeare one of the youths who trimmed themselves for the Whitsun pastime?” (S. Schoenbaum, William Shakespeare: A Compact Documentary Life [New York: New American Library, 1977], 111).
But however he got into the theatre and to London, he had made a very definite impression on his competitors by 1592, when playwright Robert Greene attacked Shakespeare as both actor and author: “There is an upstart Crow, beautified with our feathers, that with his Tiger’s heart wrapt in a Player’s hide, supposes he is as well able to bombast out a blank verse as the best of you: and . . . is in his own conceit the only Shake-scene in a country” (G. B. Harrison, *Introducing Shakespeare* [New York: Penguin Books, Inc., 1947], 1).

We don’t often think of Shakespeare as primarily an actor, perhaps because most of what we know of him comes from the plays he wrote rather than the parts he played. Nevertheless, he made much of his money as an actor and sharer in his company: “At least to start with, his status, his security derived more from his acting skill and his eye for business than from his pen” (Kay, 95). Had he been only a playwright, he would likely have died a poor man, as did Robert Greene: “In the autumn of 1592, Robert Greene, the most popular author of his generation, lay penniless and dying. . . . The players had grown rich on the products of his brain, and now he was deserted and alone” (Harrison, 1).

While Shakespeare made a career of acting, there are critics who might dispute his acting talent. For instance, almost a century after Shakespeare’s death, “an anonymous enthusiast of the stage . . . remarked . . . that ‘Shakespear . . . was a much better poet, than player’” (Schoenbaum, 201). However, Shakespeare could have been quite a good actor, and this statement would still be true. One sign of his skill as an actor is that he is mentioned in the same breath with Burbage and Kemp: “The accounts of the royal household for Mar 15 [1595] record payments to ‘William Kempe William Shakespeare & Richarde Burbage servantes to the Lord Chamberlain’” (Kay, 174).

Another significant indication of his talent is the very fact that he played in London rather than touring other less lucrative towns. If players were to be legally retained by noblemen, they had to prove they could act, and one means of demonstrating their legitimacy was playing at court for Queen Elizabeth. The more skilled companies obtained the queen’s favor and were granted permission to remain in London.

Not all companies, however, were so fortunate: “Sussex’s men may not have been quite up to the transition from rural inn-yards to the more demanding circumstances of court performance. Just before the Christmas season of 1574, for example, they were inspected (‘perused’) by officials of the Revels Office, with a view to being permitted to perform before the queen; but they did not perform” (Kay, 90). Shakespeare and his company, on the other hand, performed successfully in London from the early 1590s until 1611. It would be a mistake to classify William Shakespeare as only a playwright, even the greatest playwright of the English-speaking world; he was also “an actor, a sharer, a member of a company” (Kay, 95), obligations that were extremely relevant to his plays. As a man of the theatre writing for a company, he knew what would work on stage and what would not and was able to make his plays practical as well as brilliant. And perhaps more importantly, his theatrical experience must have taught him much about the human experience, about everyday lives and roles, just as his plays show us that “All the world’s a stage, / And all the men and women merely players” (*As You Like It*, 2.7.149-50).
Shakespeare’s Audience: A Very Motley Crowd

From *Insights*, 1992

When Shakespeare peeped through the curtain at the audience gathered to hear his first play, he looked upon a very motley crowd. The pit was filled with men and boys. The galleries contained a fair proportion of women, some not too respectable. In the boxes were a few gentlemen from the royal courts, and in the lords’ box or perhaps sitting on the stage was a group of extravagantly dressed gentlemen of fashion. Vendors of nuts and fruits moved about through the crowd. The gallants were smoking; the apprentices in the pit were exchanging rude Witticisms with the painted ladies.

When Shakespeare addressed his audience directly, he did so in terms of gentle courtesy or pleasant raillery. In *Hamlet*, however, he does let fall the opinion that the groundlings (those on the ground, the cheapest seats) were “for the most part capable of nothing but dumb shows and noise.” His recollections of the pit of the Globe may have added vigor to his ridicule of the Roman mob in *Julius Caesar*.

On the other hand, the theatre was a popular institution, and the audience was representative of all classes of London life. Admission to standing room in the pit was a penny, and an additional penny or two secured a seat in the galleries. For seats in the boxes or for stools on the stage, still more was charged, up to sixpence or half a crown.

Attendance at the theatres was astonishingly large. There were often five or six theatres giving daily performances, which would mean that out of a city of one hundred thousand inhabitants, thirty thousand or more spectators each week attended the theatre. When we remember that a large class of the population disapproved of the theatre, and that women of respectability were not frequent patrons of the public playhouses, this attendance is remarkable.

Arrangements for the comfort of the spectators were meager, and spectators were often disorderly. Playbills seem to have been posted all about town and in the theatre, and the title of the piece was announced on the stage. These bills contained no lists of actors, and there were no programs, ushers, or tickets. There was usually one door for the audience, where the admission fee was deposited in a box carefully watched by the money taker, and additional sums were required at entrance to the galleries or boxes. When the three o’clock trumpets announced the beginning of a performance, the assembled audience had been amusing itself by eating, drinking, smoking, and playing cards, and they sometimes continued these occupations during a performance. Pickpockets were frequent, and, if caught, were tied to a post on the stage. Disturbances were not infrequent, sometimes resulting in general rioting.

The Elizabethan audience was fond of unusual spectacle and brutal physical suffering. They liked battles and murders, processions and fireworks, ghosts and insanity. They expected comedy to abound in beatings, and tragedy in deaths. While the audience at the Globe expected some of these sensations and physical horrors, they did not come primarily for these. (Real blood and torture were available nearby at the bear batings, and public executions were not uncommon.) Actually, there were very few public entertainments offering as little brutality as did the theatre.

Elizabethans attended the public playhouses for learning. They attended for romance, imagination, idealism, and art; the audience was not without refinement, and those looking for food for the imagination had nowhere to go but to the playhouse. There were no newspapers, no...
magazines, almost no novels, and only a few cheap books; theatre filled the desire for story discussion among people lacking other educational and cultural opportunities.

The most remarkable case of Shakespeare’s theatre filling an educational need is probably that of English history. The growth of national patriotism culminating in the English victory over the Spanish Armada gave dramatists a chance to use the historical material, and for the fifteen years from the Armada to the death of Elizabeth, the stage was deluged with plays based on the events of English chronicles, and familiarity with English history became a cultural asset of the London crowd,

Law was a second area where the Elizabethan public seems to have been fairly well informed, and successful dramatists realized the influence that the great development of civil law in the sixteenth century exercised upon the daily life of the London citizen. In this area, as in others, the dramatists did not hesitate to cultivate the cultural background of their audience whenever opportunity offered, and the ignorance of the multitude did not prevent it from taking an interest in new information and from offering a receptive hearing to the accumulated lore of lawyers, historians, humanists, and playwrights.

The audience was used to the spoken word, and soon became trained in blank verse, delighting in monologues, debates, puns, metaphors, stump speakers, and sonorous declamation. The public was accustomed to the acting of the old religious dramas, and the new acting in which the spoken words were listened to caught on rapidly. The new poetry and the great actors who recited it found a sensitive audience. There were many moments during a play when spectacle, brutality, and action were all forgotten, and the audience fed only on the words. Shakespeare and his contemporaries may be deemed fortunate in having an audience essentially attentive, eager for the newly unlocked storehouse of secular story, and possessing the sophistication and interest to be fed richly by the excitements and levities on the stage.
It is hard to get from the facts of Shakespeare's life to any sense of what it must have been like to have lived it. He was born in 1564 in Stratford-on-Avon and died there in 1616. The day of his birth is not certain, but it may have been the same as the day of his death—April 23—if he was baptized, as was usual at the time, three days after he was born. He married Anne Hathaway in the winter of 1582-83, when he was eighteen and she was twenty-six. He became the father of three children. The first was Susannah, who was born around May 23, close enough to the date of the wedding to suggest that the marriage was not entirely voluntary. Shakespeare’s twins, Hamnet and Judith, were baptized on February 2, 1585. Hamnet died of unknown causes (at least unknown by us at this distance in time) in 1596. Shakespeare’s career as actor, theatre owner, manager, and, of course, playwright began in the vicinity of 1590 and continued for the rest of his life, though there are clear indications that he spent more and more time in Stratford and less and less in London from 1611 on. His work in the theatre made him wealthy, and his extraordinary plays brought him a measure of fame, though nothing like what he deserved or would posthumously receive.

It’s hard to get even the briefest sense of what Shakespeare’s life was like from such information. It is probably impossible ever to know what Shakespeare thought or felt, but maybe we can get closer to what he saw and heard and even smelled. Perhaps some snapshots—little close-ups—might help to bring us nearer to the world in which Shakespeare lived if not quite to the life he lived in that world. In Shakespeare’s youth, chimneys were a new thing. Before that, smoke was left to find its way out through a hole in the roof, often a thatched roof, and there were even some who maintained that this smoky atmosphere was better than the newfangled fresh air that chimneys made possible—along with a greater division of rooms and more privacy.

In the year of Shakespeare’s birth, Stratford had more trees than houses—“upwards of 400 houses as well as 1,000 elms and forty ashes” (Peter Thomson, Shakespeare’s Professional Career [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992], 1). Peter Levi says, “The town was so full of elm trees that it must have looked and sounded like a woodland settlement. For example, Mr. Gibbs’s house on Rothermarket had twelve elms in the garden and six in front of the door. Thomas Attford on Ely Street had another twelve. The town boundaries were marked by elms or groups of elms (The Life and Times of William Shakespeare [New York: Wings Books, 1988], 7). Shakespeare’s “Bare ruined choirs where late the sweet birds sang” becomes a far more majestic image with the picture of Stratford’s elms in mind. And the birds themselves had a sound which modern ears no longer have a chance to enjoy. “We must realize that it was ordinary for . . . Shakespeare to hear a dawn chorus of many hundreds of birds at once. . . . as a young man thirty years ago I have heard a deafening dawn chorus in the wooded Chilterns, on Shakespeare’s road to London” (Levi 10).

Exactly what Shakespeare’s road to London may have been or at least how he first made his way there and became an actor is much debated. He might have been a schoolmaster or fifty other things, but he may well have started out as he ended up—as a player. We can then, in John Southworth’s words, “Picture a sixteen-year-old lad on a cart, growing year by year into manhood, journeying out of the Arden of his childhood into ever more unfamiliar, distant regions, travelling ill-made roads in all weathers, sleeping in inns, hearing and memorising strange new dialects and forms of speech, meeting with every possible type and character of person; learning, most of all perhaps, from the audiences to which he played in guildhalls and inns” (Shakespeare the Player: A Life in the Theatre [Gloucestershire: Sutton Publishing Limited, 2000], 30). At some time in his life—in fact, many times—Shakespeare must have known theatrical tours very like that.
In London itself, the new Globe, the best theatre in (or rather just outside of) the city, was in an area with a large number of prisons and an unpleasant smell. “Garbage had preceded actors on the marshy land where the new playhouse was erected: ‘flanked with a ditch and forced out of a marsh,’ according to Ben Jonson. Its cost . . . included the provision of heavy piles for the foundation, and a whole network of ditches in which the water rose and fell with the tidal Thames” (Garry O’Connor, William Shakespeare: A Popular Life [New York: Applause Books, 2000], 161). The playgoers came by water, and the Globe, the Rose, and the Swan “drew 3,000 or 4,000 people in boats across the Thames every day” (161). Peter Levi says of Shakespeare’s London, “The noise, the crowds, the animals and their droppings, the glimpses of grandeur and the amazing squalor of the poor, were beyond modern imagination” (49).

England was a place of fear and glory. Public executions were public entertainments. Severed heads decayed on city walls. Francis Bacon, whom Will Durant calls “the most powerful and influential intellect of his time” (Heroes of History: A Brief History of Civilization from Ancient Times to the Dawn of the Modern Age [New York: Simon & Schuster, 2001], 327), had been “one of the persons commissioned to question prisoners under torture” in the 1580s (Levi 4). The opportune moment when Shakespeare became the most successful of playwrights was the destruction of Thomas Kyd, “who broke under torture and was never the same again,” and the death of Christopher Marlowe in a tavern brawl which was the result of plot and counterplot—a struggle, very probably, between Lord Burghley and Walter Ralegh (Levi 48).

Shakespeare, who must have known the rumors and may have known the truth, cannot have helped shuddering at such monstrous good fortune. Still, all of the sights, smells, and terrors, from the birdsongs to the screams of torture, from the muddy tides to the ties of blood, became not only the textures and tonalities of Shakespeare’s life, but also the information and inspiration behind his plays.
Ghosts, Witches, and Shakespeare
By Howard Waters
From Insights, 2006

Some time in the mid 1580s, young Will Shakespeare, for reasons not entirely clear to us, left his home, his wife, and his family in Stratford and set off for London. It was a time when Elizabeth, “la plus fine femme du monde,” as Henry III of France called her, had occupied the throne of England for over twenty-five years. The tragedy of Mary Stuart was past; the ordeal of Essex was in the future. Sir Francis Drake’s neutralization of the Spanish Armada was pending and rumors of war or invasion blew in from all the great ports.

What could have been more exciting for a young man from the country, one who was already more than half in love with words, than to be headed for London!

It was an exciting and frightening time, when the seven gates of London led to a maze of streets, narrow and dirty, crowded with tradesmen, carts, coaches, and all manner of humanity. Young Will would have seen the moated Tower of London, looking almost like an island apart. There was London Bridge crowded with tenements and at the southern end a cluster of traitors’ heads impaled on poles. At Tyburn thieves and murderers dangled, at Limehouse pirates were trussed up at low tide and left to wait for the water to rise over them. At Tower Hill the headsman’s axe flashed regularly, while for the vagabonds there were the whipping posts, and for the beggars there were the stocks. Such was the London of the workaday world, and young Will was undoubtedly mentally filing away details of what he saw, heard, and smelled.

Elizabethan people in general were an emotional lot and the ferocity of their entertainment reflected that fact. Bear-baiting, for example, was a highly popular spectator sport, and the structure where they were generally held was not unlike the theatres of the day. A bear was chained to a stake in the center of the pit, and a pack of large dogs was turned loose to bait, or fight, him. The bear eventually tired (fortunately for the remaining dogs!), and, well, you can figure the rest out for yourself. Then there were the public hangings, whippings, or drawing and quarterings for an afternoon’s entertainment. So, the violence in some of Shakespeare’s plays was clearly directed at an audience that reveled in it. Imagine the effect of having an actor pretend to bite off his own tongue and spit a chunk of raw liver that he had carefully packed in his jaw into the faces of the groundlings!

Despite the progressing enlightenment of the Renaissance, superstition was still rampant among Elizabethan Londoners, and a belief in such things as astrology was common (Ralph P. Boas and Barbara M. Hahna, “The Age of Shakespeare,” Social Backgrounds of English Literature, [Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1931] 93). Through the position of stars many Elizabethans believed that coming events could be foretold even to the extent of mapping out a person’s entire life.

Where witches and ghosts were concerned, it was commonly accepted that they existed and the person who scoffed at them was considered foolish, or even likely to be cursed. Consider the fact that Shakespeare’s Macbeth was supposedly cursed due to the playwright’s having given away a few more of the secrets of witchcraft than the weird sisters may have approved of. For a time, productions experienced an uncanny assortment of mishaps and injuries. Even today, it is often considered bad luck for members of the cast and crew to mention the name of the production, simply referred to as the Scottish Play. In preaching a sermon, Bishop Jewel warned the Queen: “It may please your Grace to understand that witches and sorcerers within these last few years are marvelously increased. Your Grace’s
subjects pine away, even unto death; their color fadeth; their flesh rotteth; their speech is benumbed; their senses bereft” (Walter Bromberg, “Witchcraft and Psychotherapy”, The Mind of Man [New York: Harper Torchbooks 1954], 54).

Ghosts were recognized by the Elizabethans in three basic varieties: the vision or purely subjective ghost, the authentic ghost who has died without opportunity of repentance, and the false ghost which is capable of many types of manifestations (Boas and Hahn). When a ghost was confronted, either in reality or in a Shakespeare play, some obvious discrimination was called for (and still is). Critics still do not always agree on which of these three types haunts the pages of Julius Caesar, Macbeth, Richard III, or Hamlet, or, in some cases, why they are necessary to the plot at all. After all, Shakespeare’s ghosts are a capricious lot, making themselves visible or invisible as they please. In Richard III there are no fewer than eleven ghosts on the stage who are visible only to Richard and Richmond. In Macbeth the ghost of Banquo repeatedly appears to Macbeth in crowded rooms but is visible only to him. In Hamlet, the ghost appears to several people on the castle battlements but only to Hamlet in his mother’s bedchamber. In the words of E.H. Seymour: “If we judge by sheer reason, no doubt we must banish ghosts from the stage altogether, but if we regulate our fancy by the laws of superstition, we shall find that spectres are privileged to be visible to whom they will (E.H. Seymour “Remarks, Critical, Conjectural, and Explanatory on Shakespeare” in Macbeth A New Variorum Edition of Shakespeare [New York: Dover Publications Inc., 1963] 211).

Shakespeare’s audiences, and his plays, were the products of their culture. Since the validity of any literary work can best be judged by its public acceptance, not to mention its lasting power, it seems that Shakespeare’s ghosts and witches were, and are, enormously popular. If modern audiences and critics find themselves a bit skeptical, then they might consider bringing along a supply of Coleridge’s “willing suspension of disbelief.” Elizabethans simply had no need of it.
Shakespeare’s Day: What They Wore

The clothing which actors wear to perform a play is called a costume, to distinguish it from everyday clothing. In Shakespeare’s time, acting companies spent almost as much on costumes as television series do today.

The costumes for shows in England were so expensive that visitors from France were a little envious. Kings and queens on the stage were almost as well dressed as kings and queens in real life.

Where did the acting companies get their clothes? Literally, “off the rack” and from used clothing sellers. Wealthy middle class people would often give their servants old clothes that they didn’t want to wear any more, or would leave their clothes to the servants when they died. Since clothing was very expensive, people wore it as long as possible and passed it on from one person to another without being ashamed of wearing hand-me-downs. However, since servants were of a lower class than their employers, they weren’t allowed to wear rich fabrics, and would sell these clothes to acting companies, who were allowed to wear what they wanted in performance.

A rich nobleman like Count Paris or a wealthy young man like Romeo would wear a doublet, possibly of velvet, and it might have gold embroidery. Juliet and Lady Capulet would have worn taffeta, silk, gold, or satin gowns, and everybody would have had hats, gloves, ruffs (an elaborate collar), gloves, stockings, and shoes equally elaborate.

For a play like Romeo and Juliet, which was set in a European country at about the same time Shakespeare wrote it, Elizabethan everyday clothes would have been fine—the audience would have been happy, and they would have been authentic for the play. However, since there were no costume shops who could make clothing suitable for, say, medieval Denmark for Hamlet, or ancient Rome for Julius Caesar, or Oberon and Titania’s forest for A Midsummer Night’s Dream, these productions often looked slightly strange—can you imagine fairies in full Elizabethan collars and skirts? How would they move?

Today’s audiences want costumes to be authentic, so that they can believe in the world of the play. However, Romeo and Juliet was recently set on Verona Beach, with very up-to-date clothes indeed; and about thirty years ago, West Side Story, an updated musical version of the Romeo and Juliet tale, was set in the Puerto Rican section of New York City.

Activity: Discuss what the affect of wearing “special” clothes is—to church, or to a party. Do you feel different? Do you act different? How many kinds of wardrobes do you have? School, play, best? Juliet and Romeo would have had only one type of clothing each, no matter how nice it was.

Activity: Perform a scene from the play in your everyday clothes, and then in more formal clothes. Ask the participants and the spectators to describe the differences between the two performances.
Synopsis: Measure for Measure

Measure for Measure is set in Vienna where vice currently runs rampant and the laws have been allowed to sleep for many years. “The too-kind Duke Vincentio is setting out on mysterious business and leaving the cares of state to his trusted minister Angelo, with instructions to enforce discipline as he sees fit.

Angelo’s first action is to revive the obsolete law condemning seducers to death. He then plans to make an example of the young Claudio and has him arrested for having sex with his betrothed, Juliet. As he is being taken to prison, Claudio begs his friend Lucio to get help from his sister, Isabella, who, upon hearing the news, hastens to her brother.

Meanwhile, Duke Vincentio is going about the city disguised as a friar, watching the way his deputy, Angelo, rules and hoping that he can bring the city, which under his own too-kindly rule has been given over to crime, back to the ways of virtue.

Isabella obtains an audience with Angelo and pleads for her brother’s life. At first her efforts are to no avail, but later, as her beauty rouses a passion in Angelo, he asks for a second interview at which he suggests she might purchase her brother’s life with her sexual favors. Shocked, she denies Angelo and rushes away. In the meantime, Duke Vincentio has visited Claudio in his cell and learned of his true love for Juliet and of their plans to marry as soon as a dowry can be arranged.

Hastening to Claudio, Isabella tells her brother of Angelo’s lustful and illegal offer; but makes it clear to him that, although she would pray for him dead, she will not sin for him living. An angry Claudio is then led away by his jailors. The duke, disguised still as a friar, has been eavesdropping on the conversation and now tells Isabella that she can save her brother without compromising herself if she will follow his plan: Angelo, he confides, has a skeleton in his own closet in the person of Mariana, whom Angelo had long ago contracted to marry but had jilted because her dowry was too small. Inasmuch as their betrothal would have been considered a verbal contract, legally and morally binding in the future, Isabella is persuaded to agree to a tryst at which Mariana, without Angelo’s knowledge, can be substituted in his bed to consummate their old marriage vows.

Isabella and Mariana carry out the plan, and Mariana shares Angelo’s bed, with Angelo thinking he is with Isabella. Angelo, however, still breaks his promise and demands to have Claudio’s head. The friar/duke, however, acts quickly and has the head from another corpse substituted for Claudio’s, convincing both Angelo and Isabella that Claudio is dead.

The next day, the duke returns to the city as himself and meets Angelo and other officials outside the gates, where Isabella accuses Angelo of seduction and murder. The duke leaves and returns again disguised as the friar, acting as a witness for the women and revealing the story and himself. He then sentences Angelo to death, but first orders a real friar to marry him to Mariana. After the ceremony he yields to the pleadings of Mariana and Isabella and spares Angelo’s life. He next has Claudio brought forth and orders him to wed Juliet and make up to her for what she has suffered. The duke himself then sues for Isabella’s hand, saying “what’s mine is yours, what’s yours is mine.”
**Characters: Measure for Measure**

**Vincentio:** The kindly, philosophical duke of Vienna, Vincentio puts the government in Angelo’s hands in the hope he can enforce the laws more strictly. However, in the end he must return and restore justice—with severity and mercy.

**Angelo:** The duke’s deputy, he is in charge of the government while Vincentio is gone. He rules with an iron hand, but ignores his own mistakes and hypocrisy. In the end he is forced to marry Mariana who he was formerly betrothed to.

**Escalus:** An ancient lord and counselor to Vincentio, he tries to instill reason and virtue in Angelo’s government.

**Claudio:** Isabella’s brother, Claudio is betrothed to Juliet and is sentenced to death by Angelo for having sex with her. He nearly loses his life, but in the end he is pardoned by Duke Vincentio and marries his love, Juliet.

**Lucio:** A “fantastic,” Lucio is a flamboyant and comic bachelor. He is Claudio’s friend and tries to help him.

**Provost**

**Thomas:** A friar.

**Peter:** Another friar.

**Justice**

**Varrius**

**Elbow:** A dim-witted constable.

**Froth:** A foolish gentleman.

**Pompey:** A clown, Pompey is a servant of Mistress Overdone.

**Abhorson:** An executioner.

**Barnadine:** A long-term prisoner, the dissolute Barnadine is sentenced to be executed together with Claudio.

**Isabella:** About to take her vows as a nun, Isabella is a very virtuous and chaste young woman. Angelo proposes she have sex with him, and he will pardon her brother Claudio. She refuses to do so, and pleads, instead, for mercy. In the end, she decides not to take her vows and to marry Duke Vincentio.

**Mariana:** Betrothed to Angelo five years ago, Mariana was jilted when she lost her dowry in a shipwreck. In an attempt to save Claudio, she has sex with Angelo, who thinks she is Isabella. In the end, Duke Vincentio orders Angelo to marry this patient lover.

**Juliet:** Claudio’s beloved lover, Juliet is pregnant and planning to marry Claudio. The two, however, must postpone their wedding while the intrigues of the play sort themselves out.

**Francisca:** A nun.

**Mistress Overdone:** A bawd, Mistress Overdone runs a brothel in Vienna.
Measure for Measure and Paying the Price
By Diana Major Spencer
From Insights, 2003

Although Measure for Measure shares with Shakespeare's other comedies the general theme so eloquently expressed by Lysander in A Midsummer Night's Dream, "The course of true love never did run smooth" (1.1.134; all references to the play are taken from The Necessary Shakespeare, ed. David Bevington, New York: Longman, 2002), here the obstacles to love, instead of envious uncles, headstrong fathers, love potions or mistaken identities, are money, legal and moral aberrations, and the execution of justice. Moreover, the title of this "dark comedy/problem play," instead of "Will they live happily ever after?," invites heavier questions: Does the punishment fit the crime? Is measure returned for measure?

To Duke Vincentio, the answer is apparently "No." Because he is too weak to enforce his own laws, he leaves his post to become puppet-master in the habit of a friar, aided and abetted by Friar Thomas. "We have strict statutes and most biting laws," the duke tells the friar, "[which are] the needful bits and curbs to headstrong steeds,/ Which for this fourteen years we have let slip" (1.3.19-21). If parents merely display the rod without using it, he continues, "in time the rod/ Becomes more mocked than feared" (1.3.26-27). He himself cannot stiffen the enforcement, he says: "Sith 'twas my fault to give the people scope,/ 'T would be my tyranny to strike and gall them/ For what I [allowed] them [to] do" (1.3.35-37). Therefore, the duke will place his trust in Angelo, ostensibly to reform enforcement policies.

But why Angelo? The duke's first speech (1.1.3-14) establishes Escalus as the most knowledgeable and trustworthy administrator. However, he explains to Friar Thomas, "Lord Angelo is precise,/ Stands at a guard with envy, scarce confesses/ That his blood flows or that his appetite/ Is more to bread than stone" (1.3.50-53). He has earlier told Angelo that Nature does not give us virtues to waste on ourselves, but to use, "for if our virtues/ Did not go forth of us, 'twere all alike/ as if we had them not" (1.1.34-36). Angelo protests that a "test [should be] made of my mettle" (1.1.49) before being entrusted with such responsibility. Nevertheless, the duke charges him, "[B]e thou at full ourself,/ Mortality and mercy in Vienna/ Live in thy tongue and heart" (1.1.44-46), twenty lines later adding, "Your scope is as mine own,/ So to enforce or qualify the laws/ As to your soul seems good" (1.1.65-67, emphases mine).

Two scenes later, the duke reveals to Friar Thomas that such a test is indeed underway: "Hence shall we see,/ If power change purpose, what our seemers be" (1.3.553-54), i.e., if power corrupts, can Angelo remain virtuous—or continue to seem so? The duke's lines certainly challenge the veracity of Angelo's virtue, but they simultaneously reveal the duke's true purpose.

The first trial of Angelo's authority is Claudio, a young man in love—and legally betrothed—to Isabella, a would-be nun, pleading for his brother's life, Angelo is willing to commit the very act for which he's condemning Claudio. However, his propositioning Isabella is several shades darker than the indiscretion of Claudio because it lacks the formality of betrothal. Isabella's submission would thus be to a lustful hypocrite whose new-found power has turned to license, as the duke had feared.

The moral lessons I learned as a child centered on the distinction between right and wrong. All we have to do to be good is to avoid evil. Good will be rewarded; evil punished—that's all we need to know to make the right choices and live a good life. Then we grow up. Choices become more complicated. Obeying "shalt not's" does not necessarily lead us to corresponding "shalt's." Sometimes the choice is not between "shalt" and "shalt not," but between "should" and "but."
Moral quibbling? Perhaps; but it is also Shakespeare’s Measure for Measure.

When I first read this play as a nineteen-year-old, I found the complexity of its moral issues far more intriguing—and truthful—than the simple right-or-wrong of my childhood. I wondered whether I would refuse my brother’s plea for life, especially as execution seemed rather excessive for the seriousness of the crime—even though I understood that in many traditions (including mine) virginity is considered more precious than life. I might fight to the death against a rapist, I thought, but could I refuse my brother, whose keeper I surely am? Which “commandment” should I choose when I can’t choose both?

Years later, I used this dilemma as a moral lesson for teenagers. I introduced Angelo, Claudio and Juliet, and Isabella, then reviewed the plot as far as Angelo’s challenge to Isabella. “What should she do?” I asked. ALL of the boys voted for Isabella’s submission; ALL of the girls said, “No! Let Claudio die!” Then we discussed the difficulty of competing moral duties.

Still, Claudio and Juliet should have waited for marriage rather than consummating a mere betrothal, so maybe he deserves to be punished. Moreover, if Isabella is sincere about the cloistered life, submission should be categorically out of the question. Perhaps abandoning Claudio to the law and Juliet to poverty and ostracism is the proper choice.

In our liberal twenty-first century, such ado about betrothal and fornication may seem bizarre, but not so for Elizabethans. In fact, the now archaic original meaning of betroth was “to engage (a woman) in contract of marriage; . . . To contract two persons to each other in order to marriage [sic].” Betrothed was used figuratively “of God and his Church or people” (OED, Compact Edition 1:208), suggesting that such a contract, sometimes described as legally binding, was very serious indeed.

In an interesting parallel, Isabella is “betrothed” to God, though not yet “married.” She has made the initial commitment, but not yet taken her final vows. As it turns out, she, too, violates her “betrothal,” not in submission to Angelo, but in—though she does not speak it—agreeing to marry Vincentio. By the way, what moral law topples when she agrees to the bed-trick of sending Mariana to Angelo in her place?

When Duke Vincentio, who has lurked in the shadows throughout, suggests the way to both save Claudio and protect Isabel’s virginity, we learn about Mariana, Angelo’s betrothed. With the introduction of Mariana, the duke reveals that power may not actually have corrupted Angelo, since he’d already displayed earlier indications of moral weakness—for example, abandoning a contract of betrothal because “[his bride’s] brother Frederick was wrecked at sea, having in that perished vessel the dowry of his sister” (3.1.218 19).

Shakespeare is careful to say that Mariana and Angelo were “affianced . . . by oath, and the nuptial appointed” (3.1.216); the shipwreck took place “between which time of the contract and limit of the solemnity” (3.1.216 18), that is, between the formal betrothal, which was supposed to be legally binding, and the church ceremony, which solemnized the union. Similarly, Claudio had explained his “crime” this way: “[U]pon a true contract/ I got possession of Julietta’s bed./ You know the lady; she is fast my wife,/ Save that we do the denunciation lack/ Of outward order” (1.2.142 45).

Poor Angelo, with his brilliantly ironic name, has broken a contract, abandoned a(n almost) wife, condemned another man to death for consummating a vow he himself had breached, then propositioned a(n almost) nun. Furthermore, unless Duke Vincentio spent his friar-time dredging up Angelo’s past history, he knew about Angelo’s treatment of Mariana from the beginning. Knowing what he did of Angelo, the duke thus set him up to fail.

Do the ends justify the means? Ironically, the moral turmoil among the “nice” people is more engrossing than the homelessness of the pimps and prostitutes left destitute by Angelo’s legal
enforcements. Perhaps some sort of justice occurs among these social outcasts. Still, their “crimes” are paradoxically more “honest” than those of their “betters.”

Do the “punishments” fit the “crimes”? We know Measure for Measure is a comedy because it ends with marriages instead of deaths. Of the two voluntary marriages, Claudio and Julietta, who are already betrothed and with child, are redeemed after unnecessary and cruel manipulation; and Vincentio, a spy, manipulator, and duke too weak to enforce his own laws, and Isabella, a religious novitiate who breaks her vows to God to marry the duke, seem to deserve each other. Of the involuntary marriages, Angelo, with the aid of Isabella’s mercy, is “punished” for his abuses of power by being forced to follow through with a contract he’d broken five years before; and Mariana, though abandoned by Angelo over the dowry, is finally “rewarded” for her patience and fidelity by having the breached contract restored. The fourth couple, Shakespeare’s usual, though not typical, comedic love-match from the lower classes, pairs the strongly objecting Lucio, an opportunist and flatterer, with Mistress Kate Keepdown, a prostitute impregnated by him.

“Happily ever after” seems unlikely.

Shakespeare’s Measure for Measure

By Ace G. Pilkington

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Much has been said over the years about what kind of play Measure for Measure is. Among other things it is a tragi-comedy, a comedy, and a thesis play. The author of a thesis play sets out to prove a point, usually about an important social issue. A list of such works would obviously include Ibsen’s Ghosts, Brieux’s Damaged Goods, Lawrence and Lee’s Inherit the Wind, and even Leo Tolstoy’s Redemption (or The Living Corpse). Most of George Bernard Shaw’s plays would make that list (though sometimes it might prove hard to pick out a single thesis) as would much of Oscar Wilde, and, perhaps surprisingly, Shakespeare’s Measure for Measure.

Of course, Shakespeare almost never does anything in a conventional way, and Measure for Measure is not a conventional thesis play. It is as The New Theatre Handbook says of Ibsen’s A Doll’s House, “both a problem and a thesis play” (Bernard Sobel, ed. [New York: Crown Publishers, Inc., 1959], 672). And it is much more than that. Where an ordinary thesis play makes it clear which side is the right side, which path the true path, and leads us up a stairway to enlightenment, Shakespeare puts us on a roller coaster that seems to change directions when we least expect it.

The play begins with Duke Vincentio wondering whether his government may have been too lenient, and, in fact, temporarily handing over the reins of that reign (sorry, Shakespeare’s puns are contagious) to the puritanical Angelo. For a brief while, it looks as though Measure for Measure will be, like Shaw’s Mrs. Warren’s Profession, a play about prostitution, as Angelo sets out to eliminate all the brothels in Vienna and execute anyone who is guilty of fornication. But just when we are ready to agree that Angelo has a point (at least when it comes to getting rid of Mistress Overdone’s establishment), our roller coaster dips and swerves, and we find ourselves facing a situation where Claudio is about to be executed for getting his fiancée pregnant. Now, apart from not waiting patiently enough for his wedding and being a friend of the disreputable Lucio, Claudio seems a nice enough young man. As Lucio says about him, “If I could speak so wisely under an arrest, I would send for certain of my creditors” (all references are to The Complete Signet Classic Shakespeare, ed., Sylvan Barnet [New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, Inc., 1972], 1.2.134 5). Most members of the audience would, I suspect, agree that Claudio’s sister, Isabella, has found the solution to this particular problem when she exclaims, “O, let him marry her” (1.4.48).
Decapitation seems altogether disproportionate as a punishment for this crime, and, in addition, it would clearly cause more social problems than it solves, leaving an unwed mother and a fatherless child.

So, we say, moving further away from Angelo and back toward the old leniency of the duke, “No one should die for this sin.” However, Shakespeare will not let us sit quietly and be happy with our answer. Angelo, whose repression of his emotions and natural impulses is anything but healthy, finds Isabella’s pleading for her brother’s life irresistible, or, rather, he finds her irresistible as she pleads. He argues that if her brother’s sin is minor, Isabella should certainly be willing to commit that same sin with Angelo to save her brother’s life.

Now we must choose and decide again. Claudio should not die, or so we thought. Should Isabella then sacrifice her chastity to save his life? Or is this situation entirely different because Isabella would be forced to do what Claudio had done willingly and because, whatever Claudio’s predicament and however little Claudio had expected to be in it (and remember no one had enforced this anti-fornication law for years), it is not Isabella’s fault that he is in it or her responsibility to get him out of it. Plus, Isabella is about to become a nun. Still, if she says “no,” her brother dies.

Isabella says, “no.” What is more she tells her brother what Angelo has offered and she has refused. The natural question is why would Isabella tell Claudio? And the inevitable answer is so that he can make her feel better about her decision. No matter how justified she feels in maintaining her chastity, she must experience some guilt at letting her brother die, so she turns to him for reassurance and comfort. At first, Claudio says exactly what his sister wants to hear, “Thou shalt not do it” (3.1.103). But then, thinking of the horrible alternative he faces, he changes his position, and the argument between them is well summed up in Northrop Frye’s paraphrase, “‘But it’s my chastity,’ screams Isabella. ‘Yes, but it’s my head,’ says Claudio” (Northrop Frye on Shakespeare, Robert Sandler, ed., [New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986], 147).

Suddenly, it begins to be clear that this is not a thesis play about prostitution or pre-marital sex or abuse of authority or chastity, but about mercy. Can Isabella legitimately keep her chastity and let her brother die? Yes, but she cannot turn on him and abuse him for not making her feel better while she does it. The first and worst of the seven deadly sins is pride, and the religion Isabella is so proud of requires her to practice charity and mercy as assiduously as she practices chastity.

So, we condemn Isabella for her selfish righteousness and move yet closer to the duke’s lenient, humane view of the law and the world. But Shakespeare is not through with us yet. Certainly, Isabella should be able to forgive her brother. Should we in the audience be able to forgive Angelo? Should Isabella be able to forgive him? And if we can’t forgive him, must we then criticize ourselves in the same way that we have criticized Isabella? Long before anyone thought of interactive art forms, Shakespeare was building a play that compelled the audience to judge themselves (indeed ourselves) by the same standard they (we) used for the characters. W. H. Auden says the duke “is not just a character, but Vienna, and a mirror in which the other characters learn to know themselves. He creates an educational process that allows the characters to undergo and emerge from their sufferings” (Lectures on Shakespeare, Arthur Kirsch, ed., [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000], 191).

Measure for Measure is a comedy that sometimes looks like a tragedy, but what makes it really comic, what makes of it a happy journey with a joyous ending, is Shakespeare’s understanding that while morality cannot be legislated, human beings can be educated to be better, kinder, and truer. We can learn, as the characters in this play do, that we all need—and all deserve—mercy.
Measure for Measure
By Kelli Allred

Anyone who studies Shakespeare’s Measure for Measure will easily find “Love, Death, and Everything in Between”—the theme of the 2014 season at the Utah Shakespeare Festival. Measure for Measure offers audiences a feast of ironies on which to chew: love, lust, natural death, murders, executions, and nearly everything in between. Set in Vienna, Austria, the thematic heart of the play focuses on the kinds of justice and mercy that Catholic religious leaders preached from the pulpit for centuries before Henry VIII challenged the sovereignty of the papacy. What ensues is a beguiling plot line with dramatic elements common to several other Shakespeare plays that include Catholic themes and characters, not typical of his time. Had he set any of these plays in England, Shakespeare would have been taking his life in his hands.

Between 1530 and 1604, the state religion of England vacillated between Roman Catholic to Protestant several times, beginning with the tumultuous reign of King Henry VIII. When the Pope refused to annul the marriage between Henry and his first wife, Catherine of Aragon, the king established himself as the divine head of church and state in England. He established the Church of England (or Anglican Church), which became the only recognized—and legal—religion in the land. His first act of business was to divorce Catherine, so that he could marry Anne Bolyn in order to produce a male heir.

Once the Catholic Church no longer occupied status in England, its vast holdings needed to be dealt with. Therefore, King Henry asked Parliament to pass an act that allowed the state to seize hundreds of Catholic monasteries, abbeys and convents. This act served to replenish the British coffers, “the exhausted Exchequer.” Properties that had been owned by the Papacy for centuries contained needed furnishings, livestock, and crops worth millions of pounds sterling. Henry appointed his loyal friend Thomas Moore to confiscate all such lands and holdings between 1536 and 1538. Most of the buildings were dismantled, and their contents distributed among friends and family of the king. There is no way to know how much money and property were pinched in the process, but there is evidence that the practice was widespread.

Perhaps the most tragic victims of these raids were the thousands of displaced monks and nuns forced to flee their only homes. Many fled to other Catholic countries throughout Europe, while others went into hiding; indeed, some attempted to blend into newly-reformed Anglican communities. Not surprisingly, many former Catholic families throughout England aided these monks-and-nuns-on-the-run by providing shelter or by purchasing passage to France, or to other Catholic countries. According to many historians, William Shakespeare’s father, John, may well have been one such benefactor. As a successful businessman, he had both the means and the inclination to do so.
In the centuries since William Shakespeare’s death, historians have searched with a fine-tooth comb to prove the rumors that Shakespeare was born into a family of closet Catholics. Historian Stephen Greenblatt dedicated a major portion of his biography of Shakespeare to proving these rumors as fact. Although he fell short of his goal, Greenblatt made a strong case for his assertion that Shakespeare had vast knowledge of Catholicism because he had grown up in it (Will in the World: How Shakespeare Became Shakespeare [New York: Norton & Co, 2004]).

By the time Shakespeare began writing plays in the 1580s, Queen Elizabeth I had made great headway in arresting the problem of “closet Catholics” and those reluctant to embrace the tenets of the Church of England. Citizens who did not attend church services regularly were subject to fines and arrest. In fact, John Shakespeare once faced such charges for non-attendance, but the state dealt with him leniently because of his status in Stratford.

What does any of this biographical history have to do with Shakespeare’s plays?

The Elizabethan theatre serves to provide evidence of the culture from a unique period of history. Just as theatregoers “were able to learn about other places and other times” when they went to the first performances of Shakespeare’s plays, today’s theatregoers “are able to get a glimpse of another world when we study the work they left behind” (Yancey, Diane [Life of the Elizabethan Theater]). The issues of religion and politics were very real for a young William Shakespeare. Therefore, it would seem natural that the playwright would create characters based on people he had known from his youth.

According to Greenblatt, “Nothing in his work suggest a deep admiration for the visible church. Several of his conspicuously Catholic religious figures . . . are fundamentally sympathetic, but not because they are important figures in the church hierarchy. On the contrary, Shakespeare plays almost always depict powerful prelates as disagreeable,” and those lower figures (such as the Friar in Measure for Measure) as beneficent and merciful (111).

What real life connections existed between Elizabethan England and the theatre that sprang from that era? And how did Shakespeare capture the verisimilitude of religious intolerance and political instability?

Considering that times were dangerous for those who did not outwardly prove their devotion to the Anglican Church, students of Shakespeare may be surprised to see him doing just that. In fact, he openly mocks the rigid-minded Protestants known as Puritans (the ridiculously pious Malvolio in Twelfth Night). Shakespeare denigrates the nature of Jews in The Merchant of Venice, where the character Shylock is imbued
with immoral traits of avarice, malice, and revenge. Othello is the Moor (Muslim) whose downfall results from his pride, jealousy, and lust. Catholic characters fare a bit better: priests, friars, monks, and nuns assume relatively virtuous and moral characters in Romeo and Juliet, Measure for Measure, King John, and A Midsummer Night’s Dream.

Real life dilemmas involving lusty youth, premarital sex, pregnancy, and eventual marriage have been around for centuries. Elizabethan England neither invented these problems nor found a solution to them. But just as today’s dramatic entertainment tends to focus on human licentiousness, so did the plays written in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Shakespeare’s audiences certainly enjoyed such stories as much as modern audiences today.

From which faction of society did Shakespeare draw the moral values espoused by the characters in Measure for Measure?

Shakespeare uses monasticism as a vehicle for exposing human paradoxes: good and evil, virtue and vice, truth and dishonesty, purity and corruption, humility and power, and persuasion and manipulation. Shakespeare’s characters make up the gambit of personalities described in the DSM-V Manual used today by mental health care professionals. In Measure for Measure, “the Duke spends most of his time dressed as a friar in order to observe what is happening in his absence. The Duke is unfailingly virtuous, good, and kind-hearted. He tends to rule too softly, which is why he enlists Angelo’s help”

(http://www.sparknotes.com/shakespeare/measure/characters.html). Shakespeare undoubtedly bases his characters on the myriad types of people he encountered throughout his childhood in the country, and his adulthood in London, where he saw up close and personal those who personified “love, death, and everything in between.”

So, why did Shakespeare persist in his use of nuns and monks in so many of his plays? And how did he get away with it, in a political climate so hostile to Catholics, Jews, and Muslims?

The societal roles of monks and nuns were prevalent throughout the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. They worked hard to prevent or remedy social, moral, and religious ills. They tended to the ills of the homeless and the sick. The Black Plague (bubonic) descended upon England several times during Shakespeare’s lifetime; he would have witnessed the administrations of holy men and women with healing hands.

In Measure for Measure, the clergy are called upon further to right the abuses of
the local authorities, particularly Antonio and Lucio, who act upon their lusts and commit the same sins they refuse to forgive legally. In fact, by the end of the play Shakespeare has reiterated his “deep skepticism about the long-term prospects for happiness in marriage” (Greenblatt, 136). Finally, the threat of death is the antithesis to the promise of love; those threatened with death (hanging and beheading) in this play are those who make love for the sake of love; and everything in between is lust and debauchery, making Measure for Measure among the most uncomfortable plots and themes written by the Bard.

The very mercy of the law cries out
Most audible, even from his proper tongue,
‘An Angelo for Claudio, death for death!’
Haste still pays haste, and leisure answers leisure;
Like doth quit like, and measure still for measure (5.1.413–416).