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.

The Study Guide is published by the Utah Shakespeare Festival, 351 West Center Street; Cedar City, UT 84720. Bruce C. Lee, communications director and editor; Phil Hermansen, art director.

Copyright © 2009, Utah Shakespeare Festival. Please feel free to download and print The Study Guide, as long as you do not remove any identifying mark of the Utah Shakespeare Festival.

For more information about Festival education programs:
Utah Shakespearean Festival
351 West Center Street
Cedar City, Utah 84720
435-586-7880
www.bard.org.

Cover photo: Kymberly Mellen (left) and David Ivers in Much Ado about Nothing, 2010. Photo by Karl Hugh
Much Ado about Nothing

Contents

Information on William Shakespeare

Shakespeare: Words, Words, Words 4
Not of an Age, but for All Mankind 6
Elizabeth’s England 8
History Is Written by the Victors 10
Mr. Shakespeare, I Presume 11
A Nest of Singing Birds 12
Actors in Shakespeare’s Day 14
Audience: A Very Motley Crowd 16
Shakespearean Snapshots 18
Ghosts, Witches, and Shakespeare 20
What They Wore 22

Information on the Play

Synopsis 23
Characters 24

Scholarly Articles on the Play

A Play of Wits 26
Weightier Than It Seems 27
Much More than Nothing 29
Benedick’s Transformation 32
Much Ado about Masking 34
Much Ado about Something 36
Contrast in Much Ado about Nothing 38

Classroom Materials

Shakespeare’s Words 40
Shakespeare’s Language 43
The Globe Theatre 45
William Shakespeare 46
Shakespeare’s Plays 47
Shakespeare’s Audience and Audiences Today 48
“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 matured 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 Shakespearean-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 Shakespearean 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 than 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 . . . glowed 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 Shakespearean 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-Shakespearean 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 supurb 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.
Mr. Shakespeare, I Presume
by Diana Major Spencer From Insights, 1994

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 Antinóy 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 Shakespearean 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: corrontos, 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 Shakespearean 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 liveries, 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 Vacabonds” (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 Whitsun tide.’ 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 seruantes 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.
Shakespearean Snapshots

From Insights, 2002

By Ace G. Pilkington

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.
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 Shakespearean 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: *Much Ado about Nothing*

Don Pedro, prince of Aragon, is visiting Messina after a victorious military engagement elsewhere. With him are his half-brother Don John, with whom he has quarreled and recently reconciled, and his friends and fellow soldiers, Claudio and Benedick. The company of soldiers is greeted warmly by Leonato, governor of Messina—and his charming daughter Hero and witty niece Beatrice, both of marriageable age. Benedick and Beatrice immediately resume a long-standing "merry war" of words; but Claudio and Hero and smitten by love-at-first-sight and are betrothed at a masked ball, mainly through the efforts of Don Pedro.

As this wedding is being planned, Don Pedro, Leonato, and Claudio also vow to make husband and wife of Benedick and Beatrice, both professed enemies of marriage. The three friends stage a conversation for Benedick's benefit in which they pretend concern over Beatrice's imagined passion for Benedick. They see no happiness for her in such a love, since her pride will not allow her to confess her affection and Benedick's price will not allow him to accept it. They sadly (and humorously) conclude that Beatrice should conquer her passion as best she can. Benedick, who is eavesdropping on their conversation, is completely taken in by the ruse. He resolves that, if Beatrice loves him, her love shall be required. In another part of the estate, Hero and her attendant, Ursula, put on a similar charade for Beatrice, who is eavesdropping on their conversation. Beatrice, like Benedick, is chastened at this revelation of how she appears to others and vows to return Benedick's love.

In the meantime the villainous Don John, still angry at his brother and jealous of Claudio, joins with his henchmen, Borachio and Conrade, and plots to prevent the marriage of Claudio and Hero. They trick the young suitor into thinking Hero has another lover by having her servant, Margaret, dress in Hero's clothes and talk to Borachio at her chamber window the night before the wedding. Borachio calls Margaret by Hero's name, and Claudio, incredulous and angry, overhears.

Later, a drunken Borachio cannot resist boasting of this adventure and is overheard by the night watchmen. Although the watchmen imperfectly understand the full meaning of the conversation, they recognize Borachio as a villain, arrest him and Conrade, and turn them over to country constable, Dogberry, and simple headborough, Verges.

The next day at the church, Claudio accuses Hero of being unchaste and refuses to marry her. She falls down in a faint, and Don Pedro, Don John, and Claudio leave hastily. Beatrice and the friar who was to have performed the ceremony are certain of Hero's innocence, while Leonato and Benedick know not what to think. The friar advises an inflamed Leonato to publicly report that Hero has died of shame; and Benedick, touched by Beatrice's distress, confesses his love for her, as does Beatrice for him. However, Beatrice asks Benedick to prove his love by killing Claudio. Torn between loyalty to his friend and to his new love, he reluctantly agrees to challenge Claudio.

In the meantime, Dogberry, Verges, and the watchmen have successfully interrogated their prisoners and extracted a confession. When Claudio learns of the treachery, he promises he will do anything to make amends, and Leonato secures his promise to marry an unknown cousin of Hero's.

The next morning, a disguised Hero is presented to Claudio as her cousin; but, when he takes her hand, she removes her mask and explains that she had only died while her name was dishonored. Claudio is delighted to learn his love still lives, and the bride is very much eager to continue her interrupted wedding. In addition, Beatrice and Benedick now publicly profess
their love for one another and are determined to marry, even after learning their romance was spurred on by a trick.

The resulting double wedding of Hero and Claudio and Beatrice and Benedick is followed by an announcement that Don John’s attempt to flee has been unsuccessful, and he has been arrested. On that happy note the play ends, and all tribulations are now regarded as much ado about nothing.

**Characters: Much Ado about Nothing**

**Don Pedro:** The visiting prince of Aragon and longtime friend of many in Messina, Don Pedro is a resourceful young man who likes action and entertainment. He is a half-brother of Don John and close companion of Claudio and Benedick.

**Don John:** The illegitimate half-brother of Don Pedro, Don John has recently fought with his more powerful and more noble brother, but they have reached an uneasy reconciliation. He is a malcontent and a villain; however, compared with Shakespeare’s other dark characters, Don John is a mild and rather ineffective villain. Borachio does his thinking for him. His machinations are regarded, like many other parts of the play, as amounting to nothing.

**Claudio:** A young man from Florence, Claudio is a dear friend of Don Pedro and Benedick and quickly falls in love and is betrothed to Hero. In the beginning of the play, he is a weak and rather ineffective character, though he shows some growth before the end of the play. Still, he is typical of a certain breed of Shakespearean characters who are inferior to the women they marry.

**Benedick:** A young man from Padua, Benedick has a sparkling wit, is a friend of Don Pedro and Claudio, and has vowed he will never marry; however, in the end he too is smitten by love and makes an ideal match with Beatrice. One of Shakespeare’s comic heroes, Benedick is quick to act on belief and feeling. For example, once convinced that Beatrice is in love with him, he is willing to go to any extreme to please her, even that of killing Claudio.

**Leonato:** The governor of Messina, father of Hero, and uncle of Beatrice, Leonato is host to Don Pedro and his comrades-in-arms. At first somewhat unappreciative and untrusting of his daughter, he is convinced in the end that Hero is blameless and deserving of pity and sympathy, rather than censure.

**Antonio:** The brother of Leonato and the uncle of Hero and Beatrice, Antonio is Leonato’s helpful and trusting friend throughout the play.

**Balthasar:** A musician employed by Don Pedro, Balthasar attends faithfully to his prince.

**Borachio:** A drunken and unscrupulous follower of Don John, Borachio almost outdoes his master in villainy. He will do almost anything for money, and it is he who stages a scene with Margaret that practically wrecks the lives of Hero and Claudio.

**Conrade:** Another of Don John’s henchmen, Conrade is an underling to Borachio and helps him in his treacherous plots.

**Friar Francis:** The priest who performs the marriage ceremony of Claudio and Hero, he believes in Hero’s innocence and is the driving force behind clearing her name.
Dogberry: A comic character, Dogberry is the constable who unwittingly uncovers the villainous plot against Claudio and Hero. Coarse, ignorant, dunderheaded, and likable, his blundering efforts contribute much humor to the play.

Verges: The headborough of the region, Verges is as equally simple and comic as his companion, Dogberry.

Hero: The only daughter of Leonato and cousin and constant companion of Beatrice, Hero quickly wins Claudio’s heart and then suffers much as the result of Don John’s machinations. She is not a strong character and is overshadowed by the scintillating Beatrice. She does show some growth and character development, however, and matures because of the suffering she goes through. She is much more ready for marriage at the end of the play than she was at the beginning.

Beatrice: The niece of Leonato and cousin and confidant of Hero, Beatrice is the perfect foil for Benedick, whom she eventually falls in love with and marries. In the play’s skirmish of wits with Benedick, Beatrice shows liveliness, humor and a keen intelligence; indeed her power of repartee is probably excelled by no other Shakespearean character.

Margaret: Hero’s lady-in-waiting. Margaret was Borachio’s accomplice in tricking Claudio into thinking Hero was untrue. However, whether she was a willing or knowing accomplice is a matter of speculation and one of the loose stitches in the play.

Ursula: Another of Hero’s ladies-in-waiting, Ursula has a much smaller role in the play.
A Play of Wits
From Insights, 1995

With *Much Ado about Nothing*, Beatrice joins Rosalind, Viola, and Portia in Shakespeare’s gallery of delightful and intelligent women. The epitome of Shakespeare's comic genius is evident as we watch the play of wit between a sparkling and clever woman and a man who is fascinated by her mind no less than by her physical charms. Beatrice and Benedick must be ranked among Shakespeare's most dazzling personages, and almost before we know it we are caught up in their merry war. The subject matter of their game is a distaste for institutionalized romantic love leading to marriage.

While Beatrice and Benedick immediately capture and hold our attention, and while without them the play would be colorless, two other plots intertwine in this story that is filled with gaiety and concerned with deception, disguise, and the psychology of lovers.

The serious part of *Much Ado about Nothing*, the ill-starred love story of Hero and Claudio, barely escapes tragedy as Claudio is tricked by the evil Don John into believing that he sees Hero conducting an amorous intrigue. This plot is founded partially on Orlando Furioso, an Italian epic poem, and partly on an old Italian tale by Bandello of a slandered lady deserted by her lover and at last reunited with him. As usual, Shakespeare handled his sources with complete freedom.

In the third plot action, and at the opposite extreme from the mercurial lovers, Shakespeare has enriched the play with some of his most memorable low comedy characters: the thick-headed constable Dogberry and his inept crew of watchmen. Dogberry murders the language in a manner reminiscent of Bottom, and he gives outrageous instructions to the “most senseless and fit” men who make up his watch. In his finest hour Dogberry cries, “O that I had been writ down an ass!” It is beautifully ironic that Dogberry and his fellow simpletons should be the ones to unravel Don John’s treachery. Evidence exists that the original role of Dogberry was created for Will Kempe, a short, fat comedian who was one of Shakespeare’s “fellows” in the Lord Chamberlain’s Men, a leading acting company in England at the time.

Despite potentially tragic elements in the second plot of the play, Beatrice and Benedick maintain lightness and gaiety. We never believe for an instant that the outcome of even the serious scenes will be anything but happy, and, assured that no misfortune is going to happen to anyone, we willingly abandon ourselves to the merry duel and comic episodes.

Two Elizabethan conventions must be accepted in order to appreciate this play. The first is the way the characters fall instantaneously in love. One glance, one flutter of the eyelashes and we hear the wedding bells ringing. After all, an Elizabethan might say, once you know it’s true love, why have a long engagement? And they don’t—although both Claudio and Benedick establish their lady loves’ financial status before taking the plunge into matrimony. This is the second convention: a lady’s estate was as much a part of her as the color of her hair.

We can only wonder what Shakespeare intended with a play he chose to call *Much Ado about Nothing*. Did he really think that little of it? Or was there commercial pressure to turn out an evening of romance and laughs? We will likely never know. What we do know is that the play was written at a period in Shakespeare’s career when he had already achieved great success as a playwright. Behind him were many successful comedies and the highly successful two parts of *Henry IV*. *Much Ado about Nothing* reflects the maturity and sureness of touch that had come to Shakespeare with his increasing development of craft as a dramatist, and the play has been continuously popular. For nearly 400 years an appearance of Beatrice and Benedick has packed the house.
Weightier Than It Seems

By Stephanie Chidester

From Insights, 1995

*Much Ado about Nothing*—the title sounds, to a modern ear, offhand and self-effacing; we might expect the play that follows such a beginning to be a marvelous piece of fluff and not much more. However, the play and the title itself are weightier than they initially seem. Shakespeare used two other such titles—*Twelfth Night, or What You Will* and *As You Like It*—both of which send unexpected reverberations of meaning throughout their respective plays, the former with its reference to the Epiphany and the topsy-turvy world of a saturnalian celebration, and the latter with its implications about how the characters (and the audience itself) see the world in general and the Forest of Arden in particular.

*Much Ado about Nothing* is no different, but we modern audiences do not pick up the deeper resonances as quickly as an Elizabethan would, simply because of a shift in pronunciation. We get our first real glimpse of the pun in the title when Don Pedro says, “Note notes, forsooth, and nothing” (2.3.57). As A. R. Humphreys explains, “that ‘nothing’, colloquially spoken, was close to or identical with ‘noting’, is the basis of Shakespearean puns, especially in a context of musical ‘noting’. A similar pun, though non-musical, is conceivable here” (Introduction, The Arden Shakespeare: *Much Ado about Nothing*, [London and New York: Methuen, 1981], 4).

The play is, in fact, driven by the “noting” of scenes or conversations and the characters’ reactions to these observations; “noting” seems to be the thematic glue that binds the various plot elements together. When he wrote the play in 1598, Shakespeare assembled the Hero-Claudio plot line from bits and pieces of Ariosto’s Orlando Furioso (canto 5) and Spencer’s *The Faerie Queene* (book 2), and added details about Claudio and Don Pedro from Bandello’s *La Prima Parte de la Novelle* (novella 22). For the characters of Beatrice and Benedick, Shakespeare drew not so much on a specific story or plot as on the tradition of wit combat and on characters from his own earlier comedies; these two characters can be seen, in fact, as Wittier and more mature versions of Kate and Petruchio from *The Taming of the Shrew*. Dogberry and Verges also have no clear literary source, but seem instead to be taken from Shakespeare’s England.

These characters, different though they may be, mesh together (and frequently clash) through their observations, chance overhearings, and deliberate eavesdroppings. The first sign of this comes early in act 1. When Claudio asks Benedick what he thinks of Hero, Benedick responds, “I noted her not, but I looked on her” (1.1.164). It becomes increasingly clear that they see in Hero two entirely different people. To Claudio she is “a modest young lady,” “a jewel,” and “the sweetest lady that ever I look’d on (1.1.165, 181, 187 8), but to Benedick, “she’s too low for a high praise, too brown for a fair praise, and too little for a great praise” (1.1.171 73).

This is, as John Wilders “notes,” “a play much concerned with the ways in which people perceive one another, with our tendency to see in other people whatever by character and experience we are predisposed to see” (New Prefaces to Shakespeare [Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1988], 147). So we must consider that Claudio is describing what he sees through the hazy mists of romantic attraction, and that Benedick (whatever he may say) is analyzing her through the mask of “a profess’d tyrant to their sex” (1.1.168 9); neither of them may be seeing Hero as she really is.

Claudio, however, has an unfortunate tendency to believe exactly what he sees, and his eyesight proves more powerful than his faith in Don Pedro and his love for Hero. When Don John, in his first bit of mischief, suggests to Claudio that Don Pedro is courting Hero for himself, Claudio takes what he sees for truth. And he is not convinced otherwise until Don Pedro actually hands Hero over to him.
Benedick also believes what his eyes show him: “The prince hath got your Hero. . . . But did you think the prince would have serv’d you thus?” (2.1.191 92, 195 6). But Benedick, at least, may be excused by his ignorance of Pedro’s intent to woo in Claudio’s name. This excuse cannot be made for Claudio; he seems more willing to trust what he sees rather than what he believes in his heart or knows in his mind to be true.

It is this quality that enables Don John to convince Claudio that Hero is unchaste; so when Claudio sees Margaret, impersonating Hero, in intimate conversation with Borachio, he disregards what faith (if any) he had in her, abandons his earlier observation that she is “a modest young lady” (1.1.165), and determines to shame her at the marriage ceremony. In his relationships with Don Pedro and Hero, visual proof (in both cases provided by a thorough-going villain) takes precedence over previous experience.

Eyesight, however, is not the only deceiving sense; hearing is also included in the play’s treatment of “noting.” At the beginning of act 2, scene 1, we learn that one of Antonio’s servants happened to overhear Claudio and Don Pedro making plans for the winning of Hero, but the servant must not have heard the conversation in its entirety because he runs to Antonio with the story that Don Pedro means to court Hero in earnest. Auditory observations can apparently be just as unreliable as visual ones.

The next eavesdropping scene, carefully engineered by the “love-gods” (2.1.386) for the gulling of Beatrice and Benedick, is yet another demonstration that what we see and hear is not necessarily what is. Just as Don John and Borachio create an event to deceive Claudio, Don Pedro and his confederates act out a scene for Benedick, and Hero and Ursula do the same for Beatrice. The quarrelsome couple believe what the “love-gods” say because on some level it’s true and because Beatrice and Benedick want to believe that each is in love with the other. In the same way that we see what “we are predisposed to see” (Wilders 147), we also hear (and believe) what we are predisposed to hear.

The final (and perhaps most important) overhearing connects the comic subplot of the constabulary with the world of Don John and Don Pedro. Despite their lack of sophistication and their abuse of the English language, Dogberry, Verges, and the rest of the watch discover Don John’s plotting and manage to sort out the confusion created by the aristocrats.

Much Ado about Nothing is, as John Wilders says, “a play about ‘noting’, about the various and conflicting ways in which we respond to and judge other people” (147). It is about the flexibility of reality—our ability to manipulate what other people observe and our occasional tendency to let biases influence our perceptions. And finally, it is about the inadequacy of “noting” the world with eyes and ears only, and the importance of relying on one’s experience with and consequent faith in other human beings. Much Ado about Nothing is all this, and marvelous comedy too.
Much More that Nothing
By Diana Major Spencer
From Midsummer Magazine, 1995

At face value, the title Much Ado about Nothing pronounces the turmoil in the play’s Messina insignificant or trifling. Yet, false accusations about Hero’s virtue, Beatrice’s command that Benedick “kill Claudio,” the villainies of Don John the bastard—are these trivial? Don John is too smug in his manipulations, Leonato and Antonio too energetic in their outrage, Beatrice too vehement, and Benedick too earnest in challenging Claudio for us to believe that slander, love, or villainy are meant to lack significance.

Moreover, Shakespeare left linguistic clues to the contrary. Five times the Bard produced specific puns indicating that the nothing of the title should be read at more than one level. In act 2 scene 3, for instance, a multiple play on words includes note as a verb with several meanings, note as a noun with several meanings, and the “homophonic pun” between noting and nothing (2.3.57n; all references to line numbers are from The Riverside Shakespeare, ed. G. Blakemore Evans [Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1974]):

Don Pedro. If thou wilt hold longer argument,
Do it in notes.
Balthazar. Note this before my notes:
There’s not a note of mine that’s worth the noting.
Don Pedro. . . . Note notes, forsooth, and nothing!
(2.3.53 57)

A browse through the Oxford English Dictionary entries on note interprets the quibbles variously, offering the following interpretations for the above lines (All references to the Oxford English Dictionary are from The Compact Edition [New York: Oxford UP, 1971]):

Don Pedro. If you have more to say, put it in writing, OR if you have more to say, sing it. Balthazar. Pay attention to this before I sing: there’s not a musical sound from me that’s worth singing, OR there’s not an observation of mine that’s worth paying attention to.

Don Pedro. . . . Pay attention to your singing: which is truly worth nothing, OR sing tunes, for heaven’s sake: and nothing else, OR pay attention to musical tones and how you produce them.

Don Pedro can also mean that Balthazar’s singing is really for trivial pleasure and thus too insignificant to require apologies or disclaimers. And, of course, other possibilities exist.

The Oxford English Dictionary (OED) offers noth as a sixteenth-century variant spelling of note, presumably convertible to the present participle, nothing. Conversely, a variant spelling of nothing in the fourteenth through sixteenth centuries was notyng. Many English dialects even now obscure pronunciation differences between t and th, leaving nutting, nothing, and noting as homophones. Scene by scene throughout the play, Shakespeare dramatizes one or more of the OED’s denotations of both noting and nothing, rendering the title a multi-level pun.

For example, a basic meaning for noting occurs in the first scene of Much Ado about Nothing, “to observe . . . carefully; to give heed or attention to; to notice closely” (OED):

Claudio. Benedick, dost thou note the daughter of Signior Leonato?
Benedick. I noted her not, but I look’d on her”
(1.1.162 64).
Benedick's quibble confirms a distinction between merely “looking at” and “noticing closely.” Surreptitiously observing (spying or eavesdropping) further exemplifies this meaning. In act 1, scene 2, Antonio tells Leonato that a servant reported overhearing Claudio and Don Pedro in the orchard discussing Hero and agreeing that Don Pedro should woo for Claudio. In scene 3, enter the villains. Borachio also reports noting Claudio and Don Pedro discussing the surrogate wooing, and Don John welcomes the chance to trouble Claudio. Thus, during the masque of act 2, scene 1, when Don Pedro woos and wins Hero for Claudio, Don John notes Claudio then approaches him as though he were Benedick to falsely note (“denote or signify”) that Don Pedro loves Hero for himself. Two other meanings of nothing also enter the equation: nothing as “the absence of good,” i.e., villainy, and nothing as “that which is nonexistent,” a fabrication. Thus, whatever ado ensues as a result of Don John’s lie is indeed about nothing—not triviality, but untruth and wickedness.

In act 2, scene 2, noting means “to indicate by pointing.” Borachio volunteers to thwart the marriage between Claudio and Hero by setting up a situation which can be noted (“pointed out”) by Don John and noted (“observed”) by Don Pedro and Claudio. To furnish “proof,” Borachio will present himself at Hero’s window with Margaret, Hero’s “waiting-gentlewoman” (2.2.13 14). The villainous connotations of nothing again are relevant.

Later in the play, the musical puns cited earlier introduce parallel eavesdropping traps for Benedick and Beatrice. As Benedick evaluates what he has noted (“overheard”), he accepts it as true because “the conference was sadly borne; they have the truth of this from Hero; they seem to pity the lady” (2.3.220 223). Beatrice, overhearing (noting) similar observations in act 3, scene 1, reaches the same conclusions about their reliability.

Beginning the third entrapment scene, Claudio and Don Pedro tease Benedick about his notes of love, in the OED sense of “a distinguishing feature, or sign”:

Claudio. If he be not in love with some woman, there is no believing old signs:
[he]brushes his hat o’ mornings. . . .
Don Pedro. Hath any man seen him at the barber’s? . . .
Leonato. Indeed, he looks younger than he did, by the loss of a beard.
Don Pedro. . . . [He] rubs himself with civet. . . . The greatest note of it is his melancholy.
(3.2.40 55)

Don John enters to enjoin Claudio and Don Pedro to note (“watch”) outside Hero’s window “even the night before her wedding-day” (3.2.113 14). If he notes (“sees”) any reason not to marry her, Claudio vows, “to-morrow in the congregation, where I should wed, there will I shame her.” “As I woo’d for thee to obtain her,” adds Don Pedro, “I will join with thee to disgrace her (3.2.123 27; italics added). The OED further defines noting as “to mark or brand with some disgrace or defect; to stigmatize.”

The next scene introduces the watch, those incomparable nincompoops, discussing their responsibilities as keepers of the peace, namely noting (“taking note of”) events and noting (“taking notes about”) them:

Dogberry. This is your charge:—you are to bid any man stand, in the prince’s name.
Second Watchman. How if [he] will not stand?
Dogberry. Why, then, take no note of him, but let him go; . . . and thank God you are rid of a knave.
(3.3.25 30; italics added)

Dogberry and Verges then note Borachio boasting to Conrade about his remuneration for the rendezvous with Margaret which was noted by Don Pedro and Claudio as sufficient proof to note Hero as unchaste. Shakespeare cleverly placed this scene before the shaming of Hero, so the audience never doubts her innocence.
Next, Dogberry and Verges intercept Leonato on the way to church with their news, but Leonato tells them to examine the prisoners without him. Legal uses of note include “abstracts, briefs, records of facts, annotation, and setting down in writing” (OED). Dogberry and Verges provide much ado about the process and content of noting the villains in the name of jurisprudence.

Act 4, scene 1 presents the public shaming (noting) of Hero. Nothing reflects the villainy of Don John, the “thing of no worth” that Hero has apparently become, the void behind the accusation, the ignorance of Hero, and her non-existence or death. In scene 2, the examination of Borachio and Conrade, Dogberry evokes two meanings of note: “to set down in writing,” as he exhorts his recorder ten times in a scene of only eighty-seven lines to “write [something] down”; and “to mark or brand with some disgrace or defect,” as he entreats the Sexton to “write [him] down an ass.”

After the supposed death of Hero, Don Pedro claims, “On my honor she was charg’d with nothing / But what was true, and very full of proof” (5.1.104 105). Benedick notes Claudio a villain and challenges him. The watch bring Borachio, who confesses, “What your wisdoms could not discover (note), these shallow fools have brought to light (noted), who in the night overheard (noted) me confessing (noting) to this man. . . . I desire nothing but the reward of a villain” (5.1.232 43 passim). Leonato then applies note and two of its synonyms to the perpetrators of the slander:

Which is the villain? let me see his eyes,
That, when I note another man like him,
I may avoid him. . . .
Here stand a pair of honorable men, . . .
I thank you, princes, for my daughter’s death;
Record it with your high and worthy deeds.
(5.1.259 69)

—or “note it (write it down) as your note” (“one’s reputation, fame or regard,” as in “a man of note” [OED]).

The final three scenes feature song, dance, “babbling rhyme” (5.2.39), “solemn hymn” (5.3.11), and “halting sonnet” (5.4.87)—all notes of one kind or other. On a final note, Claudio and Hero produce self-incriminating notes of love from Benedick and Beatrice, respectively “written in his hand” and “writ in my cousin’s hand” (5.4.86 and 89).

Obviously, Shakespeare didn’t sit down with the OED and concoct a scene for every conceivable meaning of the ambiguous words noting and nothing. On the other hand, so much convergence on these words and their synonyms precludes mere coincidence. Shakespeare recognized and reveled in the possibilities of the expanding English language of Renaissance England, and quibbles and equivocations rank among his indulgences. Much Ado about Nothing? I think so.
Benedick’s Transformation
By Ace G. Pilkington
From Insights, 2003

Benedick is fascinated by Beatrice but fears her; anguishes over love though he is animated by it; and refuses absolutely to marry until he chooses enthusiastically to do so. Indeed, his volte-face made his name into a common noun meaning, in the words of The New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary, “a newly married man; especially an apparently confirmed bachelor who marries.” But Benedick and Shakespeare are well aware that the marriage ceremony is only a small part of the change. In Act 2, Scene 3, using Claudio as a bad example of what might happen to a previously normal gentleman, Benedick asks himself, “May I be so converted and still see with these eyes?” (2.3.22; all references to act, scene, and line numbers in the play are to A. R. Humphreys, ed., Much Ado about Nothing [London: Methuen, 1981]). He must have found his own answer unsettling because it lacks that ringing certainty which he had in Act 1. He says, “I cannot tell; I think not” (2.3.22 23). Don Pedro had previously declared Benedick to be a heretic against the religion of love and beauty, following Benedick’s own assertion that he would maintain his negative opinion of women (and Hero specifically) even in the fire. “I will,” Benedick says, reaffirming his obstinate belief, “die in it at the stake” (1.1.215 16).

However, by Act 2, a different kind of fire seems to have singed if not positively melted Benedick’s resolve. Though he is relatively certain that love cannot “transform” him, he is like a man who is afraid he has caught a disease. He announces his own health in a loud voice (“yet, I am well”), but he is constantly checking for signs and symptoms. He says, “Till all graces be in one woman, one woman shall not come in my grace” (2.3.29 30). While this is still a denial of the possibility of love or marriage, it is far from absolute, and, in fact, when Benedick completes the list of virtues which a woman must have in order to win his love, he seems afraid to add a hair color to the description. He finishes hurriedly with, “And her hair shall be—of what colour it please God (2.2.34 35). Benedick’s description is too much like Beatrice already.

Of course, by the time Don Pedro, Claudio, and Leonato have finished their work as “love gods,” Benedick reverses himself entirely. Once he overhears that Beatrice is in love with him, he declares that her passion must be “requited,” no matter what embarrassment he may suffer and what a “notable argument” he may become as a result of his changed position. The completeness of Benedick’s conversion is remarkable. In Act 4, Scene 1, when Claudio has rejected Hero, and Claudio, Don Pedro, and Don John march out of the church together in an expression of masculine solidarity, Benedick stays behind with Beatrice. And this is before the two of them have talked about their feelings for each other. Benedick is willing to take a stand against his friends and even to lie to them on behalf—not even of Beatrice herself but of her previously despised cousin, Hero. Indeed, once Beatrice and Benedick have hesitantly managed to say “I love you” to each other, Benedick agrees to Beatrice’s demand that he, “Kill Claudio” (4.1.288). Admittedly, he objects and does not agree immediately to kill his best friend, but he does agree.

It is a measure of Shakespeare’s skill in characterization that we do not find Benedick’s transformation unbelievable. In spite of the constant hostilities and the pointed insults, we know what is really going on between the two stars of this wit-combat show. When Claudio praises Hero in Act 1, Benedick says, “There’s her cousin, and she were not possessed with a fury, exceeds her as much in beauty as the first of May doth the last of December” (1.1.177 79). This is obvious; less so but also important are more subtle signs that Benedick is not the misogynist he claims to be. He says to Beatrice, “I am loved of all ladies, only you excepted; and I would I could find it in my heart that I had not a hard heart” (1.1.114 16). When Claudio asks (about Hero, of
course), “Can the world buy such a jewel?” Benedick’s response is, “Yea, and a case to put it into” (1.1.168 69). This sounds appropriately cynical until we ask what sort of case he might have in mind. Here, from The Lost Love Letters of Heloise and Abelard is an answer likely to occur to a lover or even to someone who is thinking about being a lover, “To his most precious jewel, ever radiant with its natural splendor, her purest gold: may he surround and fittingly set that same jewel in a joyful embrace” (Constant J. Mews, with a translation by Neville Chiavaroli and Constant J. Mews [New York: Palgrave, 2001],195).

Though Benedick expresses disapproval of Claudio’s intent to turn husband, he feels sympathy when his friend is seemingly disappointed, and it looks (briefly) as though Hero will marry Don Pedro. “Poor hurt fowl,” Benedick says of Claudio, and continuing the bird imagery, he accuses Don Pedro of stealing Claudio’s “bird’s nest.” So much for Benedick’s intransigent opposition to marriage for himself and his friends! Nowhere does he instruct Claudio to rejoice in a narrow escape from a terrible fate, but instead he is critical of Claudio for sounding too casual about his loss. Claudio has said, “I wish him joy of her.” And Benedick replies, “Why that’s spoken like an honest drover: so they sell bullocks” (2.1.180 82). In fact, the high value Benedick places on marriage comes through most clearly when he is least happy with Beatrice.

Following the masked ball, he nurses his injured feelings and fumes over her insults. He says, “I would not marry her, though she were endowed with all that Adam had left him before he transgressed” (2.1.234 35). The statement indicates that he has been thinking about marrying Beatrice, that he associates her, however backhandedly, with paradise, and that in his extreme anger he wishes to deprive her of something truly valuable—marriage!

In the end, “in despite of his quick wit and his queasy stomach (2.1.360 61),” Benedick gets what he has desired all along. He is transformed into the person he secretly knows himself to be: his hard heart is softened, his insults are put aside, and the woman he wants and needs and obsesses over, tells him, “I love you with so much of my heart that none is left to protest” (4.1.285 86).
Much Ado about Masking
By Diana Major Spencer
From Midsummer Magazine, 2003

Mercifully, Much Ado About Nothing ends happily. Otherwise, we might have a moral drama instead of a romantic comedy. No fewer than nine of its seventeen scenes entail overhearing, eavesdropping, or out-and-out spying—leading to confusion at best and at worst to tragedy. More troubling, perhaps (and more fun!), eleven scenes present deliberate falsehood, where characters hide truth behind physical masks, fictional plots, or emotional façades because the truth, for one reason or another, chafes the pretenders.

Two scenes require physical masks: first, the masked party celebrating the visit to Messina of the Prince and his companions and, last, the second wedding, where the women are veiled. At the “reveling,” characters in masks pretend to be other than themselves, mislead others verbally, or recognize their partner but pretend not to. Don Pedro, for example, woos Hero on behalf of Claudio (2.1.82-93), as the men have agreed in a prior scene. Second, Don John reports falsely to Claudio, whom he addresses as “Benedick,” that Don Pedro wants Hero for himself (2.1.158-60). Third, Beatrice heaps insults on Benedick, who pretends not to be himself, while she knows who he is, but pretends not to (2.1.119-47; all line references are from David Bevington, ed., The Necessary Shakespeare, New York: Addison-Wesley, 2002).

Closing this pair of brackets, the second wedding scene (5.4), where the women are masked to conceal their identities and a greatly humbled Claudio accepts his penance of a substitute bride, follows a carefully choreographed mourning scene. With a much darker tone than the party scene, Leonato proffers the hand of Hero, who then unmasks to the grateful astonishment of Claudio and the Prince. The general levity of the play resumes when Benedick asks which of the other masked women is Beatrice (5.4.71).

Meanwhile, we’ve encountered three fictions that replace truth with downright falsehood. First, Don John masks his villainy with the pretense of reconciliation with his brother: “I had rather be a canker in a hedge,” he says, “than a rose in his grace” (1.3.25-26). The Bastard’s friend Conrade Challenges, “Can you make no use of your discontent?” (1.3.35). Borachio volunteers that he’s overheard the Prince agree to woo Hero for Claudio (1.3.57-60), prompting Don John’s vow to “cross” “that young start-up [who] hath all the glory of my overthrow” (1.3.63, 62-63).

Scene 2.2 reveals Borachio’s plot to discredit Hero’s honor and thus confound the marriage. The truth of Hero’s innocence is masked, according to Borachio’s confessions in various scenes, by darkness (“this very night [2.2.43]”), distance (“the Prince [and] Claudio . . . saw afar off in the orchard this . . . encounter” [3.3.148-49]), disguise (“Margaret in Hero’s garments” [5.1.232-33]), and deceit (“[My] master knew she was Margaret; and partly by his oaths, . . . but chiefly by my villainy, . . . did confirm [the] slander” [3.3.52-56]).

The second—and most concentrated and enjoyable—of the fictional plots follows Don Pedro’s declaration that “in the interim” before the marriage, he will “undertake one of Hercules’s labors, . . . to bring Signor Benedick and the Lady Beatrice into a mountain of affection th’ one with th’ other” (2.1.347-50). Often considered the centerpiece of the play, the delicious back-to-back entrapment scenes accomplish Don Pedro’s goal, which is interrupted and complicated before fruition by the third fiction, Hero’s “death.”

Ironically preceded by the incoherent visit of Dogberry and Verges and their accusation of Borachio and Conrade, which could have prevented the tragedy altogether, the wedding scene features Claudio’s refusal of Hero on grounds of intemperance and sensuality. Hero swoons in
the presence of Don Pedro, Claudio, and Don John, but revives only after they’ve slithered off. Because “your daughter here the princes left for dead,” suggests the Friar, “let her awhile be secretly kept in, / And publish it that she is dead indeed” (4.1.202 204). Leonato and Antonio perpetuate the deceit in 5.1, when Don Pedro and Claudio wander into their brotherly commiseration. The old men challenge the young, saying, “Thou hast killed my child” (Leonato, 5.1.78) and “God knows I loved my niece / And she is dead, slandered to death by villains” (Antonio, 5.1.87 88). They continue the pretense through the mourning scene and the veiled wedding.

The final “masks,” the façades, pertain primarily to Beatrice and Benedick and the emotional masks they’ve worn. We don’t know their past, but Shakespeare makes it clear that they had one: By the fortieth line of the play, for example, Beatrice complains that Benedick “set up his bills here in Messina and challenged Cupid at the flight [i.e., Benedick challenged Cupid to a long-distance archery contest by posting flyers]; and my uncle’s fool [i.e., I, Beatrice], reading the challenge, subscribed for Cupid and challenged him at the bird-bolt [took Cupid’s part and accepted the challenge]” (1.1.37 40). Leonato explains a few lines later, “There is a kind of merry war betwixt Signor Benedick and her. They never meet but there’s a skirmish of wit between them” (1.1.57 60). Still later, Beatrice confesses to Don Pedro, “Indeed my lord, [Benedick] lent [his heart to] me awhile, and I gave him use for it, a double heart for his single one. Marry, once before he won it of me with false dice; therefore Your Grace may well say I have lost it” (2.1.265 68).

The apparently disappointed Beatrice shields herself behind her inimitable barbed wit, and Benedick boasts that he has sworn off women forever. Yet their respective façades seem transparent to their acquaintances, as witnessed by the enthusiasm with which Don Pedro, Leonato, and all their friends and households expose the “wouldn’t-be” lovers to their true feelings during the orchard scenes.

Once their façades are breached, they become champions of truth: Beatrice immediately defends Hero against her accusers and resists Benedick’s tentative words of love until he proves himself worthy. She utters the most honest line in the play: “Kill Claudio!” (4.1.288), and Benedick passes the test: To prove his love, he agrees (4.1.330 32), and indeed challenges Claudio, who, along with the Prince, fails to recognize Benedick’s unmasked persona and continues to tease him about being in love (5.1.158 81). Even after Benedick stumps off, they think he’s merely misguided (5.1.191 201).

What a mess of misinformation! Left to themselves, the aristocrats would complicate themselves to death with falsehood and tragedy. But Shakespeare has given us the constabulary, so incapable of pretense that they execute the one entirely truthful scene: their accidental apprehension of Borachio and Conrade (3.3). Later, their accidental encounter with Don Pedro and Claudio with the villains in tow (5.1.202 52) discloses Hero’s innocence and Don John’s treachery. Thanks to their bumbling, and no thanks to their “betters,” truth can finally triumph, along with love and happy endings.
Much Ado about Something
By Michael Flachmann

The title of Shakespeare’s *Much Ado about Nothing* (1598) is clearly ironic, since the script deals with such significant topics as a young bride-to-be falsely accused of infidelity, her apparent death, and her joyful resurrection, all of which are coupled with an incendiary romance between two strong-willed individuals who are convinced, against their own sexual appetites, that they love each other. Typical of such other “mature comedies” as *The Merchant of Venice* (1597), *As You Like It* (1598), and *Twelfth Night* (1600), *Much Ado about Nothing* betrays at every turn the complexity in style, form, and content that audiences have come to expect from the author’s later comedies, thereby deepening our enjoyment when we watch a good production of the play. Unlike such earlier efforts as the delightful if somewhat monochromatic *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* and *Love’s Labor’s Lost*, *Much Ado about Nothing* gives viewers more for their entertainment dollar than a few belly laughs and some interesting plot developments, because it is “comic” in a much more profound sense.

Not surprisingly, the intricacy of the script is signaled as early as the title’s pun on the word “nothing,” which was pronounced much like “noting” during the Renaissance, thereby conjuring up all the images of slander, overhearing, gossip, innuendo, musical notation, and sexuality that structure the play and give meaning to its plot. As anyone who has ever been the subject of gossip can attest, it is the “notings” that prompt all the “ado”: For example, Antonio’s servants mistakenly report that Don Pedro loves Hero (1.2); Borachio reveals to Don John that she is actually beloved by Claudio (1.3), who later hears from Don John that the Prince is trying to steal her away from him (2.1); Benedick and Beatrice both overhear their friends discussing their alleged love for each other (2.3 and 3.1); Claudio is deluded by Margaret’s impersonation of Hero on the night before his wedding (3.2); and the Watch overhear Borachio confess his villainy to Conrad (3.3), which leads to Hero’s redemption and the resultant happy ending.

The play’s witty and ironic plot construction is supported by a depth in characterization seldom seen in Shakespeare’s comedies. If the old cliché is true that tragedies rely on character development while comedies are more plot-driven, the best scripts, regardless of genre, provide a mixture of both extremes. Such is certainly the case in *Much Ado about Nothing*, where the conventional Petrarchan relationship between Hero and Claudio is set into stark contrast by the incredibly human, volatile, and endearing love affair between Beatrice and Benedick, which teaches us that honest (if sometimes erratic) affection will always outshine idealized love. Much like such blockbuster 1930s Hollywood romantic comedies as *Top Hat*, *His Gal Friday*, and *The Thin Man* featuring Fred Astaire, Ginger Rogers, Cary Grant, Katherine Hepburn, and other legendary actors, the on-again, off-again love affair between Beatrice and Benedick sizzles with sexual energy, wit combat, and unrequited passion. These are real characters grappling with real amorous problems in the fictional context of a Shakespearean script, which makes them au courant for a post-modern world filled with sexual angst. As such, they easily transport the play into the twenty-first century, where it will always intrigue contemporary audiences.

Another index of authorial sophistication in the play is the complexity of its themes, which range over a wide array of powerful and allusive topics. Chief among these is the story of the maiden falsely accused, which leads to the motif of death and rebirth featured in this play and in such transcendent late romances as *Pericles*, *The Winter’s Tale*, and *Cymbeline*. Similarly, Shakespeare’s use of the movement from real war to amorous war invokes the Renaissance motif of the miles amores (“soldier of love”), through which Claudio, like his later counterparts Othello
and Antony, demonstrates the oxymoronic impossibility of being a lover and a soldier at the same time. Additional themes and images include the growing realism of Shakespeare’s villains (Don John as a precursor to Iago and Edmund), the use of sports and game-playing as dramatic metaphors for love and the struggle for power, the animosity between brothers (cf. As You Like It and King Lear), the importance of language (wherein Dogberry’s malapropisms serve as a parody of the linguistic expertise swirling around him), and the skillful and didactic use of dramatic irony, in which only the audience knows the complete reality of the play at any given moment.

Even the staging of Much Ado about Nothing profits from the play’s maturity in conception and design. The two “discovery” scenes in which first Benedick (2.3) and then Beatrice (3.1) are tricked into falling love, for example, require incredible ingenuity on the part of the director and actors in finding spaces on stage in which the lovers can hide as they overhear the conspirators’ dialog. In addition, each of the two sequential gulling episodes must be different enough from the other that viewers don’t get bored watching these “mirror” scenes. Beyond such formidable challenges, theatrical companies must find ways to encourage their audiences to forgive Claudio, who as one of Shakespeare’s first seriously flawed young lovers must end the play worthy of the second chance given him by Hero. And finally, the script provides theatrical companies with brilliant dramaturgical treasures like Beatrice’s “Kill Claudio” in 4.1.288, where the author deftly fuses love and hate into a single, breathless “beat change.”

In the final analysis, Much Ado about Nothing is a superb example of Shakespeare’s mature comic style, bringing together, as it does, a complex plot, spectacular depth in characterization, a number of intellectually engaging themes and images, and staging possibilities that make extensive use of theatrical resources and audience imagination. Perhaps the play’s greatest and most unexpected strength, however, is the way it employs the pure, simple, homespun virtues of the humble Dogberry and his Watch to uncover the diabolical plotting of Don John and his henchmen, which would surely have warmed the hearts of spectators during the Renaissance like it does today. As is so often the case in Shakespeare, the working-class characters, rather than the aristocrats, are the moral and ethical center of the play. For a comedy with such charming surprises, perilous circumstances, thematic intensity, romantic realism, and abundant laughter, surely Much Ado about Something would be a more appropriate title!

Author’s Note: Some insights in this article are indebted to the Much Ado about Nothing introduction in one of my recent books, Shakespeare: From Page to Stage (Pearson Publishing Company, 2007).
Contrast in *Much Ado about Nothing*
By Elaine P. Pearce

*Much Ado about Nothing* is a play of contrasts: contrasts in language, contrasts in public situations, and contrasts in private identities. This continual balancing of opposites ultimately creates a unified, harmonious work. The language of *Much Ado about Nothing* is precise yet elegant, carefully crafted yet gently flowing. It “dances with dexterities of antithesis, in meaning, tone, and colour. . . . Beatrice’s exchanges with Benedick or Benedick’s with the love-struck Claudio are virtuoso pointings of contrasting tenets” (Introduction, A. R. Humphreys, *Much Ado about Nothing*, [London and New York: Methuen, 1981], 28; all line references are to this edition).

Asked his opinion of beautiful Hero, Benedick tells Claudio that he thinks Hero is “too low for a high praise, too brown for a fair praise, and too little for a great praise” (1.1.159–61). “Claudio’s own pleasantest speech is devotedly alert with [contrasts]: ‘Silence is the perfectest herald of joy; I were but little happy, if I could say how much. Lady, as you are mine, I am yours; I give away myself for you and dote upon the exchange’ (2.1.288–91)” (Humphreys 28). Other instances occur throughout the play. For example, the rebellious Don John declares, “I had rather be a canker in a hedge than a rose in his grace” (1.3.25–6) when referring to his brother, Don Pedro, and says of Claudio, “If I can cross him any way, I bless myself every way” (1.3.63–64).

Against this backdrop of reverberating antithesis, other contrasts abound in both individuals and society as a whole. The major male characters have just returned from war, in which they were victorious and relatively unscathed, to the predominantly peaceful kingdom of Messina. Now the energy used in war is turned to love. Which is not to say that peace reigns, just that the battles change. While the military skirmishes were fought and fraught with disaffection, Beatrice and Benedick’s wit combat has the obvious basis in long standing affection. Benedick believes that Beatrice exceeds Hero “as much in beauty as the first of May doth the last of December” (1.1.178–79). His interest in her seems apparent when, vexed by her insults, he storms, “I would not marry her, though she were endowed with all that Adam had left him before he transgressed” (2.1.234–36), suggesting the idea of marrying her must have crossed his mind before despite his earlier assurances that he would remain a bachelor. Beatrice confides in Don Pedro that before the war Benedick lent his heart to “me awhile, and I gave him use for it, a double heart for his single one. Marry, once before he won it of me with false dice” (2.1.261–64).

Each of them has conflicting desires. Benedick wants to be a bachelor and remain in male society. But he is also attracted by Beatrice and has thought of marrying her. Unsuccessful in love, Beatrice cannot imagine a suitable suitor and hides her disappointment in wit and humor. Beatrice and Benedick have been criticized for their sudden conversion from foes to friends. However, it is not a conversion. Like dancers at the ball, they were merely masked, each fearful of rejection. Once each knows the other’s love, they can admit their own. After hearing of Benedick’s love, Beatrice exclaims, “Stand I condemn’d for pride and scorn so much? . . . Benedick, love on, I will requite thee” (3.1.108, 111). And Benedick swears, “I will be horribly in love with her. . . . When I said I would die a bachelor, I did not think that I should live till I were married” (2.3.226–27, 234–35).

Claudio’s transformation from soldier to lover seems decidedly more awkward. Back from the war, with nothing more pressing at hand, he feels empowered to pursue love in the form of Hero. Don Pedro, the leader in war, assumes a new role as director of revels, moving from the realities of war to the games of love. The practical man of action, he volunteers to disguise
himself to woo and win Hero for Claudio, obtain her father’s approval, and hasten the day of Claudio’s marriage. Don Pedro and Claudio have replaced their weapons of war with words of love, but one senses that the game is much the same, to conquer the opposition. To pass the time before Claudio and Hero’s wedding, Don Pedro devises the plan to bring Benedick and Beatrice “into a mountain of affection th’one with th’other. . . . Cupid is no longer an archer; his glory shall be ours, for we are the only love-gods” (2.1.344, 362–64).

Throughout the play, characters are caught up in the games of love. They try on different public and personal faces as they move toward becoming more truly themselves. Claudio changes from being a soldier to a lover (a role he does not play well) and back to a soldier. He has been seen as shallow and undeserving. However, his actions can be easily explained. First, he is young and inexperienced in love. He was attracted to Hero before he went to war, but he had very little interaction with her, nor does he increase it. He does not even woo her for himself, but allows Don Pedro, his social superior and his military commander, to do that for him. He believes Don John when he claims that Don Pedro has wooed Hero for himself even though he knows Don Pedro was wooing Hero for him. Hurt, he petulantly disavows his love for Hero. He does not learn from this slip, but again believes Don John’s allegation that Hero is not pure. Granted, he “sees” her talking to another man at night from her window, but he does not recognize that the woman is really Margaret, not Hero. He really does not seem to know her at all. Without knowing her, how can he love her? In his anger, he reverts to soldier, determined to attack back, to shame and punish her. He has no regrets, feels no remorse when he believes she is dead, and takes no responsibility when told it is his fault. Despite his desire to grow up and move from soldier to the more socially and personally integrated role of husband, he appears unequal to the task.

This contrasts with Benedick. His love for Beatrice is greater than his affection for his comrade. He would “not for the wide world” (4.1.288) challenge Claudio, but he eventually agrees to do Beatrice’s bidding, to “Kill Claudio” (4.1.287). Benedick must match Beatrice’s image of a man. He must take action to right a wrong. If Beatrice were a man, she “would eat Claudio’s heart in the market-place” (4.1.305–306). She regrets that “manhood is melted into curtsies, valour into compliment, and men are only turned into tongue, and trim ones too: he is now as valiant as Hercules that only tells a lie and swears it” (4.1.317–21). She laments, “I cannot be a man with wishing, therefore I will die a woman with grieving (4.1.321–23).

To paraphrase Friar Laurence in Romeo and Juliet, people, like plants, have opposing characteristics, yet they are ultimately ruled by the qualities that are predominant. Beatrice, Benedick, and Claudio’s internal conflicts are eventually resolved. Beatrice abandons her pride but not her spirit, Benedick softens his bravado, and Claudio becomes a bit more mature. The contrasts—in language, social conventions, and individual traits—combine to create a balanced, unified society, the natural end of a comedy, but more importantly, they combine to form characters who understand themselves better, who will live together more peacefully (the war is finally over), and who grow beyond their controversies to a true understanding.
Shakespeare’s Words
Vocabulary

Since *The Merchant of Venice* was written, many words in English have changed their meaning, and some are no longer used. If you remember the slang you used a few years ago, it seems dated. Who now uses the word “groovy”? Shakespeare used the rich vocabulary of his day within his plays. When reading Shakespeare read the line in context of the scene. Try translating the lines into your own words, use today’s vernacular.

**Argosies/Portly**: large merchant ships/swelled by the wind, majestic

“Your mind is tossing on the ocean,
There, where your *argosies* with *portly* sail” (Salerio, 1.1.8–9).
Meaning: Your mind is focused on the ocean, where your merchant ships are sailing with full sails.

**Strange**: reserved, becoming strangers

“You grow exceeding *strange*. Must it be so?” (Bassanio, 1.1.70)
Meaning: You are not treating me as a friend. Why are you like this?

**Warranty**: privilege

“To you, Antonio,
I owe the most in money and in love,
And from your love I have a *warranty*
To unburden all my plots and purposes” (Bassanio, 1.1.134–37).
Meaning: I owe both money and love to you, Antonio. Because of your love I have your help and privilege which aids my plans.

**Ducat**: Venetian gold, money worth about $7

“Three thousand ducats for three months, and Antonio bound” (Shylock, 1.3.10).
Meaning: Bassanio is asking for a loan of approximately $20,000.

**Fearful**: untrustworthy

“See to my house, left in the *fearful* guard
Of an unthrifty knave, and presently
I’ll be with you” (Shylock, 1.3.177–79).
Meaning: Go to my house now, which is left in the hands of an untrustworthy person, and I will be with you soon.

**Varnish’d faces**: masks or painted faces

“Clamber not you up to the casements then,
Nor thrust your head into the public street
To gaze on Christian fools with *varnish’d faces*” (Shylock, 2.5.31–33).
Meaning: Do not look out into the street to look at Christians who are celebrating carnival, wearing masks, and acting like fools.

**A carrion of Death**: death’s head, a skull

“O hell! What have we here?
*A carrion of Death* within whose empty eye
There is a written scroll!” (Prince of Morocco, 2.7.63–65)
Meaning: What do we have here? A skull, which has a scroll in its empty eye.

**Election**: choice

“The Prince of Arragon hath ta’en his oath,/And comes to his *election* presently” (Nerissa, 2.9.3–4).
Meaning: The Prince of Arragon has taken his pledge and now he is coming to make his choice.

Cozen: cheat
“For who shall go about
To cozen fortune and be honourable
Without the stamp of merit?” (Prince of Arragon, 2.9.38–40)
Meaning: Who will go about and try to cheat fortune and be admirable without the appearance of honor?

Complexion: natural disposition
“And Shylock, for his own part, knew the bird was fledged; and then it is the complexion of them all to leave the dam” (Solanio, 3.1.25–26).
Meaning: Shylock knew that his daughter was grown up and that it is in children’s natural disposition to leave home.

Counterfeit: portrait, picture
“Fair Portia’s counterfeit! What demi-god Hath come so near creation?” (Bassanio, 3.2.118–19)
Meaning: The beauty of Portia’s picture is comparable to her own beauty.

Ceremony: anything held sacred
“What man is there so much unreasonable,
If you had pleas’d to have defended it
With any terms of zeal, wanted the modesty
To urge the thing held as a ceremony?” (Portia, 5.1.219–22)
Meaning: What type of man would not defend something that is sacred to him?

Double: two-fold and deceitful
“Mark you but that!
In both my eyes he doubly sees himself,
In each eye, one: swear by your double self,
And there’s an oath of credit” (Portia, 5.1.261–64).
Meaning: See that I am the lawyer too.

Charge us there upon inter’gatories: question under oath
“Let us go in;
And charge us there upon inter’gatories,
And we shall answer all things faithfully” (Portia, 5.1.319–22).
Meaning: Let us go in where you can question us and we will answer truthfully.

**Figurative Language**

In addition, Shakespeare uses figurative language as he speaks with metaphors, similes, and personification. Recognizing when his characters are speaking figuratively helps in understanding the play.

A metaphor is the application of a word or phrase to somebody or something that is not meant literally but to make a comparison. For example: Solanio compares a baby bird leaving the nest to a daughter leaving her family:

“And Shylock, for his own part, knew the bird was fledged; and then it is the complexion of them all to leave the dam” (3.1.25–26).

A simile is a figure of speech that draws comparison between two different things using the word “like” or “as.” For example: Bassanio compares stairs made of sand to the hearts of false men.
“How many cowards, whose hearts are all as false
As stairs of sand, wear yet upon their chins
The beards of Hercules and frowning Mars;
Who, inward searched, have livers white as milk!” (3.2.77–80)

**Personification** occurs when human attributes or qualities are applied to objects or abstract notions. For example: Shylock compares covering your ears to closing up the windows of his house.

“Clamber not you up to the casements then,
Nor thrust your head into the public street,
To gaze on Christian fools with varnished faces;
But stop my house’s ears—I mean my casements” (2.5.31–34).

**Symbols**

Lastly, Shakespeare uses symbols throughout his plays, for example the three caskets in the contest for Portia’s hand. The gold, silver, and lead caskets resemble the cultural and legal system of Venice in some respects. Like the Venice of the play, the casket contest presents the same opportunities and the same rules to men of various nations, ethnicities, and religions.

Also like Venice, the hidden bias of the casket test is fundamentally Christian. To win Portia, Bassanio must ignore the gold casket, which bears the inscription, “Who chooseth me shall gain what many men desire” (2.7.5), and the silver casket, which says, “Who chooseth me shall get as much as he deserves” (2.7.7). The correct casket is lead and warns that the person who chooses it must give and risk everything he has. The contest combines a number of Christian teachings, such as the idea that desire is an unreliable guide and should be resisted, and the idea that human beings do not deserve God’s grace but receive it in spite of themselves. Christianity teaches that appearances are often deceiving, and that people should not trust the evidence provided by the senses—hence the humble appearance of the lead casket. Faith and charity are the central values of Christianity, and these values are evoked by the lead casket’s injunction to give all and risk all, as one does in making a leap of faith. Portia’s father has presented marriage as one in which the proper suitor risks and gives everything for the spouse, in the hope of a divine recompense he can never truly deserve. The contest certainly suits Bassanio, who knows he does not deserve his good fortune but is willing to risk everything on a gamble.

Another symbol in *The Merchant of Venice* is the pound of flesh that Shylock seeks. This symbol lends itself to multiple interpretations: it emerges most as a metaphor for two of the play’s closest relationships, but also calls attention to Shylock’s inflexible adherence to the law. The fact that Bassanio’s debt is to be paid with Antonio’s flesh is significant, showing how their friendship is so binding it has made them almost one. Shylock’s determination is strengthened by Jessica’s departure, as if he were seeking recompense for the loss of his own flesh and blood by collecting it from his enemy. Lastly, the pound of flesh is a constant reminder of the rigidity of Shylock’s world, where numerical calculations are used to evaluate even the most serious of situations. Shylock never explicitly demands that Antonio die, but asks instead, in his numerical mind, for a pound in exchange for his three thousand ducats. Where the other characters measure their emotions with long metaphors and words, Shylock measures everything in far more prosaic and numeral quantities.

Leah’s ring which was given to Shylock in his bachelor days by a woman, who is most likely...
Shylock's wife and Jessica's mother, gets only a brief mention in the play, but it is still an object of great importance. When told that Jessica has stolen it and traded it for a monkey, Shylock very poignantly laments its loss: “I would not have given it for a wilderness of monkeys.” The lost ring allows us to see Shylock in an uncharacteristically vulnerable position and to view him as a human being capable of feeling something more than anger. Although Shylock and Tubal discuss the ring for no more than five lines, the ring stands as an important symbol of Shylock's humanity, his ability to love, and his ability to grieve.

**Shakespeare's Language**

Many students—and adults for that matter—find Shakespeare difficult to read and hard to understand. They accuse him of not speaking English and refuse to believe that ordinary people spoke the way his characters do. However, if you know more about his language, it is easier to understand. One idea that may help is to remember that his plays are written in two forms: prose and verse. In *The Merchant of Venice* prose and verse are both used extensively.

**Prose**

Prose is the form of speech used by common people in Shakespearean drama. There is no rhythm or meter in the line. It is everyday language. Shakespeare's audience would recognize the speech as their language. Characters such as murderers, servants, and porters use prose. However, many important characters can also speak in prose. The majority of *The Merry Wives of Windsor* is written in prose because it deals with middle-class.

Launcelot Gobbo from *The Merchant of Venice* speaks in prose. For example:

“To be ruled by my conscience, I should stay with the Jew my master who (God bless the mark!) is a kind of devil; and, to run away from the Jew, I should be ruled by the fiend, who (saving your reverence) is the devil himself” (2.2.20–23).

Launcelot Gobbo, a servant of Shylock, debates with himself in humorous terms whether to seek a new employer, because he dislikes Shylock and his practices. Because there is no rhyme or rhythm, and the text flows without concern of where the line ends on the page, we recognize the passage as prose. Consequently, we can tell that Launcelot is a commoner who speaks with the language of an Elizabethan audience member.

**Verse**

The majority of Shakespeare's plays are written in verse. A character who speaks in verse is a noble or a member of the upper class. Most of Shakespeare's plays focused on these characters. The verse form he uses is blank verse. It contains no rhyme, but each line has an internal rhythm with a regular rhythmic pattern. The pattern most favored by Shakespeare is iambic pentameter. Iambic pentameter is defined as a ten-syllable line with the accent on every other syllable, beginning with the second one. For example:

“The pound of flesh which I demand of him
Is dearly bought. ‘Tis mine, and I will have it” (Shylock, 4.1.101–102).

The accent occurs on every other syllable, and the natural accent of each word is placed in that position on the line.

At times Shakespeare found it necessary to take a vowel out of a word so that the rhythm of the line would not be interrupted. For example, *strain'd* and *bless'd* is pronounced as one syllable, as in the following speech by Portia:
“The quality of mercy is not strain’d,
It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven
Upon the place beneath: it is twice bless’d;
It blesseth him that gives and him that takes” (4.1.189–92)

Shakespeare used this style of writing as a form of stage direction. Actors today can tell by “scanning” a line (scansion) what words are most important and how fast to say a line. When two characters are speaking one character may finish the ten syllable line started by the other character, showing that one line must quickly come on top of another. This is called a shared line or a split line. For example:

Portia: You **stand** within his **danger**, do you **not**?
Antonio: Ay, so he **says**.
Portia: Do you **confess** the **bond**?
Antonio: I **do**.
Portia: Then **must** the **Jew** be **merciful** (4.1.183–87).

**Trochaic Verse**

On some special occasions Shakespeare uses another form of verse. He reverses the accent and shortens the line. The reversed accent, with the accent on the first syllable is called trochaic. He uses this verse frequently in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* and *Macbeth* where magic or ritual is involved. The witches in *Macbeth* speak in trochaic verse, which is different from the earthly mortals, giving them an unnatural sound. For example:

Witch: “**Round about** the **cauldron go;**
In the **Poisoned entrails throw**” (4.1.4–5).

When reading or acting a Shakespearean play, count the syllables in the lines. You will be surprised at Shakespeare’s consistency. Then circle the syllables where the accent appears. You will notice that he places the most important words on the accent. Words like “the,” “is,” and “and” that do not carry the meaning are on the unaccented portion of the lines. In the Globe Theatre where there were no microphones, the more important words would carry and an audience member would still know what was going on because the important words were heard. Iambic pentameter has been called a “heart beat,” and each of Shakespeare’s lines contains that human beat.
The Globe Theatre

The theatre where audiences watched Shakespeare’s company perform many of his plays was called the Globe, situated on the south side of London.

It is thought that the stage was several feet above the ground where the people who paid a penny stood, and that it extended into the audience from the backstage wall. This was a model for construction of the Adams Shakespearean Theatre at the Utah Shakespearean Festival (see photo), with the difference being that all the audience is seated and no one has to stand.

As you can see in the photo, there is a center section near the back which is somewhat inset from the outer stage; this is called the inner below and is the area of the stage where bedchambers and intimate scenes with only two people were staged, so that a curtain could be drawn in front of it, while another scene begins on the stage closer to the audience. At the back of the inner below is a space for a curtain.

Two columns support the level above the inner below, providing a balcony called the above. You can see that there is space behind the balcony where actors can walk, and that is called the inner above.

The stage has four possible entrances on the main floor and three entrances on the second floor, so the whole court scene could enter at the same time.

All the main architectural features in the photo are permanent; some plays add various kinds of staircases to get from the first level of the stage to the balcony, and some plays separate the balcony completely from the main floor, so that actors have to go up or down stairs which are hidden backstage.

What can change are the curtains or doors at the front of the inner below, which can be of several different colors and can be open or closed; the kinds of doors, which can be plain wood, or decorated, or replaced with iron gates; and the various kinds of furniture which can be brought onto the stage.
William Shakespeare (1564–1616)

William Shakespeare was born in Stratford-upon-Avon in England on April 23, 1564. His father was John Shakespeare, a well-to-do general storekeeper. Shakespeare went to a good school, very much like yours, except he studied some Latin and Greek and became familiar with Greek and Roman plays and poetry.

We don’t know much about his early life, since no one wrote a biography of him while he was alive, but we do know that he married Anne Hathaway in 1582 when he was eighteen, and that they had three children: Susanna, Hamnet, and Judith. Nothing is known of why he decided to go to London, but the next mention we have of him is in 1594, when he was a member of the Lord Chamberlain’s men, a professional acting company. Through looking at some of the records of the theatre, we can find out that his first play was probably The Comedy of Errors, written in 1591, and that The Merchant of Venice was written probably about 1598.

Shakespeare died on his birthday, April 23, in 1616 at the age of fifty-two. His only son, Hamnet, had died at the age of eleven, and his wife died seven years after her husband’s death. Although his two daughters married and had children, the line died out, so there aren’t any descendants of Shakespeare alive today.

What are still alive are his plays, which are still being performed after almost 400 years, in countries all over the world—in German, French, Russian, and Japanese. Every ten years or so, the film industry “redisCOVERS” Shakespeare and makes lavish movies of some of his most famous plays.

Michael Radford directed a film version of The Merchant of Venice in 2004, which stared Al Pacino as Shylock and Jeremy Irons as Antonio. The text of the play is stripped down a bit in the production, but the reactions and responses of the characters have helped to portray the missing lines. The editing of the play has created a gripping movie—not just a film of the play. The themes are still present and gripping.

**Question:** Can you name some of Shakespeare’s plays, which have been made into movies recently, and some famous actors in them?

**Answer:** Hamlet with Kenneth Branagh; another Hamlet with Mel Gibson; Richard III with Ian McKellen; Twelfth Night with Nigel Hawthorne, Much Ado about Nothing with Kenneth Branagh, Emma Thompson, and Michael Keaton; Henry V with Kenneth Branagh; Romeo and Juliet with Clare Danes and Leonardo DiCaprio; Othello with Laurence Fishburne and Kenneth Branagh; Love’s Labour’s Lost with Alicia Silverstone, Nathan Lane, and Kenneth Branagh; and A Midsummer Night’s Dream with Kevin Kline, Michelle Pfeiffer, and Rupert Everett.
Shakespeare’s Plays

Comedies
The Comedy of Errors
The Taming of the Shrew
The Two Gentleman of Verona
A Midsummer Night’s Dream
Love’s Labour’s Lost
The Merchant of Venice
As You Like It
Much Ado About Nothing
Twelfth Night
The Merry Wives of Windsor
All’s Well That Ends Well
Measure for Measure

Histories
Henry IV Part One
Henry IV Part Two
Henry V
Henry VI Part One
Henry VI Part Two
Henry VI Part Three
Richard II
Richard III
King John
Henry VIII

Tragedies
Titus Andronicus
Romeo and Juliet
Julius Caesar
Hamlet
Troilus and Cressida
Othello
King Lear
Macbeth
Timon of Athens
Antony and Cleopatra
Coriolanus

Romances
Pericles
Cymbeline
The Winter’s Tale
The Tempest
Shakespeare’s Audience
and Audiences Today

Seating

Shakespeare’s audience for his outdoor plays was the very rich, the upper middle class, and the lower middle class. The lower middle class paid a penny for admittance to the yard (like the yard outside a school building), where they stood on the ground, with the stage more or less at eye level—these spectators were called groundlings. The rich paid two pennies for entrance to the galleries, covered seating at the sides. The rich paid three pennies to sit in the higher galleries, which had a better view. The best seats were in the lords’ rooms, private galleries closest to the stage.

How Much Did It Cost?

To get an idea of the cost of a ticket in today’s terms, consider that the average blue collar worker earned five to six pennies a day; bread for his midday meal cost a penny, ale cost another penny, and if he were lucky enough to have chicken for dinner, it cost two pennies. His rent was often a shilling (twelve pennies) a week, so there wasn’t much money left over for playgoing, nor would he have been able to take time off from work to go and see a play in the middle of the day, when they were usually performed.

Activity: Ask the students to set the space with room to sit on the floor (for the one penny seats), a semi-circle of chairs on the floor (for two-penny seats), and tables behind the chairs for three-penny seats. Depending on the size of the class, a second rank of tables with chairs on them may be set up as lords’ rooms.

Before the students decode what seating area they wish to be in, have them cost out the price of a ticket, using their allowances or earnings as a base for comparison with Elizabethan ticket prices and deducting amounts for rent and food.

Example: A student gets an allowance of $5 a week. He gets 500 pennies, as compared to the Elizabethan worker’s 36 pennies per week. Therefore, 14 of the student’s pennies equal one of the worker’s pennies. From his weekly allowance he must deduct his food and lodging, which would be 33 pennies Elizabethan (12 pennies for lodging and 3 pennies times 7 days for food). The worker has 3 pennies left for entertainment or extra chicken or ale. Let the student work out how much he has left for entertainment, and whether he will see one play with a very comfortable seat, or several, standing in the yard.

How Was Seeing a Play in Shakespeare’s Time Different from Seeing a Play Today?

Shakespeare’s audience was perhaps not as well behaved as you are. Since the play was so long, people would leave their seats and go looking for food to eat and ale to drink during the performance, or perhaps go visit with their friends. Some playgoers, especially those who had saved up money to come and see the play, were extremely annoyed if they were unable to hear the actors and would tell rowdy audience goers to quiet down.

Later in Shakespeare’s career, his acting company was invited to perform in noble houses and royal courts; the audience there was a good deal more polite, and focused on the play as you do.
Today’s Audience

Today, you have a lot of entertainment to choose from, not including the ones you provide yourselves, such as sports or putting on your own shows. Today’s audiences can choose television, movies, or stage shows, and there is a different kind of behavior that is right for each one.

Television audiences are the most casual; they don’t have to dress up, they don’t have reserved seats, and they can talk or go to the fridge whenever they want.

Movie audiences sometimes think they’re at home. Have you ever been annoyed by someone who sat behind you and kicked your chair or talked loudly so you couldn’t hear the movie? And you paid good money to go and see it, too! Then there are the people who can’t decide where to sit, and keep getting up in front of you so you can’t see the screen. What other behaviors have you seen which ruin your enjoyment?

People who go and see theatre (like you) usually pay more for a ticket than they would for a movie, and are most often annoyed by any disturbance. A theatre performance is not something you put on tape and play back on your VCR—it’s like seeing a basketball game live—there aren’t any instant replays. It requires your full attention, and you don’t want to be interrupted by other people talking and moving.

The actors who put on a show for you also want your attention—they’ve worked for a long time to develop a good production, and you can see them concentrating extremely hard to get the best meanings out of all they have to say and do. If you’ve seen any golf on television, you know that when the golfer is lining up his shot, even the announcers stop talking. What other situations can you think of where you need quiet and full concentration?

Activity: Take a four- or eight-line speech from the play and ask the students to memorize it while you provide some aural distraction (loud music, some of the students talking, you asking questions). Then have them write down what they remember. Take another speech of the same length, provide an environment with no distractions, and ask the students to study it. Then have them write down what they remember. The third method is to have the students study a speech in units of two or three, keeping the groups as far apart as possible, and keeping voices at a low level. This shows that interplay between actors helps memorization.