

**LECTURE 5. William Shakespeare.
Shakespeare's plays and comedies. "Hamlet",
"Romeo and Juliet".**

Plan

- 1 Hamlet
- 2 Romeo and Juliet
- 3 Julius Caesar

ROMEO AND JULIET

In the famous balcony scene from the tragedy *Romeo and Juliet* by William Shakespeare, Juliet Capulet emerges from her bedroom to muse upon the young man she has just met and fallen in love with, Romeo Montague. He, much taken with her, overhears her thoughts with pleasure while hidden below. A longstanding feud between the Capulets and Montagues keeps the young lovers apart. *Romeo and Juliet* (1595) is justly famous for its poetic treatment of the ecstasy of youthful love. The play dramatizes the fate of two lovers victimized by the feuds and misunderstandings of their elders and by their own hasty temperaments. Shakespeare borrowed the tragic story of the two young Italian lovers from a long narrative poem, *The Tragicall Historie of Romeus and Juliet* (1562) by English writer Arthur Brooke.

Shakespeare, however, added the character of Mercutio, increased the roles of the friar and the nurse, and reduced the moralizing of Brooke's work. The play made an instant hit; four editions of the play were published before the 1623 Folio, demonstrating its popularity. The play continues to be widely read and performed today, and its story of innocent love destroyed by inherited hatred has seen numerous reworkings, as, for example, in the musical *West Side Story* (1957) by American composer Leonard Bernstein. The balcony scene (Act 2, Scene II) from *Romeo and Juliet* is one of the best-known scenes in Shakespeare's plays, and is almost certainly the most frequently parodied. Juliet's line "O Romeo, Romeo!— wherefore art thou Romeo?" is perhaps as well known as Hamlet's famous question, "To be or not to be...?", but is often misunderstood. Romeo, having fallen for Juliet at a party he gatecrashed, has made his way to her window to woo her. There he overhears her talking aloud of her own love for him, and her concern about the fact that he is a Montague, born of a family that are enemies to her own household: "wherefore", or "why", she asks herself, could he not have been born with any other name? The celestial

imagery that Romeo uses to describe Juliet, and her use of beautiful images from nature — a rose, the sea — develop a richly romantic atmosphere. However, at the same time, Juliet’s concern for the danger facing Romeo should he be found, and the interruptions of the nurse, who almost discovers their secret meeting, build up dramatic tension, foreshadowing the tragedy that will eventually engulf these “star-crossed lovers”.

JULIUS CAESAR

The great English dramatist William Shakespeare showed his mastery of the art of rhetoric in this excerpt from *Julius Caesar* (1599). The scene, the funeral of Roman ruler Julius Caesar, opens with a well-received speech by Marcus Brutus, one of Caesar’s assassins. Brutus, who was highly respected by the people of Rome, argues that Caesar had become overly ambitious. Here, Roman statesman Mark Antony replies with a virtuoso address that turns the crowd against Brutus, but leaves the impression that Antony is a noble bystander, rather than a cunning agitator. *Julius Caesar* was written about 1599 and first published in 1623.

Though a serious tragedy of political rivalries, it is less intense in style than the tragic dramas that followed it. Shakespeare based this political tragedy concerning the plot to overthrow Julius Caesar on *Lives of the Noble Grecians and Romans* by 1st-century Greek biographer Plutarch. Plutarch’s *Lives* had first appeared in English in 1579, in a version produced by Thomas North from a French translation of the original. The North translation provided Shakespeare and his contemporaries with a great deal of historical material. Shakespeare followed Plutarch closely in *Julius Caesar*; little of incident or character appears in the play that is not found in the *Lives* as well, and he sometimes used North’s wording. Shakespeare’s play centers on the issue of whether the conspirators were justified in killing Caesar. How a production answers that question determines whether the conspirator Brutus is seen as sympathetic or tragically self-deceived.

MATURE TRAGEDIES

Since first performed in the early 1600s, the title role in William Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* has remained a favorite of many actors because of the emotional complexity of Hamlet’s personality. Nowhere is this complexity more apparent than in Hamlet’s famous soliloquy in Act III, Scene 1. The soliloquy is a monologue in which a character reveals inner thoughts, motivations, and feelings. Shakespeare used the technique often, and his soliloquies are poetic and rich in imagery. In *Hamlet*, a play about a man whose mind may be his fatal flaw, the form reaches its highest level. The tragedies

Shakespeare wrote after 1600 are considered the most profound of his works and constitute the pillars upon which his literary reputation rests. Some scholars have tied the darkening of his dramatic imagination in this period to the death of his son in 1601. But in the absence of any compelling biographical information to support this theory, it remains only a speculation. For whatever reason, sometime around 1600 Shakespeare began work on a series of plays that in their power and profundity are arguably unmatched in the achievement of any other writer.

HAMLET

Hamlet, written about 1601 and first printed in 1603, is perhaps Shakespeare's most famous play. It exceeds by far most other tragedies of revenge in the power of its ethical and psychological imagining. The play is based on the story of Amleth, a 9th-century Danish prince, which Shakespeare encountered in a 16th-century French account by Francois Belleforest. Shakespeare's Hamlet tells the story of the prince's effort to revenge the murder of his father, who has been poisoned by Hamlet's uncle, Claudius, the man who then becomes Hamlet's stepfather and the king. The prince alternates between rash action and delay that disgusts him, as he tries to enact the revenge his father's ghost has asked from him. The play ends in a spectacular scene of death: As Hamlet, his mother, his uncle, and Laertes (the lord chamberlain's son) all lie dead, the Norwegian prince Fortinbras marches in to claim the Danish throne.

Hamlet is certainly Shakespeare's most intellectually engaging and elusive play. Literary critics and actors turn to it again and again, possibly succeeding only in confirming the play's inexhaustible richness and the inadequacy of any single attempt finally or fully to capture it. At the opening of the drama, Hamlet, the prince of Denmark, has returned home after the death of his father, the king. Shortly after the funeral, Hamlet's mother remarried Hamlet's uncle Claudius, who succeeded his father on the throne. In the following scenes from the first act, Hamlet is visited by his father's ghost, which tells Hamlet that he was murdered by Claudius. Hamlet then vows to avenge his father's death, and forces his friends Horatio and Marcellus to swear never to tell what they saw or heard that night. British actor Laurence played the title character in the Academy Award-winning motion picture Hamlet (1948), based on the play by William Shakespeare. Olivier is considered by many people to be one of the most famous stage and film actors in history. He produced, directed, and acted in a series of films based on plays by Shakespeare, including Henry V (1946), Hamlet, and Richard III (1962). 46 Hamlet's Soliloquy, Act III In this excerpt from the tragic play Hamlet by William Shakespeare, Hamlet reveals that his self-doubt and inability to avenge his

father's death have led him to the brink of suicide. A British actor with the Royal Shakespeare Company recites the well-known soliloquy "To Be or Not to Be.

OTHELLO

Othello was written about 1604, though it was not published until 1622. It portrays the growth of unjustified jealousy in the noble protagonist, Othello, a Moor serving as a general in the Venetian army. The innocent object of his jealousy is his wife, Desdemona. In this domestic tragedy, Othello's evil lieutenant Iago draws him into mistaken jealousy in order to ruin him. Othello is destroyed partly through his gullibility and willingness to trust Iago and partly through the manipulations of this villain, who clearly enjoys the exercise of evil-doing just as he hates the spectacle of goodness and happiness around him. At the end of the play, Othello comes to understand his terrible error; but as always in tragedy, that knowledge comes too late and he dies by his own hand in atonement for his error. In his final act of self-destruction, he becomes again and for a final time the defender of Venice and Venetian values.

KING LEAR

King Lear was written about 1605 and first published in 1608. Conceived on a grander emotional and philosophic scale than Othello, it deals with the consequences of the arrogance and misjudgment of Lear, a ruler of early Britain, and the parallel behavior of his councilor, the Duke of Gloucester. Each of these fathers tragically banishes the child who most has his interests at heart and places himself in the power of the wicked child or children. Each is finally restored to the loving child, but only after a rending journey of suffering, and each finally dies, having learned the truth about himself and the world, but too late to avert disaster. King Lear is arguably Shakespeare's most shocking play; the scenes of Lear with his dead child and of Gloucester having his eyes struck out are horrible images of the world's cruelty. But the 47 play offers moving if ineffective examples of love and compassion: Even if these emotions are incapable of redeeming this world, they are discovered as infinitely precious in their very defeat.

ANTONY AND CLEOPATRA

Antony and Cleopatra was written about 1606 and first published in 1623. It deals with a different type of love than that in Shakespeare's earlier tragedies, namely the middle-aged passions of the Roman general Mark Antony and the Egyptian queen Cleopatra. Their love, which destroys an empire, is glorified by some of Shakespeare's most sensuous poetry. Antony and Cleopatra, like the other two plays that close

Shakespeare's tragic period—Timon of Athens and Coriolanus—depicts events from ancient history and draws on North's translation of Plutarch's Lives. The action in the play shifts from Egypt to Rome to Greece and back to Egypt and includes a battle at sea. In the process the play contrasts the luxuriant atmosphere of Egypt with the strict military code of Rome, and the cold and calculating Roman general Octavius with the passionate but ill-advised Antony. The contrasts between Roman rigor and Egyptian luxury are at the heart of this play, which keeps them in provocative balance and offers "no midway/Twixt these extremes at all."

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