THE ELIZABETHAN AGE

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

- Elizabeth I, the last monarch in the Tudor dynasty (three great kings descending from a Welsh squire, Owen Tudor: Henry VII (restored people’s faith in the monarchy; imposed a new aristocratic model, with former farmers being ennobled – Shakespeare’s Sir John Falstaff), Henry VIII (established the Church of England – the Act of Supremacy in 1534 made him head of this new church), Elizabeth I (1558-1603).

- The Tudor Myth: the king as guardian and father of the nation, sacrificing his personal life for his people; an absolute monarch (a strong king and a weak parliament, with major decisions being taken in consultation with a very small group of loyal advisors); a person endowed with two bodies – the monarch in flesh and blood and the body politic (correspondence inherited from Plato’s Republic).

- Tudor England was a prosperous country; food was in adequate supply and the population grew steadily. England was a rural country, with only 10% of the population living in the city; 80% of the country’s trade was carried out in London.

- Foreign affairs: although England was still waging war against France during Henry VIII’s reign, the balance of power changed in the second half of the 16th century; the Dutch wool market collapsed in 1550, so England had to find new forms of trade beyond Europe; the moment of the Spanish Armada defeat at Tilbury in 1588, its protagonists being Elizabeth (Gloriana) and Sir Francis Drake; the road was clear for English entrepreneurs to establish colonies – Sir Walter Raleigh established the first American colony in Virginia; the East India Company (1601) traded with countries in the East and laid the foundations for the colonization of India.

- Elizabeth ruled a prosperous country who had gained respect at an international level, was patron of arts, culture, and learning, head of the Anglican church and head of the state

- Second daughter of Henry VIII and Anne Boleyn, followed her sister Mary (Bloody Mary) on the throne of England; good Queen Bess, the Virgin Queen (“I
am married to England”), the Fairy Queen, Gloriana (victor at Tilbury), the Second Maiden in Heaven (combines religious [Catholic] imagery and political imagery), Defender of Faith (the Book of Common Prayer [1584] as well as the translated Bible [1539] brought Protestantism closer to common people).

- First woman as absolute monarch: “I know I have the body but of a weak and feeble woman, but I have the heart and stomach of a king, and of a king of England too”; manipulates the metaphor of the monarch’s two bodies by using both masculine and feminine insignia.

LITERARY BACKGROUND

- the revival of interest in classical culture (Humanism); the 1453 fall of Constantinople to the Turks made the Greek refugees who fled to Italy take with them masterpieces of ancient Greek literature, medicine, philosophy, science, etc.; from Italy, Humanism spread to Western countries due to men of learning such as Erasmus of Rotterdam, Michel de Montaigne or Thomas More.

- Thomas More (1478-1535) was Henry VIII’s Lord Chancellor; refused to acknowledge the king as head of the new church and was beheaded; wrote Utopia in Latin in 1516: an imaginary dialogue between More and a traveller; an attack on the evils of English society: corruption, misuse of private property, religious intolerance; offers in exchange an ideal country, an island whose society is based on shared property, education for both men and women, religious freedom.

- Italy: the greatest influence on the development of English literature; models are felt especially in poetry: the Petrarchan sonnet is imported by Edmund Spenser (88 sonnets, allegorical pastorals on the Italian model, a political allegory, The Faerie Queene – glorification of Elizabeth and her court, inspired also by medieval patterns of courtly love: an idealized and distant lady, a very ornate language, the stanzas were set to music and recited to the accompaniment of an instrument, the lute).

- Prose writing: travel accounts (about geographical expeditions and discoveries, the exploits of Raleigh or Drake), translations (North’s Lives by Plutarch, Chapman’s translation of Homer, Paterick’s translation of Machiavelli), The Authorized Version of the Bible (greatly influenced the development of prose style, less adorned, more straightforward), Francis Bacon’s Essays (1625), inspired by Montaigne.
The greatest literary works are the plays, following several traditions:
- the ancient Latin comedies (*Plautus, Terence*): the qui pro quo, small misunderstandings, characters of lower social origins, happy endings
- the ancient Latin tragedies (*Seneca*): crime, horror, revenge, long reflective soliloquies, supernatural elements
- street performances or popular drama: singers, acrobats, storytellers, clowns travelling around Britain since the Anglo-Saxon period, performing for common people in the marketplace or for noblemen on their country estates
- liturgical drama: a formal medieval theatre performed in the church for illiterate church-goers; music and drama was added to the religious service; it has two genres:
  - mystery plays: dramatizations of stories from the Bible; the *Mystery Cycle* telling the story of Christianity from Creation to the Last Judgement
  - miracle plays: dramatizations of the lives of saints, performed especially around religious holidays
  - morality plays: more elaborate, included elements of street performances, were performed by lay actors under the supervision of guilds – pageants or stage carriages (2 rooms); contained allegorical characters; *Everyman* (around 1500): Fellowship, Kindred and Goods vs. Knowledge and Good Deeds.
  After the schism from Rome, Henry VIII put an end to religious drama.
- English drama flourished under Elizabeth I because:
  - the plays addressed both noblemen and completely uneducated people
  - the theatre was patronized by the Court
  - the language was easier to understand than that of poetry
  - the economic prosperity of the Elizabethan age
- Drama was strictly linked to the idea of order: the Chain of Being: God, angels, humans, animals, plants, minerals; man is in the middle – his body links him to the lower levels, his soul makes him aspire to the upper ones; the human level is strictly hierarchical; disorder at any level destabilizes the entire Chain.
- The Elizabethan actors descend from medieval street performers who were considered vagabonds; they worked in companies patronized by aristocrats: The Earl of Leicester’s Men, The Lord Chamberlain’s Men, the Admiral’s Men, the King’s Men); they performed in London in winter and in the country in summer.
• 20 acting companies in London and more than 100 provincial troupes; a playhouse could sit up to 1,500 spectators; an average cast was about 20; 3 or 4 boys for women’s roles; 6 to play minor roles or work as musicians, prompters, extras, wardrobe keepers; some actors doubled for 2 or more minor parts; the costumes did not respect historical accuracy; special effects: animal organs and animal blood, pulleys to suspend ghosts or angels, trap doors.

• Plays were first performed in inns; the first playhouses respected the inn yard model, were build outside the city walls: The Theatre (1576), The Rose, The Swan and The Globe (1599). The Lord Chamerlain’s Men was one of the few companies who owned a playhouse – The Globe, later The Blackfriars.
  • The Globe – built on the South Bank; had an open yard and 3 semi-circular galleries;
  - the outer stage (with a thatched roof)
  - the inner stage (behind a curtain)
  - hell (a cellar)
  - upper stage (balcony scenes, the walls of a city, a place for musicians)
  - special effects level (with pulleys)
  - galleries (for the richer public)
  - the yard (for the poor spectators)
SHAKESPEARE’S CONTEMPORARIES

The University Wits – a group of scholars and young playwrights who had studied at Oxford or Cambridge, active in the last two decades of the 16th century

- the blank verse (unrhymed iambic pentametre): ten-syllable lines in which unstressed syllables are followed by stressed syllables; the verse that most closely resembles the natural rhythms of English speech and it is the most frequently used verse form in English literature; first used by Christopher Marlowe:

/There/are/the/Fu/ries/toss/ing/damn/ed/souls (10)
/On/burn/ing/forks:/their/bod/ies/boil/in/lead (10)
(Doctor Faustus)

- the romantic comedy: love in a dream-like, idyllic décor, often populated by mythological characters – John Lyly's Endymion, Galathea

- the revenge tragedy: a violent, bloody plot, in which the hero avenges the death of his father with the price of his own life – Thomas Kyd’s The Spanish Tragedy

- the fall-of-princes tragedy: a spectacular plot in which the hero, a royal or very important figure dies or falls to a very low position in the Chain of Being – Marlowe’s Tamburlaine the Great, Doctor Faustus

- the chronicle plays: historical plots concerned with Britain’s past, meant as moralizing examples for the present generation: George Peele’s Edward I, Robert Greene’s James IV, Marlowe’s Edward II.

CHRISTOPHER MARLOWE (1564-1593): born in Canterbury in a prosperous family; exceptional student at Cambridge; was suspected by the authorities to have converted to Catholicism; was probably working in the Secret Service actually spying on catholic conspirators against Queen Elizabeth; moved to London; formed the literary circle of the University Wits; from 1587 to 1593 wrote an produced four plays: Tamburlaine the Great Part 1 and 2, The Jew of Malta, Edward II, and Doctor Faustus; was highly successful and had a major influence on contemporary playwrights; was stabbed to death in a tavern fight.

Each of his plays revolves around a protagonist obsessed by a ruling passion:

- Tamburlaine wants to conquer the world
- Edward is blinded by his homosexual love
• Doctor Faustus aspires to unlimited knowledge and eternal life
• The Jew of Malta, a usurer, is obsessed by his greed

**DOCTOR FAUSTUS** – based on a collection of German stories, the *Faustbuch*, available in English translation, which narrate the real-life story of the German scholar and traveller Georgius Faustus; inspired by the fashionable and prestigious sciences of the Renaissance, inherited from the Greek antiquity and the Arabian classical culture: magic, alchemy, astronomy.

Marlowe’s themes: man’s aspirations to surpass all human limitations, the negative consequences of excessive ambition.

Plot: Faustus, having studied all sciences, wants to explore the world of magic, through which he is able to call up Mephistopheles and make a pact with him: he will give his soul to Lucifer in exchange for twenty-four years of life. In the meantime, Mephistopheles is his servant and helps Faustus indulge in every imaginable earthly pleasure. His powers are immense, being able to bring back to life Helen of Troy. At the end of the period, Faustus is frightened by the consequences of the pact. Begging to be saved, he is taken to hell by a bunch of devils.

- images of hell common in the medieval and early modern collective imagination:

  Now Faustus, let thine eyes with horror stare
  Into the vast perpetual torture-house.
  There are the Furies tossing damned souls
  On burning forks; their bodies boil in lead.
  There are live quarters burning on the coals
  That ne’er can die. This ever-burning chair
  Is for o’er tortured souls to rest them in.
  These that are fed with sops of flaming fire
  Were gluttons and loved only delicates
  And laughed to see the poor starve at their gates(V, ii)

- heaven and hell are places that appeal ore repel to all senses:

  Nay, thou must feel them, taste the smart of all.

- the difference between men and animals:

  All beasts are happy, for, when they die,
  Their souls are soon dissolved in elements;
But mine must live still to be plagued in hell.

- magic is regarded as heresy:
  Come not, Lucifer! I’ll burn my books.

**WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE** (1564-1616): born at Stratford-upon-Avon on 23rd April in a well-to-do family; attended grammar school but did not go to university; at 18, married Anne Hathaway and had 3 children: Susanna, Hamnet and Judith; it is believed that he ran away to London to avoid being arrested for poaching; worked around playhouses, holding the horses, waiting on actors, acting, writing plays. In 1592 Robert Greene wrote a pamphlet complaining that uneducated playwrights were more successful than writers with university degrees: “an upstart Crow, beautified with our feathers”. Shakespeare became very successful: performed at court, mixed in high social circles (the Earl of Southampton), bought the Globe, retired and bought the finest house in Stratford.

Shakespeare wrote 37 plays in 20 years.

- used many sources that were popular with Elizabethan authors: Plutarch, Plautus, Matteo Bandello, Giraldo Cinzio, Holinshed.

- did not publish his works; they were recorded in *Quartos* (large-sized books made of sheets of folded paper, reconstructed from notes taken from the theatres or from actors’ parts); seven years after Shakespeare’s death, his friends Heminge and Condell published the first collection of plays, the *First Folio*, including 35 plays, divided into Comedies, Histories and Tragedies.

- Four periods of creation according to style, plot, characterization; references to historical events; references to works by other authors
  
  - First period: 1590-1595, learning and experimentation – *Henry VI, Richard III, Richard II, King John; Titus Andronicus, Romeo and Juliet; The Comedy of Errors, The Taming of the Shrew, A Midsummer Night’s Dream*
  
  - Second period: 1596-1599, the best comedies – *As You Like It, Twelfth Night, The Merchant of Venice, Much Ado about Nothing, The Merry Wives of Windsor*
  
  - Third period: 1600-1608, skepticism and pessimism – the great tragedies (*Hamlet, Othello, Macbeth, King Lear*), the dark comedies (*Measure for Measure*)
  
  - Fourth period: 1609-1611, an idealized world, a serene farewell to the theatre – *Pericles, Cymbeline, The Winter’s Tale, The Tempest*.
Themes: unsophisticated life in harmony with nature (*As You Like It*), deception and crime (*Macbeth*), bonding and ingratitude (*King Lear*), love and politics (*Antony and Cleopatra*), the impatience of youth (*Romeo and Juliet*).

Language: a highly poetic quality, dense, striking imagery, great musicality, memorable combinations of words (*All’s Well that Ends Well*); since the plots were simplistic, the scenery modest and the stage props insufficient, Shakespeare had to describe settings, moods, atmosphere with the help of words.

Original contributions: repetition of plots and imagery was something common; Shakespeare combines sources and themes in a new manner, cultivates a realism of the Renaissance, describes profound psychological crises with great accuracy, proves impartiality of outlook in his treatment of characters, covers a vast social sphere, pointing out the contrast between the public realm and the intimate world, invents a lot of new words, puns, unusual figures of style, exploits poetic ambiguity in a modern manner.

**The Shakespearean Apocrypha:** *Henry VIII, Two Noble Kinsmen, Sir Thomas More, Edward III* (in collaboration with John Fletcher, who followed Shakespeare as the playwright of the King’s Men, after 1613).

**The Sonnets:** 154, first published in 1609, without the consent of their author, probably written at an earlier date; conventionally they are divided into 2 groups:

- Sonnets 1-126: addressed to a ‘young youth’, probably the Earl of Southampton
- Sonnets 127-154: concerned with the ‘dark lady’, presumably Shakespeare’s mistress, a married woman; describe an unhappy relationship in which both are unfaithful to each other.

- Themes: unselfish love, melancholy, mutual infidelity, joy, pessimism.
- Style: varied; in some sonnets, it is extremely sophisticated, reminding of medieval courtly love poetry, in others, the vocabulary and syntax are very simple; considered the finest love poems in English literature.
THE CHRONICLE PLAYS

- No chronological order
- Historical sources: Raphael Holinshed’s *Chronicles of England, Scotland, and Ireland* (1587), Edward Hall’s *The Union of the Two Noble and Illustre Families of Lancaster and York* (1542)
- Literary sources: *A Mirror for Magistrates* (1559) – poetic soliloquies uttered by ghosts of great dead statesmen;
- Morality plays: *Respublica* – connected to England: a cycle beginning with prosperity, followed by crime and disorder, and ending in a renewal of prosperity;
- The University Wits’ chronicle plays
- Seneca’s drama: violent tone, passionate characters, supernatural interventions, tyranny, invocations, rich imagery related to nature, diseases, animals, storms;
- Plato’s *Republic*: the relation between the human body and the body politic; the diseases of the body politic are corruption, tyranny, abuses – metaphor adopted by Christian philosophers: St. Augustine, St. Thomas Aquinas, who add religious symbolism: *rationes seminales*, God’s principles introduced in nature, which germinate under the angelic or demonic influence
- Machiavelli’s *The Prince* (1513): foremost quality of the leader – virtu, intelligence, strength of character, clear-sightedness, courage, clairvoyance; for the benefit of the community, the strong character made his way in life by any means, no matter the sacrifice; the Elizabethans misread *The Prince* as an amoral example of selfishness.

- The functions of the chronicle plays:
  - documentary: inform about history, reflect portraits of kings and queens of the past
  - political: discuss domestic and foreign affairs, wars, government policies, international power relations, legitimacy of power, the Tudor myth
  - instructive: teach history to the illiterate public
- educative: form feelings of patriotism, duty, respect for traditional values and for the monarchy
- moral: the consequence of errors and selfishness, the fight between good and evil, the fickleness of fortune (fortuna labilis), the importance of moral acts
- entertainment: the theatre was one of the major leisure activities of rich and poor Elizabethans
- imaginative: the plots helped the audience exercise their imagination.

Principles:
- structural unity: the period covered is a compact stretch, elaborated in ten years; Shakespeare declares the continuity of the plays by anticipating future plots or making references to previous actions or characters;
- plots are cumulative: similar events alternate in an additive sequence; repetition of characters with the same name (Wales, York, Gloucester, Warwick, Surrey);
- the cause-and-effect principle: any historical event is generated by past actions and, in its turn, will be reflected by future happenings; crimes and immoral acts have consequences at a larger scale, social, natural, even cosmic; Richard II’s weakness causes great misery to England and will result in the collapse of the royal house;
- the principle of order: microcosm and macrocosm are interconnected, with human events woven into a total web of things.

England’s history and kings

- **King John**: some similarities with Elizabeth’s reign: John, a bastard, defies the Pope, is excommunicated, imprisons his rival; Pope invites another king to invade England; the foreign invasion is avoided when the enemy’s navy is providentially wrecked off the English coast – the Armada Idiom, the most unhistorical play.
- **Richard II**: the last king of the medieval order, ruling by hereditary right; inefficient, unable to fulfil his royal duties; gets imprisoned; meditates in long soliloquies about the relationship between good life and the health conditions of the body, on the relation between social function and gender.
Henry IV – Hal and Falstaff stand for two opposing life styles and mentalities: the chivalric ideal of honour, vassality, martial valour vs. common sense, domesticity, lack of political initiative:

Falstaff: 'Tis not due yet – I would be loath to pay him before his day. What need I be so forward with him that calls not on me? Well, 'tis no matter, honour pricks me on. Yea, but how if honour pricks me off when I come on, how then? Can honour set a leg? No. Or an arm? No. Or take away the grief of a wound? No. Honour has no skill in surgery then. What is honour? A word. What is in that word honour? Air. A trim reckoning! Who hath it? He that died a'Wednesday. Doth he feel it? No. Doth he hear it? No. 'Tis insensible, then? Yea, to the dead. But will it not live with the living? No. Why? Detraction will not suffer it. Therefore I'll none of it. Honour is a mere scutcheon – and so ends my catechism. (V, ii)

His carnivalesque vein makes Falstaff translate everything into the language of the lower body. When urged to fight in the name of honour, patriotism, loyalty, the obese knight dismisses the official discourse of propaganda that Hal, as representative of the supreme authority, has prepared for the army: Falstaff is not ready to pay his duties – neither the political nor the religious ones. His “owing God a death” is far from being the abstraction Hal formulated. Chivalric honour is translated in the carnivalesque language of the body, where it is relativized, minimalized and dismissed.

• Richard III – the absolute negative role model; a great orator:

What shall I say more than I have inferr’d? Remember whom you are to cope withal; -
A sort of vagabonds, rascals and runaways,
A scum of Bretons, and base lackey peasants,
Whom their o’er-cloyed country vomits forth
To desperate ventures and assured destruction.
You sleeping safe, they bring to you unrest;
You having lands, and blest with beauteous wives,
They would distrain the one, distain the other.
And who doth lead them but a paltry fellow,
Long kept in Bretagne at our mother’s cost?
A milk-sop, one that never in his life
Felt so much cold as over shoes in snow? Let’s *whip* these *stragglers* o’er the seas again; (V, iii, my emphasis)

He develops a nationalistic speech, in which he presents the enemies as inferior and contemptible for the simple fact that they belong to a different ethnic group, that, unlike the British, is idle, mercenary, and base. Moreover, these unworthy soldiers are led by an unimportant individual (in comparison with himself, a king) who is a coward, ignoring the chivalric code of honour, respect and courage, and who proves now ungrateful to Richard’s family. The appeal to the soldier’s material interest is not uttered in the form of a promise, but in that of a warning: their current stable financial (and sentimental) life is in danger because of the locusts that are going to plunder their lands. However, one may say that Richard’s arguments are based on mere speculations (ethnic tension, national prejudice about the Britons’ superiority over others).

- *Henry V* – ideal of English patriotism, emblematic figure, exploited for propagandistic purposes during World War II by Winston Churchill

Once more unto the breach, dear friends, once more;
Or close the wall up with our English dead!
In peace there’s nothing so becomes a man
As modest stillness and humility;
But when the blast of war blows in our ears,
Then imitate the action of the tiger;
Stiffen the sinews, summon up the blood,
Disguise fair nature with hard-favoured rage: […]
On, on, you noble English,
Whose blood is fet from fathers of war-proof! –
Fathers that, like so many Alexanders,
Have in these parts from morn till even fought,
And sheathed their swords for lack of argument:
Dishonour not your mothers; now attest
That those whom you called fathers did beget you!
Be copy now to men of grosser blood,
And teach them how to war! – And you, good yeomen,
Whose limbs were made in England, show us here
The mettle of your pasture; let us swear
That you are worth your breeding: which I doubt not;
For there is none of you so mean and base,
That hath not noble lustre in your eyes.
    I see you stand like greyhounds in the slips,
Straining upon the start.
The game’s afoot:
Follow your spirit; and, upon this charge,
THE COMEDIES

Functions: philosophical and moral (the fight against evil, love as supreme victory); entertainment (singing, dancing, the clowns)

Themes: reconciliation through love, retribution, the victory of good over evil, initiation into beauty, truth, love, the powers of nature, the world of dreams

Periods: the early period, of great romanticism (1591-1594): virtuous, clever, and innocent women in love; transvestites, clowns, qui-pro-quo, miraculous rescuing, love, marriage: The Comedy of Errors, The Taming of the Shrew, A Midsummer Night’s Dream, Twelfth Night

- the middle period, lacking idealism (1597-1606): disgust for love and womanhood, dark or problem comedies – the transition towards the tragedies, influenced by Shakespeare’s biography (betrayed by the Dark Lady): All’s Well that Ends Well, Measure for Measure, Troilus and Cressida

- the late period, serenity and idealism (1609-1611): optimism, poetic language, imaginary lands, reconciliation, happiness: Pericles, Cymbeline, The Winter’s Tale, The Tempest

Sources: Plutarch (Cymbeline), and Plautus (The Comedy of Errors), Chaucer (Troilus and Cressida, Two Noble Kinsmen), Boccaccio (Troilus and Cressida, Two Noble Kinsmen), Renaissance pastorals (Twelfth Night, As You Like It), Neoplatonic philosophy (The Tempest)

Locations: Italian cities (Verona, Venice, Padua, Rome, Florence, Messina) or Italian territories (Sicily, Illyria), imaginary places (Bohemia by the seashore, a forest near Athens), in the middle of nature (the forest of Arden); the remoteness from contemporary London – a world of illusions, perfect happiness, fiction, imagination; the play-within-play (performances in the middle of the actual play: dumb shows, masques, plays, songs) reduplicates reality and takes the audience into an ineffable realm.

Genre and gender: women are main characters in comedies, with men being the objects of their affection, effeminate, passive characters, or comic appearances (Malvolio in Twelfth Night).

Female heroines as transvestites: Julia (The Two Gentlemen of Verona), Portia, Nerissa, Jessica (The Merchant of Venice), Rosalind (As You Like It), Viola (Twelfth
Night), Imogen (Cymbeline); the Amazons – Hippolyta (A Midsummer Night’s Dream), Hippolyta and Emilia (Two Noble Kinsmen).

The cross-dresser: Elizabethan and Jacobean set of prescriptions about appropriate dress in women: fashion and gender behaviour signalled through dress. Biology justifies fashion, hierarchies, private and public behaviour. Any attempt at cross-dressing is regarded as rebellion: letter at the Jacobean court in 1620 – the Bishop of London preaches against the danger of women taking over men’s roles once they have forgotten the limitations of their biology and, therefore, of their social influence: “to inveigh vehemently and bitterly in their sermons against the insolency of our women, and their wearing of broad brimmed hats, pointed doublets, their hair cut short or shorn, and some of them stiletoes or poignards”

- prescriptions about female conduct are supported by both the ideology of the Christian Church and the medical theories coming from the Greek Antiquity and the medieval period: women’s inferiority, sinfulness, and inherently dangerous nature, the necessity to keep them under control.

- an affront to the Bible, but also to society and nature: Hic Mulier and Haec Vir, concerned with the degree of freedom to be given to women in various social positions:

“Hic Mulier. How now? […] For since the days of

Adam women were never so Masculine: Masculine in their genders and whole generations, from the Mother to the youngest daughter; Masculine in Number, from one to multitudes; Masculine in Case, even from the head to the foot; Masculine in Mood, from bold speech to impudent action; and Masculine in Tense, for without redress they were, are, and will be still most Masculine, most mankind, and most monstrous. Are all women then turned Masculine? No, God forbid, there are a world full of holy thoughts, modest carriage, and severe chastity. To these let me fall on my knees and say, "You, oh you women, you good women, you that are in the fullness of perfection, you that are the crowns of nature's work, the complements of men's excellences, and the Seminaries of propagation; you that maintain the world, support mankind, and give life to society […] women, good women, modest women, true women -- ever young because ever virtuous, ever chaste, ever glorious.

- the man-woman is a monster: the vestimentary metamorphosis reveals parts of the body that have so far been hidden (the legs) and hides others that should be
visible, since they are regarded as women’s natural ornaments (the hair). Cross-dressing causes a severe alteration of the behaviour commonly prescribed to women both in public and in private: “for modest gestures, giant-like behaviors; and for women's modesty, all Mimic and apish incivility”.

The androgyne: Plato’s *Symposium* – the original wholeness of the human being, made up of both masculine and feminine principles. When the gods split the humans in two parts, segregating their sexes, they obliged them to seek for the lost half in order to regain the lost happiness – a metaphor of love.

- a humanist ideal: revival of ancient Greek athletic practices; the promotion of both male and female bodies; the disguise of actors interpreting female parts
- literary and philosophical functions: the theme of illusion and deception, fight for self-discovery, insertion into a plural social order, the existence of common moral features in men and women, the search for identity.

The hermaphrodite: law cases in the Middle Ages up to the 16th century in Europe in which hermaphrodites were trialed and sentenced to death and, after being burnt, their ashes were thrown away. In the 17th century, the medical research has already accepted the fact that being a hermaphrodite is not a sin one assumes willingly, but a physical anomaly and the individuals are no longer punished for their mere biological state. If, however, they take advantage of this duality, their physical monstrosity being doubled by the moral one, the courts are merciless. In England the climate was a bit different, homosexuality having an ambiguous status (James I was rumoured to be a sodomite); a certain pattern of public conduct in the men of early modern England: sentimental friendships; in the case of women, lesbianism was disturbing as it contradicted the notion that woman was made for man and thus, a female-only or female-directed activity was regarded as subversive; a possible disguise was cross-dressing: women dressed as men in order to join husbands or lovers who were travelling or who were in the army or navy.

Elizabeth’s model: “the body of a weak woman, but the heart and stomach of a king” (speech at Tilbury); the symbolism of the moon, but in combination with solar characteristics (“semper eadem”; “no rainbow without the sun”), the golden crown and sceptre, her evocation of the Greek goddess of hunting, Artemis.

The Amazon: a fearsome warlike tribe of women descended from the god of war, Ares, of Thracian origin; armed with silver axes and golden shields, endowed both
with feminine beauty and with a strong and fit body, capable of handling masculine martial outfit and of fighting on the battlefield; a matriarchal society, in which the army was choses from among the virgins (for the continuation of the Amazon race, the women mated with the neighboring Gargarian men for a short period of time each year, during the summer. Male children born from these unions were either sent to the Gargarians or killed. Female children were kept and raised by the Amazons); a tribe on the banks of the Amazon river, defeated by the Spanish conquistadores; a-mazos (without a breast): cutting off or burning one of their breasts in order to make better use of the bow and arrow and have more strength in the arm; “those who are not breast fed” (suggesting the Amazons’ lack of maternal preoccupation) or even “those with robust breasts”.

**TWELFTH NIGHT:** 1599, earlier themes and motifs; performed in February 1602.
-the twelfth night after Christmas (the Epiphany); performed on the occasion of the visit paid to the Queen by Italian ambassador Orsino, Duke of Bracciano; “what you will” – invitation to have fun, to enjoy the pleasures of love and imagination

- sources: Plautus’ *Menaechmi* and the anonymous Italian comedy *Gl’Ingannati* (1537).

- **Olivia**’s character is a comment on Queen Elizabeth’s refusal to get married; her falling in love with Sebastian – an indirect comment on Elizabeth’s alleged affair with Robert Dudley or a mere piece of advice for a monarch who, at her coronation, said: “I am married to England”; a rather worrying spectacle for the Protestant doctrine, which praises marriage and for the social mentality in general which regards female celibacy as an anomaly, marriage being the only accepted normality, which could be opposed only by a life of piety in a nunnery. For rich or aristocratic women, celibacy was, however, sometimes a solution if they wanted financial independence and a legal identity – if they were not represented by a man in the family they could sue and be sued themselves – but the chances of survival in bad times were much worse for single women.

- **Viola vs. Rosalind:** disguise at the Court vs. disguise in the wilderness; the page vs. an outlaw (Robin Hood, Sherwood and the myth of the merry England); Viola’s final submission (she is not proposed by Orsino until she goes and changes her male clothes into a lady’s attire:

  Cesario, come;
For so you shall be, while you are a man;
But when in other habits you are seen,
Orsino’s mistress and his fancy’s queen. (V, i)

vs. Rosalind’s freedom of choice (she decides herself when to reveal her real identity in front of the others and give up her male outfit); Viola’s choice of a socially limited male disguise (a servant at the court) vs. Rosalind’s choice of a liberating costume, in the middle of nature, away from the constraints of court etiquette.
THE MERCHANT OF VENICE – a cosmopolitan republic: many ethnicities co-existed peacefully (one of the few places in Eastern Europe where Jews were still allowed – expelled from England, France, and Spain in the 13th-14th centuries), and were given chances to improve their social status (Othello, although an African, becomes the leader of the Venetian army); women enjoyed relative freedom (the only place where women artists could organize meetings and make their creations known to the public; Emilia gives proto-feminist speeches when Desdemona lets herself molested by her husband); leniency towards homosexuality (Antonio)

- Shakespeare had probably never seen a Jew, with the exception of the Maranos (Portuguese Jews reputed for being quack doctors), but was familiar with cliches about them from Geoffrey Chaucer and Christopher Marlowe: sly, dangerous, greedy murderers; historical fact: since Christians were not allowed to be usurers and Jews were not allowed to possess land, the Jews embraced the profession of money-lenders.

- Shylock asks for Antonio’s life in exchange for the money he owes him:
  
  The pound of flesh which I demand of him
  
  Is dearly bought, 'tis mine, and I will have it.
  
  If you deny me, fie upon your law!
  
  There is no force in the decrees of Venice. (IV, I)

- The Jew’s symbolic cannibalism: a sign of difference, cannibalism being read as the supreme form of savagery, racial and religious Otherness (he is similar with Caliban, the savage of the New World, whose name is a pun reminding of man-eating practices regarded as the supreme crime in the eyes of Christians); Otherness can be seen at the level of the skin – physical stereotypes which stipulate that Jews have red hair, hooked noses, and a peculiar smell.

- The Jew’s revenge for having been discriminated and humiliated; the first egalitarian speech in literature:
  
  He hath disgraced me, and hinder’d me half a million; laught at my losses, mockt at my gains, scorn’d my nation, thwarted my bargains, cooled my friends, heated mine enemies: and what’s his reason? I am a Jew. Hath not a Jew eyes? Hath not a Jew hands, organs, dimensions, senses, affections, passions? Fed with the same food [except the pork Shylock has a dispute with Antonio and Bassanio over, as part of their older religious and social dispute], hurt with the same weapons,
subject to the same diseases, heal’d by the same means, warm’d and cool’d by the same winter and summer, as the Christian is? If you prick us, do we not bleed? If you tickle us, do we not laugh? If you poison us, do we not die? And if you wrong us, shall we not revenge? If we are like you in the rest, we will resemble you in that. If a Jew wrong a Christian, what is his humility? Revenge: if a Christian wrong a Jew, what should his sufferance be by a Christian example? Why, revenge. The villainy you teach me, I will execute; and it shall go hard but I will better the instruction. (III, i)

**MEASURE FOR MEASURE:** dark comedy, commentary on social and political abuses, on the corruption and perversion of the legal system, hypocrisy, the contrast between appearance (public image) and essence (the individual’s character).

- Angelo – the man who takes advantage of power in order to obtain the favours of a lady, Isabella
  - Isabella – a hypocrite who wants to become a nun but does not understand basic Christian notions such as compassion and self-sacrifice
  - Mariana – introduces the motif of the bed trick (*Much Ado about Nothing*, *Cymbeline*), a meditation on the (im)morality of sexuality, marital love, adultery
  - Claudio – has a moral revelation that could be also read nowadays in medical terms:
    
    
    …Our natures do pursue,
    
    Like rats that ravin down their proper bane,

    A thirsty evil; and when we drink we die. (I, ii)

For Claudio, sexuality is an evil that belongs both to the act (in this case, the individual would normally be able to make a moral choice if he wanted to) and to nature itself (where the individual is regarded as a helpless toy in the hands of both destiny and his own tyrannical body). L.C. Knights analyzes Claudio’s gloomy lines in these terms:

The illustrative comparison has, we notice, three stages: (i) rats ‘ravin down’ poison, (ii) which makes them thirsty, (iii) so they drink and – the poison taking effect – die. But the human parallel has, it seems, only two stages: prompted by desire, men quench their ‘thirsty evil’ in the sexual act and – by the terms of the new proclamation – pay the penalty of death.
- desire and eating/drinking habits function in the same way – too much of any of them can have dangerous consequences for one’s health, can cause serious disorders, and such complications may lead to the ‘patient’s’ death; Claudio’s lamentations establish a contrast between the sinner’s irregular, chaotic life, which poisons his body (we can argue that some contemporary vices such as smoking or drug consumption are literally poisonous) and the ‘father’ (the saint, the monk, the priest) who are not only the earthly instances, who regulate and condemn sin, but stick to a regular life that, with numerous strict rules, discipline the body, thus keeping it healthy and, ultimately, alive. Contemporary theories also try to persuade people of the importance of diet and physical exercise, which can prolong their lives with a couple of years.

- If too irregular a life can affect one’s health and moral integrity, too regular a life can also be dangerous. Isabella’s devotion will consist of too much discipline and fasting, but not enough sisterly love and self-sacrifice. Isabella’s refusal to offer her virginity in exchange for her brother’s life has been more often criticized than admired, although it is a nun’s duty to obey the rules of her order. Saint Clare’s order doesn’t allow its practitioners to have a look at men – not to mention having an affair with them; however, most critics regard Isabella’s chastity as a ‘problem’, one of the main disturbing factors in the plot.

- The Duke’s presence – regulating: when he returns, order is restored; similarly to Orsino, he solves the conflicts and annihilates the disturbing element (he marries chaste Isabella)
THE SHAKESPEAREAN TRAGEDY

- Aristotle’s *Poetics*: tragedy is a violation and reassertion of order, producing catharsis (cleansing the soul) through pity and fear.

- A.C. Bradley about Shakespeare’s tragedy: a story of exceptional calamity leading to the death of a man of high rank; it contains uniquely interesting events, impressive because they imply a disaster of some kind, ending up in the hero’s death or in multiple deaths; the decay of kings and princes is a spectacular moral lesson for audiences, much more interesting than the death of a beggar or an ordinary citizen; the Elizabethans are taught that the wrong line of conduct leads to the supreme punishment.

- **Suspense or dramatic tension**: one of the greatest tasks a playwright is facing in order to capture and maintain the audience’s attention; it is created when the audience is uncertain about what is going to happen or, on the contrary, when the audience is given more information than the characters themselves have, the playwright allowing the public to see dangers that the characters are unaware of, a situation that creates anxiety in the witness of the tragic scene.

- **Tragic flaw**: the main character, the tragic hero, undergoes a series of misfortunes which lead to his downfall; he passes from a state of happiness to one of despair because he has a weakness in himself which destroys the balance of the world around; the hero is an important personality who is a mixture of good and bad, the audience understanding his weakness and feeling pity for him because his misfortunes are greater than he deserves; the hero is doomed from the very beginning; his destiny is generally controlled by destiny, death being the only escape he can find from pain and suffering.

- **Soliloquy**: a theatrical convention in which a character speaks aloud to himself; the character may not necessarily be alone on the stage, but it is assumed that other characters don’t hear the hero’s words; the playwright uses the soliloquy to convey directly to the audience the character’s motives, intentions and his innermost feelings and thoughts; it increases the dramatic impact of a scene.

- **Dramatic functions of tragedy**: the functions of comedies and chronicle plays (information, entertainment, etc.) are replaced by more profound psychological, metaphysical, religious insights. Shakespeare insists on the moral nature of
choice: at a certain moment, people are forced to make a decision, which reveals
man’s giving up power and freedom (he is free before he makes the choice;
afterwards, he becomes a victim of his own decision and must obey destiny). A
wrong choice always entails personal and even collective destruction. **Death** in
the tragedies is a negative, destructive force, but it has a strong retributive
function.

- **Major themes: Evil.** Spiritual inner forces are in conflict in the hero’s
  consciousness. If instincts prevail, they generate evil, a great disturbance at the
  individual or family level, but also with universal, cosmic consequences, the outer
  nature being a projection of man’s inner nature. Evil is associated with
  unkindness, jealousy, envy, vice, hate, chaos, monstrosity, which all engender
  **Fear.** This negative, destructive feeling often motivates villains (Iago) to tempt
  and destroy the main characters and sometimes it is transmitted to the audience as
  well, who suffer alongside with the characters on the stage. Special effects and
  settings can increase the impression of fear. Characters in the tragedies are also
guilty of a major **Sin.**

Heroes and villains can both be sinners, consciously or against their will. Through
their sins, they can destroy their enemies (Iago against Othello), but also the
people they love and who stand by them all through the play (Othello against
Cassio and Desdemona). Sinners can also be sinned against, their own unjust
deeds being doubled by other characters’ wrong actions that affect them (King
Lear and his two elder daughters). However, **Love** is not entirely absent in this
gloomy picture. Sometimes it helps heroes understand their sins and repent for
them before they die (Lear about Cordelia); sometimes it is love that engenders
tragedy and destroys the equilibrium the characters enjoyed so far (Romeo and
Juliet, Antony and Cleopatra).

- **Plot:** the tragedy consists of the following stages: the exposition (the context and
  the characteristics of the main hero are disclosed), the conflict (the hero is tempted
to sin), the crisis (the hero is presented committing his sin and the immediate
consequences of his actions become visible), the climax (the sins are disclosed and
the moment has come for both villain and tragic hero to pay), and the denouement
(the final resolution of the plot, most often synonymous with the hero’s death).
The events have a gradual and tensioned evolution. Parallel plots can complicate the story furthermore, usually reflecting the main themes and motifs of the main plot (they may be secondary plots with secondary characters who have a more remote connection with the main characters [the Gloucester family subplot in *King Lear*], or plays-within-the-play, which are frame stories that somehow reflect the realities of the main plot the characters are unaware of or afraid to talk about directly [the play organized by Hamlet at the court, with professional actors in the roles of his mother and murderous uncle]). The oscillation of conflicts alternate with rises and falls in tension, necessary to relieve the audience from the great pressure of the important tragic scenes.

Comic scenes are skillfully inserted, with fools or lower characters (the gravediggers in *Hamlet*, the drunken porter in *Macbeth*) performing a comic part, meant to relax the audience before or immediately after a moment of great tragic effect (a murder, a suicide). Comic parts in comedies always come in prose (Juliet’s nurse in *Romeo and Juliet*).

- **Shakespearean innovations in tragedy**: the tragic hero with a flaw (*hamartia*) is Shakespeare’s contribution to the tragic genre. At first, the characters move in a world of harmony, justice, beauty, where everybody is assigned their right place. But a distortion makes the main characters unable to master their instincts and avoid sin. Irresolution, credulity, pride, ambition, in combination with power and intelligence, attain a terrible force that destroys order at all human and cosmic levels.

- **The heroes undergo a cycle of change**: the **delineation** of the main character, initially depicted as noble, honest, strong (Othello is a famous general, Hamlet is a refined intellectual, Lear is a wise and old monarch, Macbeth is a brave soldier and the most loyal vassal of his king, Antony is the most important representative of the Roman civilization); the **antithesis**, or the hero’s evolution into his opposite, symbolically announced by a journey he makes (Othello goes from Venice to Cyprus, Hamlet returns from the University of Wittenberg to Elsinore, in Denmark, Lear moves to Dover, Macbeth returns to Scotland from Norway, Antony goes to Egypt); the **synthesis**, or the recovery of his initial virtuous nature, together with the discovery he makes as an epiphany or illumination. Even in
death, the hero learns a lesson that is transmitted to the audience as a moral teaching.

- **The foil characters**: they have antiphonal effects, each hero having a character, who reflects his main features and behaviour. The fools have an important function, being the only persons who, although situated at the lowest level in the social hierarchy, are allowed to tell the king the truth and criticize his mistakes. The villains can be situated very high in the Chain of Being (Claudius is the brother of a king and later a king himself), somewhere in the middle (Iago has a relatively important function in the Venetian army), or very low (Edmund, in *King Lear*, is a bastard).

- Tragedies also deal with modern themes – **discrimination**. Othello’s jealousy and fury cannot be properly explained without his inferiority complex and insecurity caused by his marginal position in the Venetian society. Cleopatra, as a non-European monarch, is regarded as wild, dangerous, a whore who manipulates noble Antony for her selfish ambitions.
HAMLET

DATE: First mentioned in 1602; four Quarto versions: in 1603, 1604, 1611, 1612. Today we read a combination of the four, created by editors.

SOURCES: Thomas Kyd’s *Hamlet*; Saxo Gramaticus’ *Historia Danica*; François de Belleforest’s *Histoires Tragiques*; real events: Mary Stuart killed her husband Darnley together with Bothwell, whom she married later; the Earl of Essex was killed by his wife and by Robert Dudley.

THE PLOT: a detective story – finding the murderer

- a political play: tyranny and dictatorship; madness as a form of escaping an ideological prison and asserting one’s freedom of expression, thought, movement; Polonius, Rosencranz and Guilderstern are spies, political apparatchiks, the king’s instruments

- a revenge tragedy: both Hamlet and Laertes seek to avenge the deaths of their fathers and are ready to lose their lives for this

- a philosophical play: life and death, the relevance of human acts, the importance of action and meditation, the role of the intellectual in society, order and chaos, individual and collective responsibility, the existence of afterlife

- a psychological play: Hamlet’s and Ophelia’s madness as a clinical description of causes, symptoms, manifestations of depression, hallucinations, schizophrenia, sexual frustration, hysteric, manias, dementia

- the exposition: Hamlet’s first soliloquy (I, ii) introduces the hero’s weariness of life; he returns from Wittemberg – a scholar, different from his father, a typical medieval, military king

- the conflict: Hamlet meets the ghost, plans to stage the story of the murder with professional actors, Claudius gives himself away, Hamlet is unable to kill him while he is praying, he kills Polonius by mistak and convinces Gertrude of his madness

- the climax: the graveyard scene, helping Hamlet to understand that death is only a natural transition towards a new form of existence

- the dénouement: most characters die, Horatio, an intellectual like Hamlet, is left to tell the story and extract a lesson from it, and Fortinbras (fort, “strong” [Fr.]; bras, “arm” [Fr.]; brass – an unyielding metal) remains to rule the country in an
authoritarian, though not dictatorial manner, and to transform the chaos caused both by Claudius’ tyranny and by Hamlet’s weakness into order and a healthy body politic

**HAMLET:** a young man with no name of his own and uncertain family identity (a son and a nephew to both Gertrude and Claudius); uncertain age – a student, but one of the gravediggers’ remark in act V suggests he might be thirty (Shakespeare considers a very crude young man to be unlikely to undergo such a complexity of thoughts and emotions).

- his family relations: Hamlet is often considered to be suffering from the Oedipus complex; a very tense relationship with his future in-laws; a problematic relationship with his fiancee: his rejection can be regarded as a sacrifice he makes in the name of his father or as selfishness

- his madness: although Hamlet feigns madness to fulfill his plan, he undergoes a traumatic psychological evolution, from melancholy, disgust, misogyny, to cynicism, hatred, pessimism. At the beginning he is a typical Renaissance man, believing in the noble nature of humankind, but then he looks at humanity in a modern manner:

> “What a piece of work is man! how noble in reason! how infinite in faculty! in form and moving how express and admirable! in action how like an angel! in apprehension how like a god! the beauty of the world! the paragon of animals! And yet, to me, what is this quintessence of dust? Man delights not me; no, nor woman neither, though by your smiling you seem to say so” (II, ii).

- his lack of action: Hamlet’s strong meditative inclinations, his intellectual side prevent him from “taking arms against a sea of troubles”; his dissatisfactions remain considered on a passive level; however, this passiveness has also been regarded in a positive manner: Goethe regards Hamlet as a typically romantic hero, an idealist afraid of failure; Coleridge believes his scholarly training prevent him from putting an end to the speculative habits of the mind; Jan Kott reads *Hamlet* in a political context, regarding the hero as a representative of the intelligentsia victimized by the totalitarian political system.

**OPHELIA:** a victim of her father’s authority and her fiance’s weakness. According to Alexandru Olaru, Ophelia is suffering from a severe depression, having a psychotic reaction to Hamlet’s rejection. This is manifested in her sickly appearance described
by the courtiers, her confusion and delirium in her meaningless speech, her nervous
gestures and her apparent desire to commit suicide, proved by the euphoria with
which she meets her death.
Artists regard her as the perfect embodiment of the victimized woman – especially
during the Victorian period, when romantic suffering was a common literary theme
(Clara in Dickens’ *David Copperfield*, caroline Helstone in Charlotte Brontë’s
*Shirley*): fragile, very youthful heroines whose victimization is announced by an
extremely slim body with the signs of anorexia nervosa on it: the pre-Raphaelite
painters, J.W Waterhouse, Ernest Hebert.
DATE: 1604; two printed variants, the Quarto version of 1622 and the Folio Version of 1623, both derived from playhouse manuscripts. The latter is 160 lines shorter than the former.


BLACKNESS: Margo Hendricks writes about the reader’s awareness of the existence of racial issues in *Othello*: “Bentley’s commentary is striking in its near total inattention to Othello’s skin colour: Bentley’s only comment about the matter is to state, ‘Othello is a man of action whose achievement was immediately obvious to an Elizabethan audience, in spite of his exotic colour and background, because of his position as the commanding general for the greatest commercial power of the preceding century’. When so much has been made of Othello’s hue, Bentley’s lack of commentary on the place of colour and race in the play seemed singularly odd. Yet it was not until much later that I considered Bentley’s omission to be an astute stratagem to redirect the reader’s attention and gaze away from Othello’s colour and to his stature as a warrior, and to the complex moral dimension that status entails in Shakespeare’s tragedy”.

The spectacle of negritude on the Shakespearean stage was not something completely newfangled: exotic shows and pageants whose *pièce de résistance* were the black bodies (at James VI’s wedding in 1589, four black men danced naked in the snow). Between 1585 and 1692 the European audience could admire hordes of “Negroe boys” or “blackamoors” in moving allegories in the streets of London and the aristocracy could enjoy less crowded performances on their own estates.

The display of people from Africa or the New World is motivated by curiosity and profit – public ignorance, thirst for novelty, oddity, and cruelty;

ISLAMISM: the presence at the English court of Abdul Guahid, the Moorish ambassador. He visited England over the winter of 1600-1601. As Shakespeare’s acting company was called on to give entertainment at court over the Christmas, it is probable he might have played before Abdul Guahid.

Links with the “Barbary”: 
1. As England’s trade links expanded, so did connections with the non-Christian world, particularly those parts, which could satisfy the English craving for anything sweet. (An early shipment of goods from Morocco contained 300 tons of refined sugar, 220 tons of molasses, 1400 pounds of sweetmeats, 600 pounds of marmalade, 6 tons of dates, and 30 tons of almonds.)

2. Renaissance Europe had a culture wrongly analyzed by most historians as independent. On the contrary, it interacted and even fused with both the Byzantine and the Arabian one, mixing its own renaissance with their respective ‘renaissances’. The European cultural elite was very much aware of the Arabian culture and influenced by it - the magic practices.

3. Both England and Morocco had reasons to undermine Spanish power, leading to a confluence of political, as well as trade interests, and Elizabeth fostered contacts with the ruler described in contemporary chronicles as “Hamet, King of Mauritania Tingitana”, but better known to history as Sultan Ahmed El Mansour Dahbi (Abdul Guahid was coming from Mauretania, just like Othello).

- Moors were often depicted as having similar features with the black people: big heads, thick lips, great sexual appetite.

- numerous medieval romances about conversion express a cultural anxiety fostered ever since the time of the crusades. The Islam is not only near, but it is also unmanageable and dangerous.

- the fascination with the East (in 20 years, between 1587 and 1607, about twenty English plays had ‘Turkish’ characters) is justified by the terror Islam exercised upon the European subconscious.

- the Moor’s major enemies: Iago and Roderigo; a hint at a specific dimension of racism in pre-modern and early modern Europe. Roderigo’s role: that of drawing more special attention to the national identity of the Moor’s enemy: Spanish, a reminder that modern racism is mainly a Spanish heritage.

- Limpieza de sangre, the purity of blood, was an ideological excuse for the expulsion of Jews from Spain, a political move dictated mainly by economic interests.
- Iago (James): the name of the saint (worshipped at Santiago de Compostela) who encouraged the Spaniards in the 11th century battles against the Arabs (Santiago Matamoros).

- Roderigo: the figure of a medieval Spaniard fighting against the Arabs (El Cid). Therefore, a Moorish Othello having a Spanish Iago and a Spanish Roderigo as friends he trusts more than his wife, may have been, for an audience aware of these connections, a dubious image.

- the last Moorish wars in Spain had been fought under the sign of a cruzada that reminded of the knightly traits that had shaped the medieval initiative. The Spanish novel developed in this climate: the pagan enemy, the protagonist of pasos honrosos: the ‘Saracen’ was the target, the enemy of the cross, the metaphysical enemy - a presence, in the collective imagination, both threatening and familiar.
MACBETH

DATE: between 1603-1606 for court performance, dedicated to James I – a descendant of Banquo (he was of Scottish origin) and interested in the science of magic

SOURCE: Raphael Holinshed’s Chronicles of England, Scotland and Ireland (1587): Macbeth was a valiant soldier; George Buchanan’s History of Scotland (1582): Macbeth was “a man of penetrating genius, a high spirit, unbounded ambition, and, if he had possessed moderation, was worthy of any command however great; but in punishing crimes he exercised a severity, which, exceeding the bounds of laws, appeared oft to degenerate into cruelty” (admiration and realism)

THE PLAY: only 2,100 lines (the shortest, probably some parts were cut out, omitted, or censored); some scenes may have been added by Shakespeare’s followers (the porter scene, II, iii, or Hecate’s part – an allusion to a song in Th. Middleton’s The Witch); the compact and quick plot given by the hasty succession of events; an inspiration for modern playwrights and film directors (Eugene Ionesco’s Macbett, Akira Kurosawa’s Throne of Blood).

THEMES: all-pervasive evil, a social and psychological disease linked to temptation, sin, retribution; evil is generated by ambition, selfishness, and the couple’s innate cruelty (Macbeth’s manner of killing his enemies, lady Macbeth’s violent speech about sacrificing her own baby); together with confusion and fear, evil becomes a very dangerous entity:

1 Witch: When shall we three meet again
     In thunder, lightning, or in rain?
2 Witch: When the hurlyburly’s done,
     When the battle’s lost and won…
All: Fair is foul, and foul is fair:
     Hover through the fog and filthy air (I, i)
a political play: the tragic fall of a country ruled by a dictator: “O nation miserable! With an untitled tyrant, bloody-sceptered” (Macduff, IV, iii) – the legitimacy of power, the influence of the sick body politic on the people

a play of atmosphere: darkness – the crucial moments of the play take place during the night or in places daylight cannot reach: the murders, the sleep-walking, the ghosts’ appearance, Macbeth’s visit to the witches’ cave; blood is a predominant organic element

a poetic play: abstract notions are combined with terrifying gestures to increase the impression of horror and suspense: treason, suspicion, shame, obsession, madness, illness, sleeplessness; on the other hand, good is symbolized by milk (babies, motherhood, positive femininity), loyalty and duty (Macduff’s sacrificing his own family for political and social justice)

a philosophical play: the notion of ambiguity is massively exploited – Banquo: “So foul and fair a day I have not seen”, I, iii; “You should be women,/And yet your beards forbid me to interpret/That you are so”, I,iii.

a psychological play: a study in fear, a feeling opposing ambition and courage – at the beginning Macbeth is promoted for his courage on the battlefield (the king calls him repeatedly “brave Macbeth”, “valiant cousin”, but his wife finds feminine characteristics in her husband’s personality when he hesitates to fulfill his ambition

this feeling, combined with hesitation, reluctance, doubts and remorse, makes Macbeth more humane and plausible from a psychological point of view than Richard III (a man rather than a monster)

Macbeth is afraid of those who may rival him, but mostly of the influence of the witches, which also implies the fear of his own potentialities:

This supernatural soliciting
Cannot be ill, cannot be good. If ill,
Why hath it given me earnest of success,
Commencing in a truth? I’m thane of Cawdor.
If good, why do I yield to that suggestion
Whose horrid image doth unfix my hair
And make my seated heart knock at my ribs,
Against the use of nature? Present fears
Are less than horrible imaginings” (I, iii)

- The tyrant forgets his fears only at the climax of his criminal career and expects the others to fear him (opposite to Richard III who starts being afraid only before the final battle): “I have almost forgot the taste of fears”, V, v; “What is thy name? – Thou’lt be afraid to hear it”, V, vi; his final courage is not that of the valiant gentleman at the beginning, but that of a trapped, enraged animal – a sign of moral debasement: “I cannot fly./But, bear-like, I must fight the course”, V, vii.

- **Foil characters:**
  - Duncan: the rightful King of Scotland, old, honourable, even humble in carrying his duties, trustful of the man he admires most in his army; Banquo is a great fighter, brave, but lacking cruelty; Macduff, who discovers the murder of Duncan, is a loyal vassal to the king, placing his duty above personal feelings; Malcolm, not born of a woman, is Macbeth’s main adversary;
  - Lady Macbeth is also a foil character: her function is to push Macbeth into accepting to change his courage on the battlefield into evil action; Macbeth loves and respects his wife as a partner who can share power with him: “what greatness is promised thee”, I, v)

- **Women’s position in the medieval world of courtly values:** Lady Macbeth flouts the laws of hospitality, which, as a woman, she should embody; her desire to give up her femininity and procreative gift is a blasphemy; her evil nature is of Senecan influence (images of physical violence abound); the lesson is that women should not aim at the advantages of the public life because they don’t belong there (a world of physical strength, stamina, military courage – male attributes); it is also relevant that this world – contaminated by an unfeminine woman – should be saved by a man not born of a woman (a man who was not born and raised under feminine influence, be it good or bad).

- **Stylistic implications of the play:**
  - nature is not a beautiful, picturesque setting, but a grotesque realm: the raven is hoarse, the owl shrieks, the cricket cries.
  - Sacred symbols are inverted: the cauldron (hospitality and black magic), babes (divine and human sacrifice, but also cruelty and selfishness, birth and death at the same time), the table and the feast (conviviality, friendship, equality, but also
betrayal, plotting, exploitation), Birnam wood (a symbol of spring, positive nature, rebirth, but also of war and death)

- Three settings: Inverness (sweet airs, a happy family), Forres (the royal palace, cold, formal, with obsessions and fears), Dunsinane (a bunker of war, loneliness, death)

- Shocking imagery: life is a tale told by an idiot, the mind is full of scorpions, dashing babies’ brains out, the earth is shaking with fever, Macbeth has killed sleep, etc.

- The play most abundant in soliloquies: confessional, psychological, the character is an introvert, the author obtains a permanent oscillation between the formal outside of appearances and the profound, chaotic inside of a tormented spirit.

Enter a PORTER. Knocking within.

PORTER: Here’s a knocking indeed! If a man were porter of hell-gate, he should have old turning the key – [knock]. Knock, knock, knock! Who’s there, i’th’name of Belzebub? Here’s a farmer that hang’d himself on th’expectation of plenty: come in time; have napkins enow about you; here you’ll sweat for’t. [knock]. Knock, knock! Who’s there, i’th’other devils’ name? Faith, here’s an equivocator that could swear in both the scales against either scale; who committed treason enough for God’s sake, yet could not equivocate to heaven: O, come in, equivocator. – [knock]. Knock, knock, knock! Who’s there? Faith, here’s an English tailor come hither, for stealing out of a French hose: come in, tailor; here you may roast your goose. [knock] Knock, knock, knock; never at quiet! What are you? – But this place is too cold for hell. I’ll devil-
porter it no further: I had thought to have let in some of all professions, that go the
primrose way to th’everlasting bonfire. – [knock] Anon, anon! I pray you, remember
the porter.
KING LEAR

DATE: first staged in 1606, but probably written earlier; nowadays there are two printed versions: the 1608 Quarto and the 1623 Folio.

SOURCES: Holinshed’s Chronicles of England, Scotland and Ireland (1587) and the anonymous The True Chronicle History of King Lear and His Three Daughters (1594)

THE PLAY: set in Britain before the Norman Conquest: a glorious past that promotes only the purely Anglo-Saxon and Celtic origins without any French interference; an illo tempore, fairy tale dimension.

• the pre-French stage in English history – Britain as the Heptarchy (the seven small kingdoms that had been formed after the Angles and the Saxons had settled here in co-habitation with the Celts); a period of political stability, of economic and cultural development: the creation of the great epical poems promoted by local minstrels, scops, promoting local values (the feasts of the “mead-hall”, the total allegiance of heroes to their lord, funeral “pyres”) and the Northern Pantheon of gods: Beowulf, The Battle of Maldon, Deor’s Lament; royalty associated with two heroic figures – King Arthur (probably a real Celtic prince) and Alfred the Great (the first king who united some of the English territories and probably the first enlightened monarch in the history of mankind)

• the “once upon a time” impression of the story, stronger than in the case of any other play by Shakespeare: the magic number three (Goneril, Regan, Cordelia), the sheer contrast between good and bad children (Lear’s daughters, Gloucester’s sons), the figure of the good, wise, old king with a white beard who is victimized by the people he trusted; Sarea in bucate; individuals transformed into morality virtues (Cordelia, Edgar, Kent, the fool), vices (Gonerli, Regan, Edmund), Everyman (Lear); the idea that universal sins, thirst for power, flattery, ingratitude, adultery, generate universal suffering at all social levels (for a king and for a simple nobleman)

THE IMPACT OF THE PLAY: not very popular in earlier periods; A.C. Bradley found it “too huge for the stage”; in the 18th century Nahum Tate changed its ending; too many characters; absurd events (Gloucester’s blinding, the division of Lear’s kingdom); the unfair death of Cordelia (acknowledged by Holinshed’s Chronicle); the
play became more popular in the 20th century, being also adapted for the big screen (Peter Brook’s 1971 film insisting on the poetic, lyrical side of the play; Grigori Kosintzev’s 1970 film, focusing on social and political aspects, introducing a collective character, the starved mob, to indicate the negative impact of Lear’s foolishness, vanity, and selfishness).

LACK OF MODERATION: a sin that affects Lear from the very beginning: his wish that everybody should witness his daughters’ declarations of love; his dream that he is the most beloved man in the world; his claims to keep the appearances of royalty (the 100 men) even after he gave up royalty; his exaggerated expectations from his elder daughters; his despair in the middle of nature; his refusal to reconcile himself with Cordelia’s death.

LEAR’S POSITIVE SIDE: he has a generous, unsuspicious nature and yearns for harmony; his suffering is noble and intense and his experience of “nothingness” is one of the most profound experiences of pessimism

- the storm scene: Lear transforms himself into a character full of grandeur, his rage and despair embellishing the old man’s personality:
  Blow, winds, and crack your cheeks! Rage, blow,
  You cataracts and hurricanes, spout
  Till you have drenched our speeches, drowned the cocks!
  You sulph’rous and thought-executing fires,
  Vaunt-couriers of oak-cleaving thunderbolts,
  Singe my white head; and thou all-shaking thunder,
  Strike flat the thick rotundity o’th’ world,
  Crack nature’s moulds, all germens spill at once
  That makes ingrateful man. (III, ii)

- a process of initiation through suffering: he admits his mistakes in humility: “I am a very foolish, fond old man” (IV, vi); learns to care for the others and love them without waiting for anything in exchange: “How dost my boy? Art thou cold? […] Poor fool and knave, I have one part in my heart/That’s sorry yet for thee” (III, ii); learns to pray for the poor: “I’ll pray and then I’ll sleep” (III, iv).

NATURE AND IMAGERY
the impact of the wicked daughters; their evil nature places them on a lower level on the Chain of Being (many animal references for Goneril and Regan, as for Richard III: 133 separate mentionings of 64 animals: serpents, tigers, monkeys, dogs, Lions, bears, horses, worms, pelicans, flies, rats, mice, etc.)

- nature is an important symbolic element, mentioned 40 times: personified as a judge or as a goddess (a pagan reminiscence); green nature vs. red nature (peace and harmony vs. jungle and chaos), outside nature vs. inside nature (the storm illustrates Lear’s rage and the intensity of his suffering and madness)

- the isotopy of sight: blindness and illumination: “Old fond eyes,/ Beweep this cause again I’ll pluck ye out/ And cast you, with the water that you lose,/To temper clay” (I, iv)

**THE FOOL:** the only character who sees clearly from the very beginning and is allowed to talk; while the king goes mad, the fool (whose job is that of feigning madness) becomes more rational and balanced; the roles are reversed:

Fools had ne’er less grace in a year,
For wise men have grown foppish,
And know not how their wits to wear,
Their manners are so apish […]
Then for sudden joy did weep,
And I for sorrow sung,
That such a king should play bo-peep
And go the fools among. (I, iv)

L.C. Knights about the fool’s role:

“The Fool’s meaning, however, lies not merely in what he says but in the way he says it – those riddling snatches which partly reflect the moral confusion of the world, but whose main function is to cast doubt on such certainties as the world (including the audience) thinks it possesses. Not only, therefore, is he an agent of clarification, prompting Lear towards the recognition of bitter truths; it is he who forces the question, What is wisdom? And what is folly? It is through him, therefore, that we come to see more clearly the sharp distinction between those whose wisdom is purely for themselves and those foolish ones — Kent, Gloucester, Cordelia, and the Fool and the sympathies that are quite outside the scope of any prudential calculus. Like
Gloucester, though in a very different way, the Fool is directed towards an affirmation".
ANTONY AND CLEOPATRA

DATE: probably written in 1606-1607, printed in the First Folio of 1623.

SOURCE: North’s translation of Plutarch

THEMES: the triumph of love over worldly chaos; a tragedy and a romance at the same time, announcing Shakespeare’s style of the last plays (The Tempest, Winter’s Tale)

- a tragedy of ruin and death: the collapse of an empire, the ruin of a general, the destruction of a great queen; although victims of fortune, their deaths are regarded as glorious and transfigurating

- a philosophical play: the metaphysics of sensuality and seduction (defined by Jean Baudrillard as the supreme form of manipulation or by Marsilio Ficino as erotic magic, which puts the senses to sleep)

• ROME AND EGYPT: the two extremes of the world
  - Rome: a cold society (war, plotting, politics, business, marriages out of interest)
  - Egypt: magic, love, sensuous femininity, but also dissolution

ANTONY: a middle-aged general, considered a pillar of the world; his flaw: letting himself transformed into a puppet.

- the consequences of his weakness and choice of the flesh: military errors, shameful defeat at Actium; but love doesn’t degrade Antony entirely: it makes him become “increasingly lofty and magnificent, great in boldness and beauty, greater still in defeat and in the face of death” (H. Fluchere)

• A woman of exceptional beauty that “beggars all description”, but also the creature who has made a puppet out of the powerful Roman general, a whore, but also a witch; an “unparalleled lass” – not a feminine character like any other who can easily be portrayed by a teenage boy (Shakespeare has the Queen herself deplore the fact that “some squeaking boy” would reduce her greatness to the attributes of a mere whore).

• Cleopatra in front of the public eye like Elizabeth: not the woman, but the monarch and goddess:

  The barge she sat in, like a burnished throne,
  Burned on the water; the poop was beaten gold; […]

...On each side her
Stood pretty dimpled boys, like smiling cupids,
With divers-coloured fans, whose wind did seem
To glow the delicate cheeks which they did cool,
And what they undid did. (II, ii)

- In *Parallel Lives of Noble Grecians and Romans*, Plutarch indicates Cleopatra’s negative influence on Antony prior to the two future lovers’ encounter:

> “Such being his temper, the last and crowning mischief that could befall him came in the love of Cleopatra, to awaken and kindle to fury passions that as yet lay still and dormant in his nature, and to stifle and finally corrupt any elements that yet made resistance in him of goodness and a sounds judgement. He fell into the snare thus”.

- the Roman messenger sent by Antony to the Egyptian queen introduces Antony to Cleopatra as a weak character: she should fear nothing from him, the gentlest and kindest of soldiers (a dubious trait in warriors, exploitable by Cleopatra, who trusts her own “attractions which, having formerly recommended her to Caesar and the young Cnaeus Pompey, she did not doubt might prove yet more successful with Antony”

- Cleopatra’s age: if the girl “ignorant of the world” managed to charm Caesar at the age of sixteen or seventeen, the woman at the age when beauty is “most splendid” and the intellect is in “full maturity” must be fully capable of seducing Caesar’s friend (contradicted by George Bernard Shaw in *Caesar and Cleopatra*:

> “But in Egypt sixteen is a riper age than it is in England. The childishness I have ascribed to her, as far as it is childishness of character and not lack of experience, is not a matter of years. It may be observed in our own climate at the present day in many women of fifty”.

- Plutarch’s reserve in front of Cleopatra’s beauty:

> “For her actual beauty, it is said, was not in itself so remarkable that none could be compared with her, or that no one could see her without being struck by it, but the contact of her presence, if you lived with her, was irresistible; the attraction of her person, joining with the charm of her conversation, and the character that attended all
she said or did, was something bewitching. It was a pleasure merely to hear the sound of her voice, with which, like an instrument of many strings, she could pass from one language to another”.
THE TEMPEST

DATE: 1611; Shakespeare’s last play before retiring to Stratford; the Epilogue
- a farewell to the theatre:
  
  Now my charms are all o’erthrown,
  And what strength I have’s mine own, - [...] 
  But release me from my bands
  With the help of your good hands:
  Gentle breath of yours my sails
  Must fill, or else my project fails
  Which was to please [...] 

CANNIBALISM: the supreme physical manifestation of Otherness: barbarous, shameful, against Christian moral prescriptions; cannibal feasts were said to be held in secluded spots where women and children were rarely admitted; the captives destined to be eaten were shut up in huts in front of the sanctuaries. There they were kept until the moment when they were sacrificed to the pagan gods.

- not exclusively a religious rite or the expression of an urge for revenge: it was also induced by a simple liking for human flesh that could impel a man to kill for no other reason than his desire for fresh meat (since man was the only large mammal whose flesh was available). In this case, women and children were the principal victims.

- ‘cannibals’ in early modern European records: Queen Isabel of Spain’s 1503 edict allowing the enslavement of all ‘cannibals’ in the newly discovered territories; a strong interest in ‘discovering’ cannibals all over the New World; the label succeeded rapidly in demonizing the entire native population, as well as in legally producing an economic benefit to European explorers and investors (Central and South America were long considered the home of cannibalism since the word derived from the Carib (=Canib) Indians who lived in the present-day Caribbean basin when Columbus arrived)

- the view on cannibalism was not unitary: the conflicts between the Catholic and the Protestant doctrine. While the Spanish described cannibalism as related to “mad, ravenous people tearing flesh”, the French saw it as highly ritualized and rule-governed (Michel de Montaigne Of Cannibals): the inherent goodness of the natives’ nature in comparison with the Europeans’ sophistication; natives on the side of nature and ‘us’ on the side of culture:
Now, to return to my subject, I find that there is nothing barbarous and savage in this nation, by anything that I can gather, excepting, that every one gives the title of barbarism to everything that is not in use in his own country. As, indeed, we have no other level of truth and reason, than the example and idea of the opinions and customs of the place wherein we live: there is always the perfect religion, there the perfect government, there the most exact and accomplished usage of all things. They are savages at the same rate that we say fruit are wild, which nature produces of herself and by her own ordinary progress; whereas in truth, we ought rather to call those wild, whose natures we have changed by our artifice, and diverted from the common order. In those, the genuine, most useful and natural virtues and properties are vigorous and sprightly, which we have helped to degenerate in these, by accommodating them to the pleasure of our own corrupted palate. And yet for all this our taste confesses a flavor and delicacy, excellent even to emulation of the best of ours, in several fruits wherein those countries abound without art or culture. Neither is it reasonable that art should gain the pre-eminence of our great and powerful mother nature. We have so surcharged her with the additional ornaments and graces we have added to the beauty and riches of her own works by our inventions, that we have almost smothered her; yet in other places, where she shines in her own purity and proper luster, she marvelously baffles and disgraces all our vain and frivolous attempts.

- Otherness: a subjective, conventional notion; savagery, associated with primordial nature, is essentially positive (a comment against the Spaniards)
- Cannibalism: the basic identification trait for the natives; attention to the major prejudice about non-European, non-white, non-Christian communities. Although the French philosopher argues scientifically that cannibalistic practices are rare and occasioned only by war or ritual circumstances, the image still remains:

Every one for a trophy brings home the head of an enemy he has killed, which he fixes over the door of his house. After having a long time treated their prisoners very well, and given them all the regales they can think of, he to whom the
prisoner belongs, invites a great assembly of his friends. They being come, he ties a rope to one of the arms of the prisoner, of which, at a distance, out of his reach, he holds the one end himself, and gives to the friend he loves best the other arm to hold after the same manner; which being done, they two, in the presence of all the assembly, despatch him with their swords. After that they roast him, eat him among them, and send some chops to their absent friends. They do not do this, as some think, for nourishment, as the Scythians anciently did, but as a representation of an extreme revenge; as will appear by this: that having observed the Portuguese, who were in league with their enemies, to inflict another sort of death upon any of them they took prisoners, which was to set them up to the girdle in the earth, to shoot at the remaining part till it was stuck full of arrows, and then to hang them, they thought those people of the other world (as being men who had sown the knowledge of a great many vices among their neighbors, and who were much greater masters in all sorts of mischief than they) did not exercise this sort of revenge without a meaning, and that it must needs be more painful than theirs, they began to leave their old way, and to follow this. I am not sorry that we should here take notice of the barbarous horror of so cruel an action, but that, seeing so clearly into their faults, we should be so blind to our own. I conceive there is more barbarity in eating a man alive, than when he is dead; in tearing a body limb from limb by racks and torments, that is yet in perfect sense; in roasting it by degrees; in causing it to be bitten and worried by dogs and swine (as we have not only read, but lately seen, not among inveterate and mortal enemies, but among neighbors and fellow-citizens, and, which is worse, under color of piety and religion), than to roast and eat him after he is dead.

- new European self-image: the discoveries in the 16th and 17th century (the populations on the four continents differ from one another) - instead of religious feelings, the European man is seduced by his physical, intellectual, and moral superiority.

- Josep Fontana: the new mirror has two sides: the first one, showing the racial difference, offers the figure of the ‘savage’; the second one, fundamental for a Eurocentric vision on history, reveals the ‘primitive’. The first image engenders slavery; the second one creates imperialism (in the 19th century, scientists sent to Brazil concluded that “the Indians were unable to assimilate the elevated
European culture, and were, therefore, doomed to perish, like so many other species in natural history”).

- *The Tempest*: the most vulnerable of all Shakespeare’s plays to postcolonial criticism; used by it (Octavio Mannoni 1950) to establish itself as an independent field of study: the good savage is the submissive Ariel; the monstrous savage is Caliban, who is not only non-European, but also the son of a witch and a devil; Ariel is liberated by the white man who has come to the island to be “lord on’t”, learns the colonizer’s language and practices, and becomes his loyal page. Caliban chooses dissidence. He undermines Prospero’s authority with every single thing he does: he tries to rape Miranda, he uses the language offered by the white only to curse, he claims lordship over the island, he invites Stephano to take Prospero’s place.

- the native countries’ victimization by imperialism and their thirst for independence, agency (Homi K. Bhabha):

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  This island’s mine, by Sycorax my mother,
  Which thou takest from me. When thou comest first,
  Thou strokedst me, and made much of me;
  Wouldst give me
  Water with berries in’t; and teach me how
  To name the bigger light, and how the less,
  That burn by day and night: and then I loved thee,
  And show’d thee all the qualities o’the isle,
  The fresh springs, brine-pits, barren place and fertile:
  Cursed be I that did so! (I, ii)
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  - difference appears primarily at the body level: weight, posture, and their own shape in comparison with supernatural shapes; Ariel is a ‘delicate’ spirit, vertical, airy, can fly (superior position in the Chain of Being); Caliban is a sea monster who cannot stand upright (Stephano thinks he is four-legged):

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    Trinculo: […] What have we here? A man or a fish? Dead or alive? A fish: he smells like a fish; a very ancient and fish-like smell; a kind of, not of the newest, Poor-John. […] Legg’d like a man! And his fins like arms! (II, ii)
    Trinculo: […]A strange fish! Were I in England now, as once I was, and had but this fish painted, not a holiday fool there but would give me a piece of silver: there
would this monster make a man; any strange beast there makes a man: when they will not give a doit to relieve a lame beggar, they will lay out ten to see a dead Indian. [...] this is no fish, but an islander, that hath lately suffer’d by a thunderbolt. (II, ii)

- Caliban’s relationship with Prospero, the master, reduces itself to bodily matters - corporeal punishment (minute descriptions of all the stages and operations necessary to apply discipline, the physical consequences he will suffer)

- Ariel can sing so well that his song mesmerizes all his listeners; Caliban’s only song is produced by his drunkenness and the only thing he can do then is to distort his own name as he sings:
  No more dams I’ll make for fish;

  Nor fetch in firing

  At requiring;

Nor scrape trenchering, nor wash dish:

  ‘Ban, ‘Ban, Ca-Caliban

  Has a new master: get a new man.

Freedom, high-day! High-day, freedom! Freedom, high-day, freedom! (II, ii)