

# ENGL 4420: Shakespeare and his Age

with Brian Donovan

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Transcript of 1<sup>st</sup> day's PowerPoint® presentation

## Outline

1. This Course.
2. Shakespeare's Theater and its Practices (see also pp. xliii–xlvi in *Pelican Shakespeare*).
3. Early Modern English.
4. Iambic Pentameter.
5. The "Henriad."

## This Course

- Readings will mostly be of Shakespeare's plays; his sonnets, and work by others of "his Age" will occupy smaller portions of our time and attention here and there.
  - Chief among these others will be Sir Philip Sidney, one of Shakespeare's predecessors as English sonneteer, and also the author of the period's most important work of literary/critical theory.
  - We shall also glance briefly at "Coke on Littleton," a classic of English law by the era's leading jurist.
- Among the plays of Shakespeare, we shall generally spend a week on each one we take up, and so deal with a dozen or so (out of thirty-seven).
- Firm selections include the four history plays of the "second tetralogy" or "Henriad," with which we shall begin; the tragedies *Hamlet* and *King Lear*; and the "problem" comedy *Measure for Measure*.
- We shall also take up at least one of the three great festive comedies (*A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Twelfth Night*, and *As You Like It*); and at least one of the two late "romances" (*The Winter's Tale* and *The Tempest*).
  - Choices among these, and among his other plays, will be guided by today's questionnaire.

## This Course: Texts

- *The Complete Pelican Shakespeare*, ed. Orgel & Braunmuller.
  - Not the most high-powered / scholarly complete-works edition, but better suited to undergraduate-level study, as edited for ease of reading, and affordable at \$67.
  - Nice balance between too much and too little help in the way of line notes, and between signaling their availability too insistently or not at all.
  - Good for us all to have (& bring to class!) the same edition.
  - Worthwhile addition to *permanent* personal library.
- *Sir Philip Sidney's Apology for Poetry & Astrophil & Stella*
  - \$18.25.
  - Contains literary-critical treatise and sonnet sequence.
  - Sidney, the quintessential Elizabethan courtier/soldier/poet, was ten years older than Shakespeare and died (of a combat gunshot wound) at age 31.

### Shakespeare's Theater and its Practices

- Reading a Shakespeare play requires strong imagination:
  - Nearly all you have to go on is what characters are present on stage, and what they say to one another.
  - From this, you have to infer what is going on:
    - physically (stage directions are of some help here but tend to be minimal),
    - socially, and
    - psychologically.
  - You must imagine what *motivates* each utterance (generally in terms of its intended effects on *other* characters present to hear).
- Reading a play imaginatively is a bit like directing a full production inside your own skull.
- Part of you may well be imagining the play's events as happening in real life, in a real though past world, or as in a fully realized location-shot movie.
- Another valuable part of the experience, however, is to imagine the play as unfolding before a live audience, of Shakespeare's contemporaries (who understand his language and jokes to varying degrees and in various ways, according to their various social classes), in the type of theater for which it was created.
- We shall see a film of *Henry V* (our fourth play) that realizes both possibilities and a range between them.
- All roles were performed by males:
  - Women were played by boys with voices not yet changed.
    - This may be one reason why female roles are so far fewer than male ones, as shown in table on p. lii in *Pelican Shakespeare*.
  - Some modern productions do the all-male thing with adults, sometimes including specialized female impersonators.
    - An all-male production of *As You Like It* in London, in 1967–9, cast Anthony Hopkins as the country wench Audrey, Ronald Pickup as heroine Rosalind.
- Changes in setting (from palace, to battlefield, to tavern, to forest, etc.) were communicated to the audience by dialogue and acting rather than scenery.
- Such changes of scene occurred when everyone left the stage (“*Exeunt*”) and then fresh characters would *Enter*.
- With no curtaining or darkening of the stage, no one could be “discovered” already on stage at the start of a scene.
- Many features that we take for granted in the printed texts of Shakespeare's plays have been supplied by printers and editors since Shakespeare's time in most cases:
  - List of characters in the play (*Dramatis Personae*);
  - Notations regarding where each scene takes place;
  - Division of play into numbered Acts and Scenes.

### Early Modern English

- Contrary to popular belief, the English of Shakespeare's plays is not *Old English* (OE) or even *Middle English* (ME) but actually *Modern English*, albeit *Early Modern English* (EModE)—the language also of the King James Bible.

- *Old English* (OE) was the language of the Germanic tribes who dominated at least southern England from the fifth century, when they invaded Celtic Britain, until they were themselves conquered by the Normans in 1066:
  - Nu sculon herigeaen heofonrices weard,  
Meotodes meahte and his modgeþanc,  
weorc wuldorfæder swa he wundra gehwæs  
ece Drihten or onstealde. (Cædmon, C7)
- *Middle English* (ME) resulted from the eventual hybridization of OE with the conquering Normans' French (with some Norse influence too, Vikings having long occupied northeastern England). This is the language of Chaucer (~1400), which sounds considerably more foreign than it looks:
  - Whan that Aprill, with his shoures soote  
The droghte of March hath perced to the roote  
And bathed every veyne in swich licour,  
Of which vertu engendred is the flour; . . .
- Compared with OE and ME, Shakespeare's EModE is highly accessible to speakers of Present-Day English (PDE).
- Changes in transition from ME to EModE include
  - a shift in sounds of long vowels, from the values still current in most other European languages to those whereby the long vowel “says its name” (in most cases this is a diphthong rather than a pure vowel sound, as “ah-ee” for *I*);
  - the silencing of many letters that were pronounced in ME and are still written to this day, as in *knight & tale*.
- In Shakespeare, real grammar governs the use of distinctive EModE forms such as “thou” and “goest”:
  - *Thou* and *thee* are second-person *singular* pronouns, in the subjective and objective cases respectively (cf. *I* vs. *me*).
    - The possessive is *thy*, or *thine* before a vowel (same deal with *my/mine*, including “mine host”).
    - Verbs inflected to agree with subject “thou” end in *-(e)st*, as in *thou hast* (present) or *thou gavest* or *thou walkedst* (past); futures are formed with *shalt* or *wilt*.
    - By Shakespeare's time, plural forms *ye* (subjective) and *you* (objective, but coming into use for both) are already in common use for addressing *one* person.
  - Present-tense verbs, especially irregular ones like *have*, *go*, and *do*, are *sometimes* inflected to agree with 3<sup>rd</sup>-person singular subjects with *-(e)th* rather than PDE *-(e)s*—as in *she hath*, *it goeth*, or *he doth*.
- *Methinks* uses the objective form *me* rather than *I*, and the 3<sup>rd</sup>-person singular ending *-s* rather than the 1<sup>st</sup>-person form, because it is *not* just an old-fashioned form of “I think” but rather is an impersonal verb meaning “it seems to me.”
  - Pronouns “me” and “you” sprinkled into informal speech seemingly at random carry a similar dative sense, as “to me” or “for me” or “as far as I am concerned.”
  - Similarly informal is the seeming-random use of “your” before a noun, as in “your water is a sore decayer of your whoreson dead body” (*Hamlet* 5.1.160–1).
- *Sirrah* (accent on 1<sup>st</sup> syllable) is a term of address to a male social inferior.

- *Withal* (accent on 2<sup>nd</sup> syllable) has various uses: as “moreover,” as “nonetheless” or “however,” or just as a form of “with” suitable for ending a sentence, phrase, or clause.
- Negation in EModE does not generally depend on the helper verb *do* as in this PDE sentence here. (An EModE version might begin “Negation *depends* [or *dependeth*] *not* . . . .”)
  - A similar deal applies to questions: EModE “Finds brotherhood in thee no sharper spur?” rather than PDE “Does brotherhood find . . . ?”
- “An” often substitutes for “if” (or supplements it, “an if”).
- “A” sometimes substitutes for “he.”
- For the rest, count on footnotes, available in the *Pelican Shakespeare* for every line that bears a printed line number not in italics. You may prefer to look down only when stumped (I do), but note that some familiar words may have borne meanings in EModE that are no longer much current in PDE:
  - *go* may mean quite specifically *walk*.
  - *quick* often means *alive* rather than *rapid*.
  - *eat* may be used for *ate*, in which case it is pronounced not *ēt* but *ĕt*.

### Iambic Pentameter

- Shakespeare’s plays are mostly written in verse, meaning that the lines conform to a rhythmic pattern, whether or not they rhyme; and the rhythmic pattern in question, that is, the “meter,” is almost always *iambic pentameter*:
  - This meter was the overwhelming favorite of English poets from Chaucer to the Victorians and beyond, as being an idealized approximation of normal speech.
  - When lines conform to this meter but do not rhyme, it is called *blank verse*.
  - Where iambic pentameter lines in the plays do rhyme, it is generally in pairs, called heroic couplets—sometimes kept up for lengthy passages, but often just a single such couplet signals the end of a scene or speech.
- The iambic pentameter rhythm is found in very pure form in the famous line from Marlowe’s *Doctor Faustus*:

One “foot”—specifically an “iamb” (∪ /)

Was this the face that launched a thousand ships?

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

[There are ten syllables in the line, and given a natural delivery the even-numbered ones are louder than odd-numbered ones. The standard marking for this is a slash or *ictus* for the louder or “stressed” syllables, and a *breve* for the softer or unstressed ones, both marked, as shown, *above* the syllable in question. For the two-syllable word “thousand,” the difference in loudness is just a matter of where the accent goes. In words of 3 syllables not accented on the 2<sup>nd</sup>, and in words of 4 or more syllables, there is a secondary as well as a primary accent, and both count as stresses. Among this line’s other words, just one syllable each, those that carry the meaning or tell the story—“this face launched ships”—are louder than the mere grammatical function words. The line’s resulting overall rhythm is a matter of repeating a basic unit, called a “foot.” In this case that unit consists of an unstressed syllable followed by a stressed one. This kind of foot is called an *iamb*—from the Greek ἰαμβος, meaning much the same thing except in that ancient Greek

meters were based on long and short instead of loud and soft. Five (Greek *pentē*) *iamb*s make up the *iambic pentameter* line.]

- Good iambic pentameter, however, requires continually disrupting and varying this rhythmic pattern in small ways so as to avoid hypnotic monotony.
- One common wrinkle is a pause somewhere in the middle of the line. This pause is called a *caesura* and is notated “||”;
- Often it occurs where stop punctuation appears within the line:

U / U / || U / U / U /

We thank you both. Yet one but flatters us,

- Another variation is an extra unstressed syllable at the line’s end, termed a *feminine* ending:

U / U / U / U / U / U

That Mowbray hath received eight thousand nobles

- The most important class of these variations, however, consists of substituting some other type of metrical foot for one or more of the five iambs.
  - Iambic foot or iamb (what any of the following may substitute *for*): U /
  - Spondaic foot or spondee: / /
  - Pyrrhic foot: U U
  - Trochaic foot or trochee: / U
  - Anap(a)estic foot or anap(a)est: U U /

- Spondaic substitutions (/ /) are especially common for the first foot in the line. This next line has spondaic substitutions (underlined) for both its first and last feet:

/ / U / U / U / / /

O, God defend my soul from such deep sin!

This line thus has seven stresses rather than the normal five, but the five even-numbered syllables (God, -fend, soul, such, sin) are still the five main beats, kept on a steady rhythm.

- In the following three-line speech, we find pyrrhic substitutions (U U, underlined) for the 3<sup>rd</sup> & 5<sup>th</sup> feet of the 2<sup>nd</sup> line and for the 2<sup>nd</sup> foot of the 3<sup>rd</sup> line (as well as a spondaic substitution for the 1<sup>st</sup> foot of the 1<sup>st</sup> line). The lines with pyrrhic substitutions have fewer than five real stresses, but still the five-beat rhythm keeps steady:

/ / U / U / U / U /

What doth our cousin lay to Mowbray’s charge?

U / U / U U U / U U

It must be great that can inherit us

U / U U U / U / U /

So much as of a thought of ill in him.

- Spondaic and pyrrhic substitutions have the effect of raising or lowering the volume on individual syllables; they do not much affect the speed at which syllables follow one another.
- But trochaic and anapestic substitutions do affect that speed:
- For trochees and anapests have each *one* stressed syllable, as iambs do; but they differ from iambs in the number of unstressed syllables preceding and following that stress.
- When one of these feet is substituted, the line still has five stressed syllables in it; and they are still its main beats, and should be kept on a steady rhythm.
- This entails rushing over unstressed syllables where two or even three come between one stress and the next, and pausing where none come between.

- For example, this next line has trochaic substitutions (/ ◡, underlined) for both second and fourth feet:  
           ◡ / || / ◡ ◡ / || / ◡ ◡ /  
           In rage deaf as the sea, hasty as fire.
- The two trochaic substitutions entail pausing (marked above as *caesura*) after both “rage” and “sea” (though the only comma is after “sea”), and rushing through the contiguous pairs of unstressed syllables, “as the” and “-ty as.”
- This rhythmic irregularity joins with the vivid similes (and the entrance of the two angry characters thus described) in making this an exceptionally fine and memorable line, a poetic and emotional high point within the scene.
  - Strange to say, the extreme *regularity* did much the same for the Marlowe line with which we started.
- The artistry of Shakespeare’s verse largely consists in his suiting such rhythmic variations to the ebb and flow of his characters’ emotions and rhetoric, and to the contours of their syntax.
- For this reason, actors and readers are wise to be sensitive to the iambic pentameter rhythm *and its variations*, as a guide for both logical and emotional understanding.
- Lines being spoken must not peter out towards their ends (breath control!), the line-end being a site of considerable emphasis; but the rhythmic variations can bestow emphasis upon other sites within the line as well.
- Sensitivity to Shakespeare’s rhythmic emphasis is especially valuable in heightening our awareness of his use of *antithesis*—that is, the setting of opposite concepts against each other—which is a vital aspect of his thought and style.
- Our first play, *Richard II*, is written entirely in iambic pentameter throughout.
  - Except for the Marlowe line with which I began, all the preceding examples are culled from its first scene.
  - Per the table on p. lii in the *Pelican Shakespeare*, it is one of only 4 plays out of 37 that are 99.9% or 100% in verse.
- In its sequels (*1 Henry IV*, *2 Henry IV*, and *Henry V*), and in most of his other plays, Shakespeare mixes passages and scenes in verse with those in prose.
  - Often, scenes of court or otherwise high life and society will be in verse, while scenes of low life and company, in taverns and so forth, will be in prose.
  - Because prose breaks into lines differently in different column widths, line numbering in prose passages (and verse ones that follow prose within the same scene) will often differ from edition to edition.

### The “Henriad”

- With *Richard II* we are beginning one of the two *tetralogies* (more or less coherent sequences comprising four five-act plays apiece) among the ten “history” plays of Shakespeare.
  - The “first” tetralogy, comprising *Henry VI* parts 1, 2, & 3 plus *Richard III*, covers the period 1422–85.
  - The “second” tetralogy, comprising *Richard II*, *Henry IV* parts 1 & 2, and *Henry V*, covers the preceding period, 1398–1420, but is *second* as written later than the other.

- The second tetralogy, which we shall read complete, is sometimes termed the “Henriad,” as chronicling (over the last three of its four plays) the rise of Henry of Monmouth from juvenile delinquent to hero-king.
- The problem at the heart of this story is that Henry of Monmouth inherits the throne from a father who took it by force or threat of arms away from its legitimate heir and occupant, Richard II, whom he then had killed (as dramatized in our first play).
  - That father is Henry or Harry of Hereford, known as “Bolingbroke,” who thus became King Henry IV.
- The question of whether such a usurper’s heir can become legitimate as monarch, by some kind of merit perhaps, was applicable to Shakespeare’s own sovereign, Elizabeth I:
  - For her own hereditary claim to the throne depended on its usurpation by her grandfather Henry Tudor, Earl of Richmond, who became King Henry VII after leading a successful armed rebellion against Richard III (who fell in the decisive battle).
    - Shakespeare, dramatizing this overthrow at the end of his first tetralogy, had obligingly portrayed Richard III as a conniving villain and murderous tyrant—so that overthrowing him was clearly a good thing.
    - Shakespeare’s Richard II, and thus Bolingbroke’s overthrow of him, are much more ambivalent.
- More generally, the Henriad explores what constitutes legitimacy in a monarch, and how the role of monarch is to be understood, attained, and enacted.
- In reference to the act of usurpation, the tetralogy also explores how the usurper sets a precedent for armed rebellion against his own reign—as when the Percy family, having helped Bolingbroke pull down one king, rises against him when as king he crosses them.
  - This act of usurpation eventually led to thirty years of intermittent civil war between two branches of the royal family, now known as the Wars of the Roses (since Bolingbroke’s own “Lancaster” branch adopted a red rose as its badge, and the “York” branch a white one, in *1 Henry VI* 2.4). The first tetralogy dramatizes these wars.