

Shakespeare's Tragedies and History Plays

Romeo and Juliet

- Written at the outset of his career.
- Two star-crossed lovers, victims of the hatred of their households but also of fate.
- Some scholars have maintained that they don't have real tragic depth and that the tragedy does not arise from the tragic quality of the characters but from the unfortunate sequence of random events. Where does tragedy reside?

Romeo and Juliet

- In the fact that such pure and passionate love will be rewarded only by death. The tragedy lies in the sudden extinction of such beauty.
- Elements of comedy (love and masked ball) and tragedy.
- Lack of knowledge that derives from bad communication.
- Tragic role of chance
- Speed is the medium of fate

Great Tragedies: *Hamlet*

- All the **great tragedies** were written over a period of few years, between 1600-1606.
- Stephen Greenblatt: the characteristics of the tragedies is their “**strategic opacity**”, i.e., Shakespeare decided to take out a “key explanatory element” of the motivations of their protagonists in order to deepen their effect and “release the enormous energy” that explanations would partially block or contain.
- **Hamlet** = **revenge tragedy**, but the revenge takes place only in Act V, though Claudius (the villain) has given himself away in Act III → play within the play.
- Hamlet speaks nearly half of the lines of the play.

Hamlet

- Many soliloquies: he reflects on the meaning of human life; he **interrogates** and values **his own self** with the tools of the culture at his disposal: Christian, Renaissance, classical; our shared human condition.
- It contains the **paradigm of modern man** in his analytical approach and quest for answers; he is conscious of his **fragmented nature** as we are, he shares our sensibility.
- He is conscious of man's **peripheral position** in a universe that has no longer the Earth at its centre and man as the measure of all things; he declares his dismay before a **world that is deprived of order and balance**.

Othello

- Why does Jago persuade Othello that Desdemona has betrayed him? Unconvincing reasons for his hatred. «Demand me nothing» is his answer.
- Othello is the incarnation of an emotion, jealousy and its **destructive power**; **reason** is totally **overpowered** by it, this human attribute is nullified by irrationality.
- He is deaf to his wife's explanations, can't distinguish, evaluate or understand anymore -→ his final speech: does he absolve or partly condemn himself? Does suicide mitigate his brutal egoism or give him back some of his grandeur and nobility?

King Lear

- **Strategic opacity**: he abdicates and bequeaths his kingdom to his 3 daughters (Regan, Goneril and Cordelia) according to an equal division; but then he says «he might extend his bounty» to the one who can demonstrate that she loves him most by verbal homage. No explanation is given for this decision. No explanation is given for Cordelia's failure to express herself in rhetorical ways: "her love is more ponderous than her tongue"

King Lear

- Tragedy of **power**? Of **Wounded pride** or **vanity**? Lear is stripped of his former power by Regan and Goneril. His noble anger turns into madness. Only when his mind has given way, Lear finally recognises Cordelia's unreserved love.
- Gloucester is tricked by his bastard son Edmund into believing that his legitimate son Edgar is plotting to kill him.
- Tragedy of **fathers** who cannot understand their **children**.
- Lear and Gloucester are **blind** in the face of the adulation of their children who are deceiving them and those who really love them. Gloucester's eyes have been really put out because of his loyalty to Lear. (Goneril orders to pluck his eyes out). Imagery of the play revolves around **looking** and **seeing** , **appearance** and **reality**.

Macbeth

- Scottish play from Holinshed's *Chronicles*
- Macbeth = a noble and brave warrior but on hearing the prophecy of the 3 witches he conceives the idea of killing the king: Duncan.
- He hesitates: horror of regicide vs thirst for power.
- No pity: a long list of murders: Banquo, his son (who survives), MacDuff's family
- Lady Macbeth: ruthless and ultra-ambitious (act V: sleep-walking, haunted by obsession with blood). Previous self-confidence vs profound disturbance but no explanation is given in between.

Antony and Cleopatra

- The last of the great tragedies, from Plutarch's *Parallel Lives*.
- **Conflict** between **passions** and **reason**, and two worlds: Cleopatra = sensual queen of a warm country, capricious and **irrational** vs Roman world = cold, orderly, **calculating**, future emperor **Octavian**. **Antony's downfall** caused by passion but it also makes him grand and noble in his defeat.
- **A love so grand** that to know its confines, one would have to "find out new heaven, and new heart" : Antony, caught between two worlds, chooses to take the side of Cleopatra, denying his Roman-ness.
- Romeo and Juliet vs Antony (grizzled) and Cleopatra (wrinkled deep in time). Same accent, same intensity, myth.

Chronology of the Most Important History Plays (or Histories):

- **First Group (date of first performance):**

- Henry VI (Part I)
1590-91
- Henry VI (Part II)
1590-91
- Henry VI (Part III)
1591-92
- Richard III 1592-93

- **Second Group (date of first performance):**

- Richard II 1595-96
- Henry IV (Part I)
1597-98
- Henry IV (Part II)
1597-98
- Henry V 1598-99

History Plays (or Histories): why are they important?

- **At Shakespeare's time**, they had educational value for the large majority of the less cultured spectators. Didactic value. Celebratory intent.
- **Today** they make us reflect on the nature of power in any period (many productions of *Henry VI* and *Richard II* in 20th century costumes; Richard III resembles Hitler in Richard Loncraine's film set in the 1920s)

R. Loncraine's *Richard III* (1995)



First Group of History Plays

(first performed 1590-91)

- *Henry VI* (Part I, II, III) and *Richard III*. Shakespeare's career started with a series of 3 interlinked dramas about Henry VI, the last Lancastrian (1422-61 and 1470-71):* his lack of political skills (he lost all English possessions in France) and statesmanship was one of the causes of the War of the Roses.
- *In-between Edward IV of York reigned
- The war of the Roses (1455-1485), between the York and Lancaster families, ended with the defeat of Richard III (of York, 1483-85) by Henry Tudor, future King as Henry VII.
- Central themes:
 - the responsibilities of the King, the necessity of national unity, the disasters caused by opposing forces, the legitimacy of kingship (can a King be deposed?).
 - -→ themes also of *Richard II*

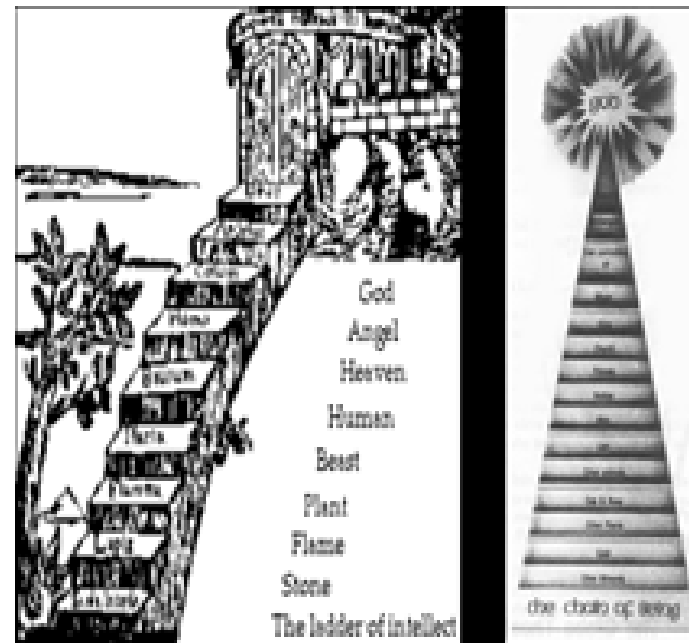
The Great Chain of Being (decreed by God)

- God (Christ+Virgin Mary)
- Angels
- Kings and Queens
- Commoners
- Animals
- Plants
- Non-living Things
- The chain stretches from God to the tiniest particle of sand
- A place for everything and everything in its place



The Great Chain of Being will influence the Elizabethan notion of the world

- A medieval metaphor illustrating the hierarchy of being from God to the lowliest
- A Christian Concept (See Psalm 8 in The Book of Psalms in the Bible)
- It shows the order of everything and its relation in importance to everything else.
- Everything is linked together





Richard III

- The real king: 1483-85 . Last of the York dynasty . Defeated at Bosworth by the future Henry VII Tudor (beginner of Tudor dynasty).
- Shakespeare's Richard is a figure of evil on a grand scale.
- Wickedness and ability to dissimulate, malicious irony, mocking and cruel streak = his psychological features. A sublime actor that elevates imposture to an art of politics.
- Growing interest in the play probably results from the many dictatorships of the 20th century.
- A symbol of the tyrant of any time.

Richard III: 1955 and 1995 films

Laurence Olivier (director and protagonist)

**Directed by R. Loncrain
Starring Ian McKellen**



Second Group: *Richard II*

(first performed 1595-6)

- King Richard II's reign: 1377- 99. The last of the Plantagenets.
- The story of a king who was obliged to give up his throne. A weak king, influenced by his favourites, taxing his subjects to support his choices and accused of wasting England's money by his noblemen. He was deposed.
- His assassination was ordered by Henry of Bolimbroke, who had already seized the power as Henry IV.
- Failure as a ruler but full of vitality, he gains the sympathy of the audience due to his appeal as a "poet"
→ stature of a tragic hero .

Henry IV (part I and II)

(first performed 1597-8)

- The travails of the new King, the usurper Bolimbroke, faced with the rebellion of his earls and archbishops, and of his son the dissolute Prince Henry.
- The greatest creation is the character of Falstaff, the leader of the dissolute «crew» frequented by the young prince. Comic character, larger than life* (flamboyant appearance) , eloquent spokesman of the pleasures of eating, drinking and fornication, a great liar. He instructs us in freedom not in, but from society (H. Bloom) → his influence is not good for a future king.
- *attracts people's attention, lively personality

Henry V

(first performed 1598-99)

- When Henry IV dies, reconciled with his son, Prince Henry becomes King as Henry V and renounces Falstaff's friendship, because he is not the young man he used to be. He is the ruler of the country now.
- The play is very celebrative in tone and tells the victories of Henry V in France (the Battle of Agincourt, 1415, Saint Crispin's Day, an episode of the Hundred Years' War). Patriotism. Henry then married the French Princess and their son was made heir to the throne of France and England.



Henry V

- Laurence Olivier brought the play to the screen at the end of WW2. The miraculous victory at Agincourt in the play was an injection of national pride and self-confidence for a people exhausted by the struggle against Nazism.
- Reflection on the war: Henry in disguise listens to a conversation of two soldiers about their motives for hating war (fears and doubts, misery of their families if they die). Later Henry exposes to the soldiers the reasons of the war's just cause and urges them to battle. Yet the soldiers' point remain a testimony of the cruel reality of war.

Laurence Olivier (1944) vs Kenneth Branagh (1989)

