PLOTS, CHARACTERS AND INTERPRETATIONS

THE CAMBRIDGE SHAKESPEARE GUIDE

EMMA SMITH

The Cambridge
Shakespeare Guide

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All's Well that Ends Well

Key Facts
Date: 1604–5
Length: 3,075 lines
Verse: 55% / Prose: 45%

Major characters' share of lines:	
Helena	16%
Parolles	13%
King	13%
Countess	10%
Bertram	9%

Unsettling romantic comedy which poses the question, is all well that ends well?

Plot and characters

Helena (or Helen), daughter of a recently deceased physician, is in love with **Bertram**, Count of Roussillon, whose father has also just died, making him a ward of the **King of France**. While his mother, the **Countess**, is sympathetic to her affections, Bertram is not. Bertram attends the King at court, accompanied by the Countess's friend **Lafew**. In exchanges with the clown, **Lavatch**, the Countess comments on the unfolding plot at a distance. The King has been suffering from a terminal illness that baffles all of his doctors. Helena, armed with her father's prescriptions, persuades him to try her remedy, on condition that she be given the husband of her choice if she is successful. On his recovery, the King agrees to her request to marry Bertram. Bertram himself is horrified by the prospect of marrying so ignobly, but is forced, unwillingly, to accede. He immediately leaves Helena to go off to war with his braggart companion **Parolles**. Bertram's letter to her refuses to recognise the marriage until she has the ring from his finger and a child of his body. Helena is undeterred. Under cover of going to Santiago de Compostela on pilgrimage, she follows Bertram and learns that he is attempting to seduce **Diana**. She arranges with the **Widow**, Diana's mother, that, unbeknownst to Bertram, she will herself substitute for Diana in a bed trick, and Diana arranges the

assignation with the ardent Bertram. Meanwhile, Parolles' cowardice is revealed when he is tricked by the **Lords of Dumaine** and other soldiers, speaking a comic nonsense language, into believing he has been captured by the enemy. It is announced that Helena is dead and Lafew and the Countess plan for Bertram to marry Lafew's daughter. Lafew agrees to employ the disgraced Parolles as a fool. Bertram returns and agrees to the new marriage, producing an engagement ring which the King recognises as one he gave to Helena. Bertram cannot explain how he got this ring, and is arrested on suspicion of killing Helena. A letter arrives from Diana claiming that Bertram had seduced her on the promise of marrying her on Helena's death, and the Widow and Diana arrive at court to confront him. Eventually Helena is brought in to explain, and Bertram has to accept that, since she has got his ring and says she is pregnant with his child, he must acknowledge her as his wife.

Context and composition

The play shares linguistic patterns, particularly vocabulary, with *Othello*, *Measure for Measure* and *Troilus and Cressida*, and was probably written around 1604–5. Along with *Measure* and *Troilus* (and, more rarely, *Hamlet*) it is often identified as a so-called 'problem play', and it shares its sexualised plot culminating in a bed trick with *Measure*, its cynicism about war and male camaraderie with *Troilus*, and its defiantly anti-heroic presentation of its characters with both plays. There have also been suggestions of a later composition date of 1607–8, which would place the play between the romantic comedies and the late plays (*Pericles*, *Tempest*, *Winter's Tale*) with which it also shares some of its fairy-tale plot elements. It was first printed in the First Folio of 1623. Shakespeare's source for the play is a story from the Italian collection of novellas, Giovanni Boccaccio's *Decameron* – via a sixteenth-century English translation. His major additions to the source are the comic roles: the clown Lavatch and Parolles, who has something of Falstaff's boastfulness (see *Henry IV* parts 1 and 2).

One notable – and audible – feature of *All's Well* is its frequent use of rhyme – as in Helena's interview with the King in Act 2 – alongside

other formal moments such as her letter in the form of a sonnet. This artificiality contrasts effectively with the cynicism of the play-world and its characters, as its attempts at make-believe idealisation – the King's miraculous cure, the winning of a mate through cleverness – are repeatedly undercut by the seedy realities of human motivation.

Performances

We have no details of any early performances – and indeed, there are confusions in the Folio text which have led some scholars to propose it was not actually performed in the early modern period. The play was little revived over the intervening centuries, although the trick played on Parolles was popular during the eighteenth century At the beginning of the twentieth century George Bernard Shaw identified it as a play which had found its time alongside the dark, unflinching work of Ibsen, but it has struggled to establish itself in the repertoire. Subsequent revivals followed Shaw in stressing the play's uncomfortable modernity, often through contemporary dress, such as Barry Jackson's 1927 production with a young Olivier as Parolles. More recently the play has achieved stage success where its combination of artificiality and realism has been acknowledged. Trevor Nunn's 1981 Edwardian production, for example, with Peggy Ashcroft as the Countess, Harriet Walter as Helena and Mike Gwilym as Bertram was praised by one newspaper reviewer for keeping 'the balance between comic hoopla and emotional pain' by 'putting real, suffering people into an unreal situation'. Marianne Elliott's National Theatre production of 2009 stressed the play as fairy tale with a set out of an illustrated

Grimm, complete with ramparts, wolves and magic lanterns and an indeterminate ending with Helena and Bertram caught momentarily in a freeze-frame wedding photograph. The play has not been directed for cinema, but the BBC Shakespeare included a version directed by Elijah Moshinsky (1981), set entirely indoors with elaborate lighting effects and effective performances from Angela Down, Ian Charleson and Celia Johnson as the Countess.

Themes and interpretation

In showing us an interrupted courtship between young people, overlooked by their elders, *All's Well* bears a superficial resemblance to the romantic comedies which precede it in Shakespeare's writing career. But these formal similarities are often seen to be outweighed by tonal discrepancy: that marriage is so ruthlessly divided here into betrothal, consummation and only reluctant acknowledgement perverts the comic plot. Sex, money, disease and casually ignoble warfare undermine that cheerful disposition we like to associate with the genre of comedy. Much criticism of *All's Well* has tended to boil down to an assessment of its central couple. Is Helena Shakespeare's 'loveliest character' (Coleridge) or 'a keen and unswerving huntress of man' (E. K. Chambers)? Is Bertram, as Dr Johnson felt, a 'coward' and 'profligate', or is he to be pitied for Helena's implacable and unsolicited pursuit? Certainly, Shakespeare has here developed the vigorous comic heroine who actively seeks her own romantic fulfilment – Rosalind in *As You Like It*, Julia in *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* – into an often discomforting character who defies expectations from her first soliloquy, revealing that she is not mourning her father but swooning after Bertram. Bantering with Parolles about the value of virginity, cool and unsentimental in making the arrangements with the Widow, Helena does not admit of the vulnerability or insecurity that might make her more likeable. Her credo of self-sufficiency – 'Our remedies oft in ourselves do lie, / Which we ascribe to heaven' (1.1.187–8) – echoes the radical agency of an Iago (in *Othello*) or Edmund (*King Lear*): and these are not happy role models for a comic heroine.

But nor does Bertram garner audience sympathy: at best he is callow, like *Much Ado*'s Claudio; at worst he is deeply selfish, incapable of empathy, resistant to that impulse towards the re-education of young men that is at the heart of much Shakespearean comedy. If *All's Well* complements *The Taming of the Shrew*, this time offering a pattern of male subjection to female will, its ending is no less problematic than that of the earlier play (the plays are printed consecutively in the First Folio). Bertram's final acceptance of his role as husband begins with a conditional 'If', just as the last iteration of the play's title in its closing lines introduces a note of contingency: 'All yet seems well, and if it end so meet, / The bitter past, more welcome is the sweet' (5.3.322–3). The qualifications deny us a 'happy ever after' resolution to the play's unsettling narrative.

Shakespeare takes a fairy tale here and systematically darkens it. Helena's magical healing of the King partakes of a fantasy world, but it is a miracle she exploits for her own agenda, just as her pilgrimage has distinctly earthly aims. Lafew's remark – 'they say miracles are past, and we have our philosophical persons, to make modern and familiar, things supernatural and causeless' (2.3.1–3) – is typical of the play's knowingness as it deploys an idealised folkloric structure in the shrewd service of human selfishness and need. 'All's well that ends well' seems less the conclusion of a fable and more the amorality of the Renaissance pragmatist Machiavelli, advocating ruthless self-interest at the heart of power politics. 'The web of our life is of a mingled yarn, good and ill together' (4.3.60–1) could seem to stand as an epigraph for the play's own tragi-comic structure, but in context – the Dumaine Lords discussing Helena's 'death' – it, too, is ironised. Helena, like Hero in *Much Ado* before her, and Hermione later in *The Winter's Tale*, returns from this 'death' – the conclusion of a tragedy – and instead claims her comedic marriage promise. But the atmosphere of loss and mourning is never fully dispelled in this bracingly uncomic play.

Performances

Shakespeare's great dramaturgical innovation in *Antony and Cleopatra* is the use of short, crosscut scenes to represent the escalating emotional and military conflict, particularly in Act 4 (sixteen scenes). But the epic scope of the drama has been difficult to realise in the theatre, and the stage direction '*they heave Antony aloft to Cleopatra*' registers something of the physical difficulty of raising the fatally wounded hero into Cleopatra's monument (presumably originally represented by the balcony over the stage). After its initial performances in 1606–7, there were none until Garrick's lavishly rearranged version in the mid eighteenth century, and subsequent productions found the scenery required to make this spectacular play palatable to contemporary audiences prohibitively expensive. In the twentieth century the roll call of actors for the two main roles attests to the power of the writing for performers: Vivien Leigh and Laurence Olivier (1951), Janet Suzman and Richard Johnson (1972, filmed for television), Helen Mirren and Michael Gambon (1981), and Judi Dench and Anthony Hopkins (1987) – although in most productions reviewers tend to find one of the protagonists more convincing than the other. Recent productions have tended to use design to stylise the differences

between an exotic, passionate Egypt and a colder, more regimented Rome, as in Michael Attenborough's production for the RSC in 2002. Mark Rylance's performance as Cleopatra at the Globe in 1999 was provocative, reminding audiences that the play was written for a pair of male leads: one reviewer found the performance 'true to the spirit of the play, which has to keep battling against farce as it pushes its way towards tragic dignity'.

Themes and interpretation

'No grave upon the earth shall clip in it / A pair so famous' (5.2.353–4). Caesar's final epitaph on the lovers is a striking one, in identifying their predominant characteristic not as passion, pride or grandeur but as that of being famous: Antony and Cleopatra are celebrities, and, as with modern celebrities, what we see is always a performance. In this play the lovers are never alone on stage together: there is never a moment of privacy. Flirtation, tantrum, grandiloquence – and perhaps love too – are all played out for the cameras. We could almost say that these characters know we the audience are there, and they are doing it all for our benefit. In such a culture the question of authenticity – does Cleopatra/Antony really love Antony/Cleopatra? – becomes unanswerable: how would we know? In part the play anticipates the difficulties of understanding public individuals but it does more than this: it acknowledges the inscrutability of the private self. Unlike the heavily soliloquised access to other tragic characters (Macbeth, Hamlet), here we see largely dialogue and performance. Like Caesar, all we really know at the end of the play is that the pair were famous.

Dialogue and self-conscious theatricality ally the play to the structures and tone of comedy, where wit, wordplay and strong female roles are common. Like *Much Ado About Nothing*, for example, it dramatises a female world brought into collision with a male one – and in ending with Cleopatra's triumphant suicide and the words 'Husband, I come' (5.2.281), perhaps the play's formal impulses towards comedy are in fact fulfilled. Cleopatra's choreographed death contrasts markedly with Antony's bungled attempts at suicide, and in her death dressed in her robe and crown,

she embodies both Egyptian majesty and Roman fortitude. Act 5, the space of the tragic hero, is hers alone; it is her death, not his, that brings closure to the play. Antony's request to his servant, the significantly named Eros (god of love) to kill him, brings out the ironies of causation in the play. Both lovers suggest that they wish for death as an escape from the ignominy of military defeat and imprisonment, as well as wishing for it as a final consummation of their relationship; for each of them their political and personal honour is as pressing as their passion. Was it indeed, as Dryden's Restoration reworking of the play would have it, *All for Love*?

The conflict between the values of Rome and of Egypt that destroys Antony represents the conflict between duty and desire, between head and heart. The play opens with the disapproval of Antony's decline from stoic soldier to 'dotage' as 'the bellows and the fan to cool a gipsy's lust' (1.1.8–9), but the Cleopatra we meet is much more than the Romans' misogynistic caricature. Her performance – the verbal dexterity, the quicksilver moods, the sexual frankness, the emotional manipulation, the moments of insecurity – epitomises the play's instability, just as the dominant linguistic images of overflowing and liquefaction ('Let Rome in Tiber melt' [1.1.35]) suggest a world at once benignly fertile and dangerously volatile. Although the play's own energies can seem to have been diverted to the seductive luxury of Alexandria rather than the repressive political machinations of Rome, there is no doubt that the conflict will exact final retribution on its sacrificial victim. As Enobarbus witnesses, Antony is torn physically between Rome and Egypt, between Roman wives and Cleopatra, and between fighting and loving. His claim, embracing Cleopatra, that 'The nobleness of life / Is to do thus' (1.1.38–9) attempts to elevate the passions the Romans read as base into a supreme philosophy, but later he recognises 'These strong Egyptian fetters I must break, / Or lose myself in dotage' (1.2.112–13). Enobarbus' own position is one of simultaneous involvement and distance from the events, and as such he may well function as a surrogate for the play's audience. Readers and viewers of the play tend to divide along Roman–Egyptian lines, but, as Marilyn French puts it, 'At the end of *Antony and Cleopatra*, Caesar has the world; Antony and Cleopatra had the living' (*Shakespeare's Division of Experience*).

As You Like It

Key Facts
Date: 1599–1600
Length: 2,796 lines
Verse: 55% / Prose: 45%

Major characters' share of lines:	
Rosalind	25%
Orlando	11%
Celia	10%
Touchstone	10%
Jaques	8%

Romantic pastoral comedy in which a cross-dressed heroine escapes court life to live and woo in the forest

Plot and characters

Since their father's death, **Orlando** has been ill-treated by his envious elder brother **Oliver**, who commissions **Charles** the wrestler to kill Orlando in a competition to be held at court. **Duke Frederick** has taken power from *his* elder brother **Duke Senior** and banished him to the Forest of Arden; he keeps the old duke's daughter **Rosalind** as a companion to his own daughter **Celia**. They watch the wrestling match in which Charles is beaten by Orlando, who gains no reward when Frederick hears that Orlando's father was loyal to the old duke. Rosalind and Orlando fall in love. Frederick banishes Rosalind in a rage, and the cousins agree to escape in disguise to the forest: Rosalind as a man, Ganymede, and Celia as Aliena. They are accompanied by **Touchstone**, a jester. Orlando is warned by an old servant, **Adam**, to flee his brother, and the two go together into the forest, where they meet Duke Senior's lords including **Jaques**, a melancholy and satirical courtier. **Silvius** the shepherd is in love with the haughty **Phoebe**, but she falls in love with Ganymede. In disguise, Ganymede encounters Orlando who is proclaiming his love for Rosalind by pinning up terrible verses on trees, and s/he teaches him the way to woo her, having Celia act as a priest for a mock-wedding. Oliver arrives with news of Orlando's bravery in killing a lioness that

was about to eat Oliver as he slept under a tree, and brings a bloody cloth from the wounded Orlando to Ganymede, who almost faints and gives away her disguise. Oliver and Celia fall promptly in love. Touchstone woos the goatherd **Audrey**, dismissing her erstwhile suitor the bumpkin **William**, but is persuaded to postpone their marriage which would have been conducted by **Sir Oliver Martext**. Ganymede manipulates Phoebe into accepting Silvius, she and Celia reveal their true identity, and the four couples are married by **Hymen**, god of marriage. Duke Frederick's arrival in the forest is promised by **Jacques de Bois**, the middle brother of Oliver and Orlando, but this is interrupted: Frederick has met a holy man and become a hermit, and so Duke Senior can return to office. Jaques opts to stay with Duke Frederick and the others prepare to return. Rosalind delivers a teasing epilogue.

Context and composition

As You Like It was written around 1599–1600, probably just after *King Henry V* and *Julius Caesar* and around the time of *Hamlet*. It was first printed in 1623. It shares with *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* and *Twelfth Night*, among others, the device of the woman dressed as a man, and, like those other plays, has fun with the double recognition that the woman is really played by a male actor. Its pastoral mode is picked up again in *The Winter's Tale*, where again it provides a contrast from the harsh world of the court. It has a high proportion of prose – including for important speeches such as Rosalind's epilogue – and a number of contemporary songs.

Shakespeare's main source for the play is the prose romance by Thomas Lodge, *Rosalynde* (1590). His alterations point up the parallel sets of warring brothers – Oliver and Orlando, Dukes Frederick and Senior – and also the unreality of the world of Arden (in Lodge's story the rightful duke is restored by a deadly battle rather than a miraculous conversion). Orlando takes his name, and his lovesick behaviour, from the hero of Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso*, which had been dramatised by Robert Greene early in the 1590s.

But Rosalind, of course, spends much of the play dressed as Ganymede, a classical name with strong associations of homosexuality for early modern audiences. The frisson of the scene in which Rosalind as Ganymede pretends to be Rosalind for Orlando to practise his wooing is continued in the playfulness of the epilogue, when Rosalind – or the male actor underneath – flirts with men and women in the audience, teasing them with the ambiguity of her/his gender position. From this perspective, *As You Like It*, rather than denoting vapid crowd-pleasing, as George Bernard Shaw opined, takes on a saucy, provocative air: anything goes, any which way, whatever you fancy. As is to be found elsewhere in Shakespeare's comedies, gender can be played with and impersonated, but class distinctions are absolute: Rosalind tells Phoebe 'you are not for all markets' (3.6.60), making it clear that her mistake is less the misprision of Ganymede's sex and more her presumption in loving above her station. Touchstone's cynical couplet, 'come, sweet Audrey, for we must be married or we must live in bawdry' (3.4.73–4), is a frank acknowledgement that the social institutions of marriage are structures to police potentially transgressive desire, just as the swiftness of Oliver and Celia falling in love shows us that these institutions are formal gestures towards comic closure. The 'giddiness' of it (5.2.4), as Oliver acknowledges, is part of the play's make-believe. Ending under Hymen's direction confirms conservative structures – marriages, political restitution, the return to the court – even as the epilogue undercuts this finality.

The traveller Jaques and the clown Touchstone are Shakespeare's most prominent additions to his source material, and their different dispositions set out the range of responses the play includes and can produce. Jaques' world-weary contempt constructs an existential stage-play world in which 'All the world's a stage, / And all the men and women merely players' and life is a series of declining stages to an old age 'sans teeth, sans eyes, sans taste, sans everything' (2.7.139–66). Touchstone has a parallel speech on the seven degrees of quarrelling: more expansive, more verbally witty, and ultimately more optimistic. It is intrinsic to the structure and tone of *As You Like It* that it is both Touchstone's and Jaques' play.

The Comedy of Errors

Key Facts
Date: 1594
Length: 1,918 lines
Verse: 85% / Prose: 15%

Major characters' share of lines:	
Antipholus of Syracuse	15%
Adriana	15%
Dromio of Syracuse	14%
Antipholus of Ephesus	12%
Dromio of Ephesus	9%

Early farcical comedy of two sets of long-separated twins careering in bewilderment around Ephesus: confusions abound

Plot and characters

Egeon is under arrest and threat of death in Ephesus as an enemy Syracusian merchant, and has until evening to find a ransom. Thirty-three years ago a shipwreck divided his family so that he was parted from his wife **Emilia** and one twin son, **Antipholus** (called **of Ephesus** to try to minimise confusion), along with a twin servant, **Dromio** (**of Ephesus**). The other twins, **Antipholus** (**of Syracuse**) and **Dromio** (**of Syracuse**), have also left Syracuse and spent their adult life looking for their missing brothers. Egeon has now come to look for them. Antipholus of Ephesus is married to **Adriana**, who, discontented at his lack of attention to her, complains to her unmarried sister, **Luciana**, who later finds herself the object of Antipholus of Syracuse's affections. **Nell**, an unseen kitchen maid of substantial proportions, is the love interest for Dromio of Ephesus, and Dromio of Syracuse inevitably finds himself bewildered at her offstage advances. Antipholus of Ephesus' associates include **Angelo**, a goldsmith from whom he has commissioned a gold chain, **Balthazar** a merchant, and a

Courtesan to whom he promises the gold chain intended for his wife which ends up instead in the hands of Antipholus of Syracuse. A **Duke** rules over the state and appears at the beginning and the end of the play. **Dr Pinch** is a comic schoolteacher-cum-magician brought in to cure the apparent madness of the confused Antipholus of Ephesus, who has been arrested for not paying for goods he believes he has never received because they have gone to his brother in error. In the play's final scene Antipholus of Ephesus is interrogated about these debts and approached for the money for his ransom by Egeon, who mistakes him for his brother and unwittingly recognises him as his long-lost son. The **Abbess** promises to cure Antipholus' madness, and introduces Antipholus of Syracuse who has fled to the abbey for sanctuary. She has her own revelation, too: she is Emilia. The confusions of the day are untangled as she invites all to a belated christening party for her sons.

Context and composition

This tightly structured play conforms to classical ideas of unity of time, space and action since it all takes place, unusually for Shakespeare, in one place on one day (compare *The Tempest*). It is based on the Roman playwright Plautus' *Menaechmi* (*c.* 200 BC), which was well known to Elizabethan schoolboys. The play is Shakespeare's shortest, with a high incidence of end-rhymed verse, related formally to other early comedies such as *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and to *Romeo and Juliet* and linguistically to the narrative poem *Venus and Adonis*, suggesting a composition date of around 1593–4. A number of the play's themes and motifs are echoed in other plays. Mistaken identity generated by twins occurs again in *Twelfth Night*; the clever servant motif is common to Plautine comedy (see also Gobbo in *The Merchant of Venice*, Lance in *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* and, more darkly, Iago in *Othello*); shipwrecks and family dissolution and reunion by water are echoed in *Pericles*, part of which also takes place in Ephesus and shares some of the same sources and echoes of St Paul. It was first published in 1623, and probably written close to its first performance in 1594.

Performances

Its first recorded performance was at Gray's Inn (December 1594), and it was performed at court in 1604: the play, with its three locations, the Phoenix (house of Antipholus of Ephesus and Adriana), Porcupine (Courtesan) and Priory (Abbess), may have been written with indoor, occasional performance in mind, where its five-act structure would have been marked by short intervals. Its brevity may also indicate it was not intended for commercial performance but as an accompaniment to feasting or other entertainment. Ben Jonson, Shakespeare's contemporary, felt unable to adapt another Plautus twin play because he could not find identical actors: different productions of *Errors* have had different solutions, sometimes making the twins look alike (Samuel Phelps was even able to cast Irish identical twins as his Dromios in 1864), sometimes using similar costuming, sometimes absurdly stressing their physical dissimilarity, sometimes, as in the BBC television film (directed by James Jones, 1984), by casting a single actor to play both twins. This is more difficult on stage, although Kathryn Hunter (Globe, 1999) is one of a number of modern directors to attempt it.

The play only found its place in the theatrical canon in the twentieth century. Memorable productions include Theodore Komisarjevsky's zany 1938 production at Stratford, with a stylised street-scene set dominated by a crazy clock to emphasise the importance of time to this time-strapped play; Adrian Noble's RSC version (1983), with absurdist costumes and the Dromios with clowns' red noses; Tim Supple's dark 1996 RSC production focusing

on the brutality of the play's beatings and arrests and the eeriness of the magical Ephesus; and David Farr's 2003 interpretation for the Bristol Old Vic referencing Magritte, Escher and Freud. Although the play is unique among Shakespeare's comedies in having no scripted songs or music, its rhythms have been adapted to an opera, *Gli Equivoci* (1786) by Mozart's pupil Stephen Storace, to an updated musical comedy, *The Boys from Syracuse* (1938), by Rodgers and Hart, and to several musical stage versions, including Trevor Nunn's in 1976 (televised in 1978).

Themes and interpretation

Coleridge's view of the play as a 'poetical farce' understands something crucial about this cleverly constructed, plot-driven play, particularly when read alongside the theatre theorist Edward Gordon Craig's comment that 'farce refined becomes high comedy, farce brutalized becomes tragedy' (*Index to the Story of My Days*). *Errors*' accretion of misunderstandings and misrecognitions establishes it as a farce, a form of finely timed physical comedy. Farce's speed has no time for questions about plausibility or motivation, just as *Errors* hurtles around Ephesus almost without pause – although the long opening speech of Egeon is one exception to this pacing – and without troubling its protagonists with too much interior psychology. This dynamic construction is a strength, not a weakness, and in its exploration of identity, confusion and the nightmarish implications of its many errors of perception the play often comes closer to the absurdist theatre of the twentieth century than to Shakespeare's own romantic comedies. In fact, while this play gestures towards comic closure in numerous couples, it never really gets there: Adriana's eloquent complaint about her husband hasn't been resolved; Luciana and Antipholus of Syracuse are not to be married, or at least not yet; the Courtesan continues to be defined by being outside marriage. Egeon and Emilia are the play's romantic veterans, but they are hardly the young couples typical of Shakespearean comedy, and the play ends not with the crowded stage with which the genre usually represents the inclusive social

Coriolanus

Key Facts
Date: 1608
Length: 3,837 lines
Verse: 80% / Prose: 20%

Major characters' share of lines:	
Coriolanus	23%
Menenius	15%
Volumnia	8%
Sicinius Velutus	8%
Cominius	8%

Brutal military and political tragedy of pride and reversal

Plot and characters

In ancient Rome the people are hungry and discontented, and direct their anger against the patrician general **Caius Martius**. The senator **Menenius** tries to calm them with the fable of the belly, about how the body politic must work together. Martius is sent by the Senate to meet an army of the Volscians, led by his arch-rival **Tullus Aufidius**. At home Martius' wife **Virgilia** fears for his safety but his mother **Volumnia** takes pleasure in his bravery and the danger. **Valeria**, Virgilia's friend, likens Martius' young son to his father when he dismembers a butterfly. Martius leads his men to an impossible victory over the Volscians and single-handedly captures the town of Corioles, being awarded the surname **Coriolanus** in remembrance of this feat. On his return, he is proposed as consul, an office which requires the assent of the people under their representatives, the tribunes **Sicinius** and **Brutus**. Through his pride and outspoken contempt for the Roman crowd, Coriolanus alienates the people, and he refuses to supplicate for their favour in the marketplace. While they give grudging consent to his appointment, the tribunes persuade them to change their minds. Angrily and publicly upbraiding the people

for their behaviour, Coriolanus is accused of treason and is banished, to the delight of the tribunes. He leaves Rome, stoically bidding farewell to his family, and goes in disguise to Aufidius. When his identity is revealed, he is received with great honour, and leads his erstwhile enemies against Rome, although the Volscians, including Aufidius, do not fully trust him. First **Cominius**, then Menenius, then his family come as envoys from Rome to ask him to spare the city. Volumnia pleads eloquently and they kneel: wordlessly he takes her hand and agrees to sue for peace. They return triumphant to Rome, but Coriolanus is accused by Aufidius of betraying the Volscians. The people demand his death and murder him: Aufidius promises a noble burial.

Context and composition

Coriolanus is probably Shakespeare's final tragedy, written in 1608 shortly after *Antony and Cleopatra* and *Timon of Athens* and sharing some of their cynicism about tragic glory. It was first published in 1623. In it Shakespeare returns to Thomas North's translation of Plutarch's *Lives of the Noble Grecians and Romans* (1579, his source for *Julius Caesar* and *Antony and Cleopatra*) and to the fifth century BC, close to the events described in his narrative poem *The Rape of Lucrece* (1593). The characterisation of Volumnia is largely Shakespeare's addition to his source. Unusually, there is no subplot and no alternative locus of interest: the play single-mindedly builds up Coriolanus and then destroys him.

For the play's first audiences, its representation of the insurrections and corn riots of urban Rome may have had an added piquancy due to similarities with the Midlands Riot in England during 1607–8, and the play may also have chimed with the Jacobean debate over parliamentary versus royal prerogatives.

Performances

The play was probably performed in 1608–9, perhaps in the new Blackfriars theatre (see '*Shakespeare's Theatre*' below) – the Folio text is divided into acts, which were to allow for the trimming of candles in the indoor theatre. Its stage history from the Restoration onwards has tended to have more or less radically partisan interpretations, from eighteenth-century versions shadowing anti-Jacobite controversy to the attempt to use the play to provoke a military coup in France in 1934.

With the rise of European fascism in the 1920s the play gained a new relevance on stage. But the history of the play in the twentieth century shows its inherent ambiguity. Laurence Olivier played Coriolanus as a would-be fascist dictator (1937) and sealed the association in a production in 1959, where his death, strung upside down over the stage, recalled the lynching of Mussolini in 1945. On the other hand, it was the preferred Shakespeare play of the Nazis because it was interpreted as a paean to strong leadership, and, as such, was banned in occupied Germany after the war. At other times, too, this ambiguous play has gained a clarity in particular performances: the struggle for democracy against military dictatorship, in Michael Bogdanov's 1990 English Shakespeare Company version; jackboots and blackshirts in Steven Berkoff's 1995

West Yorkshire Playhouse production; Trevor Nunn and Buzz Goodbody (RSC, 1972), stressed the sociological aspects rather than the individual human tragedy; in 1989 Terry Hands and John Barton did the opposite, subduing everything to the personality of Charles Dance as Coriolanus (RSC). David Thacker's 1994 production (RSC) with Toby Stephens was set in the French Revolution and amplified the play's gender dynamic with a prominent reproduction of Delacroix's iconic *Liberty Leading the People*. Ralph Fiennes played the role in 2000 under Jonathan Kent's direction, and directs and stars in a film version scheduled for release in 2012, with Vanessa Redgrave as Volumnia.

Themes and interpretation

With fewer than forty lines of soliloquy – among the smallest number in any Shakespeare play – the absence of introspection and the relative inarticulacy of the play's central protagonist are clearly defined: Coriolanus is no more chummy with the audience than with the plebeians. The adjective most often used of him is 'proud', and Coriolanus' pride is a carapace – a protective outer shell which can be penetrated only with difficulty and at fatal cost. That inhumanity which is a crucial strength in battle as he slashes his way in and out of Corioles cripples him at home. Battle is a kind of baptism, a name-giving through which he can aggressively assert his own identity. Without it he is lost. As 'a thing of blood' (2.2.103) and 'chief enemy to the people' (1.1.5–6) at home or to opponents abroad, his approach to civil politics is coloured by this anatagonistic view of the world.

In fact, the whole play is seduced by brutality and the cult of violence. The image of the child catching a gilded butterfly and tearing it to pieces is a powerful snapshot of its characteristic cruelty. It glories in wounds and blood as marks of Romanness and of masculinity. The formidable Volumnia's terrible catalogue of the additions to her son's wounds shocks us because of its subversion of normal expectations of maternity. Coriolanus cannot separate himself from his mother, and her demands are ultimately destructive: no wonder that some of the most influential critical readings of the

play have found their interpretative framework in psychoanalysis. Her love seems overpowering: her son feels he must be emasculated into a 'harlot' or 'eunuch' to please her in politics. She appears to derive a kind of erotic satisfaction from the spectacle of his martial physicality, imagining her son her husband and his fighting a displacement of 'the embracements of his bed' (1.3.4) Her lovingly lingering description of his wounded body contrasts with the chaste and cold marriage of Coriolanus and Virgilia. Elsewhere the homoerotics of militarism are emphasised in Aufidius' description of his meeting with Coriolanus in the imagery of the connubial bed: 'we have been down together in my sleep / Unbuckling helms, fisting each other's throat' (4.5.121–2). This powerfully destructive relationship – the intensely sexualised image of single combat – emerges as momentarily more powerful than the bonds of family and state that form Coriolanus.

As in other Roman plays it is Rome itself and the values it implies which are the prime battleground of this supremely political play: the conflict is between forms of government – republicanism and tyranny – plebeians and patricians. If the play has a message – and that is debatable – it seems to be to show the dangers of both extremes. The idea that power rests either solely with the people or solely with the haughty patricians is shown to be flawed, through the equivocal presentation of all the political factions. Shakespeare emphasises, for example, that the tribunes are motivated not by concern for the people but by pride in their own office, but he also gives voice to the hungry crowd whose physical needs cannot be explained away by Menenius' patronising metaphor of how the belly of the state needs the head, arms and legs. Coriolanus himself is firmly on the side of absolute power, and of absolute autonomy, 'as if a man were author of himself / And knew no other kin' (5.3.36–7). Ultimately, however, this proud soldier is fatally vulnerable to others: to Aufidius, to Volumnia, Virgilia. The glorious and solitary Roman deed of suicide is not allowed to Coriolanus (as to, say, Brutus in *Julius Caesar*): in death, as in life, his attempts at autonomy are ruinously compromised.

The ignoble end of Coriolanus dying of multiple wounds at the hands of conspirators – the stage direction is '*Draw both the*

Arviragus, Cymbeline's sons, whom he abducted from their nursery in revenge for his own banishment. Stung by Innogen's rejection, Cloten follows her dressed in Posthumus' clothes, vowing to kill him and rape her, but when he meets Guiderius they fight and Cloten is decapitated. The young princes are drawn to the mysterious Fidele, and when s/he appears dead having taken a poison of the Queen's – given to Pisario in the guise of a medicine – they lay out her corpse with a solemn rite in the cave, alongside that of the headless Cloten. When Innogen awakes she mistakes the corpse for that of her husband. The Roman commander **Lucius** who has come to exact imperial tribute by force takes her into his service. Belarius, Arviragus and Guiderius join the British army and fight bravely; Posthumus, having come to Britain with the Roman army, changes sides to join the princes and in the battle beats, but spares, Iachimo, who does not recognise him. Sleeping, he is visited by the ghosts of his parents and his brothers, who call on **Jupiter** to aid him; Jupiter descends to deliver a tablet, which when Posthumus awakes he is unable to interpret. In a final scene news of the Queen's death and her confession of her attempts to kill Innogen and the King, the news of Cloten's death and Iachimo's confession of his trick crowd in with the revelation of the princes' identities and Fidele's true character, and the **Soothsayer**'s interpretation of the tablet predicting the reunion of the royal family. Cymbeline finally agrees that, despite having beaten the Romans, they will pay the required tribute after all.

Context and composition

The play was probably written in 1610 as part of a vogue for tragi-comedy often associated with John Fletcher, with whom Shakespeare would collaborate on *The Two Noble Kinsmen* and *King Henry VIII*; there is a rare account, by Simon Forman, of an early performance in April 1611. The spectacular entrance of Jupiter, who '*descends in thunder and lightning, sitting upon an eagle*', may be as much to show off the special effects possible in the private theatre of Blackfriars as to further the plot. *Cymbeline* shares with *The Tempest*, *The Winter's Tale* and *Pericles*, which are often grouped together as 'romances', a melding of realism and fantasy, a journeying plot and an interest in